

Devon Connell Patreon by Thomas Bell

(01/January/2020 - 28/December/2021)

[MC #5's Face Poll: 1/3](#)

[Jan 1, 2020](#)

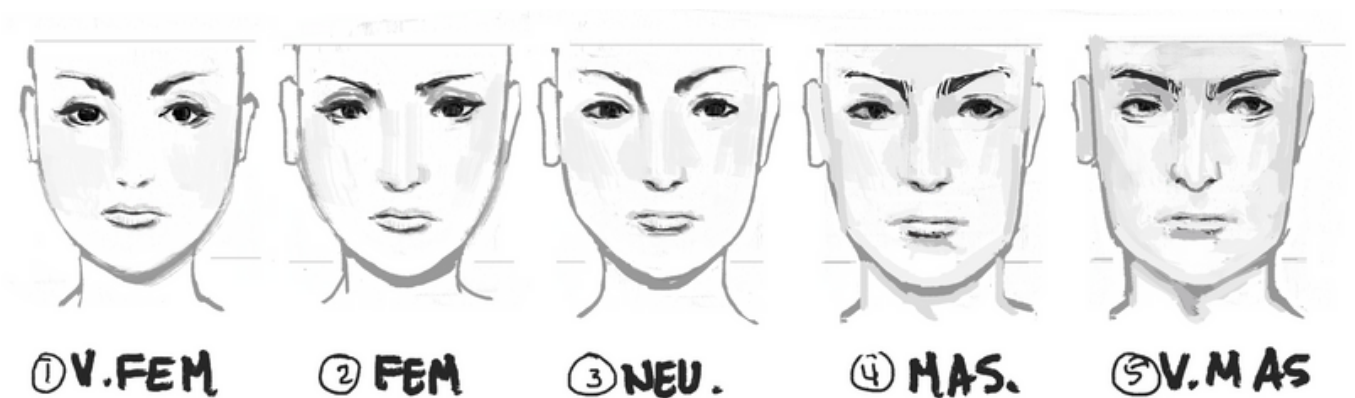
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+0)

15%

Feminine (+13)

33%

Neutral (+2)

13%

Masculine (+5)

10%

Very masculine (+19)

30%

Poll ended Jan 5, 2020 · 40 votes total

[MC #5's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Jan 6, 2020](#)

The design for MC #5 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 masculine**

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

Impulsive (+10)

20%

Calculated (+0)

5%

Perverted (+2)

3%

Chivalrous (+8)

5%

Charming (+4)

15%

Stoic (+16)

5%

Drifter (+1)

5%

Protective (+8)

8%

Brutal (+25)

33%

Finesse (+3)

3%

Poll ended Jan 10, 2020 · 40 votes total

Side Story #18: Bashō's Poem

Jan 7, 2020

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

<Author's note: This story contains mature subject matter involving a minor in a potentially dangerous situation. Nothing bad happens but reader discretion is advised.>

Side Story 18: Bashō's Poem

■■ Tonogasha ■■

“Poetry? I’m all for cuttin’ class...but you nerds want to listen to *poetry*?” Bashō scoffed, dropping his two classmates he had raised by their kimono collars. “Empty your pockets or I’ll tell the teachers!”

For a boy the age of nine, Bashō was big, and having been raised from modest means relative to the rest of his class, he was well-suited for being a bully. He was a son of a samurai—though a dead one, and those didn't bring in the ryō like the living ones did.

"Y-yeah, there's gonna to be lots of famous poets there from all over Hyuga! They'll be doing a renga, where each poet takes turns giving lines. You, uh...probably wouldn't like it, Bashō-senpai," one of the bully's victims said with a nervous laugh.

"Well maybe I will!" Bashō replied, stubborn and angry. "Come on, let's go!"

■■■■

The poetry house wasn't far nor was it hard to find with all the signs and merchandising going on around it. Large displays of beautiful calligraphy was adorned on the walls, while merchants hawked parchments covered in verses, many of them shouting the lines of the poets inside.

Tonogasha was the only town in Hyuga where such a sight could be seen. Artisans and their benefactors made their home here, in the idyllic valley between the hills. It was a place where wealth was in abundance but work wasn't; it was an odd dynamic that made life for those struggling to get by even harsher.

It was that sort of resentment that made Bashō walk with a chip on his shoulder. He didn't like what he didn't understand, and he already knew he wasn't going to enjoy poetry, either. It was too girly and unfit for the son of a samurai. That said, he didn't want his peers to think him uncultured or stupid, so he was the first to make it to the door into the poetry house.

Unfortunately, he couldn't take a step inside before a large man with an even larger gut forced him out.

"Sorry, kids. Adults only! Could get a bit racy in there—especially with Sōkan-dono in the circle."

"Come on! I'm big enough!" Bashō complained and was joined by his two classmates. But the door guard wouldn't budge, and his bulging stomach meant squeezing past him wasn't in the cards. Bashō was about to lose spirit and spend the day elsewhere until the man kept talking.

"You're no allowed! There's saké in there, and we're not handin' it out to brats like you. Beat it!"

The boys complied but Bashō, at least, had newfound determination. Saké was what the grown men drank—and that was reason enough for him to go in and get a taste for himself. To do so, though, required a bit of cooperation. Or at the very least a mix of bribery and intimidation.

"Alright you two, listen up," Bashō said as he got the three of them into a huddle. He proceeded to let the two boys in on the plan, one involving an alley cat and a sack of stale fish guts. He found the guts in a barrel outside an unattended stall used to sell fertilizer, while his classmates found not one cat but two and had the cuts on their arms to show for it.

Walking around with a sack of reeking guts and two all-but-feral cats was a bad idea, and they quickly drew the ire and attention of the crowd. They had to hurry if they were going to unleash their attack on the doorsman. Unfortunately, he had both smelled and heard them coming, and had brought over a gruff looking companion—one bearing both a katana and a scowl to chase them off.

Bashō tossed the guts while his classmates released their cats in a panic. The felines scattered off and the fish innards did little more than litter the street corner. The boys then became mice themselves as they screeched and scurried off, but even this was part of Bashō's plan. There were only two chasing them, which meant only two in their group was going to get caught.

And Bashō wasn't going to be one of them.

"Aaaah!" one cried as he tripped over Bashō's outstretched leg. Proving to be every bit of the bully that he was, he ran off alone into one alley and around to the next, running the perimeter of the poetry house to get to the other side.

When he got there, he slipped in through the unguarded entrance. Aside from stinky hands and sore right foot, he had managed to infiltrate the building mostly unscathed. As for his companions, well...

"I'll be sure to tell 'em what saké tastes like tomorrow!"

Grinning and eager, Bashō waded through the standing-room-only crowd. The poetry house itself was of an odd design: it had a large, open-roofed chamber at the center where everyone stood and chatted about in eager anticipation.

Their apparent glee raised the boy's expectations the further he went in. Disappointment met him immediately, however, upon seeing what the crowd was surrounding: a circle of old men, smoking kiseru pipes and sitting on pillows.

Each one was more odd and less intimidating than the last. They giggled like the girls in his class, slapping their knees and cracking their bones in ways only old men could. *"These are the poets everyone is so excited about? They're just a bunch of feeble old grandpas!"*

It would seem the poetry reading hadn't started yet—not that Bashō cared to stick around long. At least this delay gave the boy time to do a bit of reconnaissance. His main goal sat at a table on the opposite side of the poetry circle. Several bottles of saké and many dozens of cups were laid out, all of them filled with glimmering, clear liquid.

Bashō's face began to blush at the thought of his future buzz. He knew alcohol made men act silly and that it put hair on their chests, too—and that his own was certainly lacking. The fact that his mother, teachers and priests forbid the brew was all the incentive he needed to do some taste-testing.

So he slid and maneuvered himself through the audience, slowly so as not to draw too much attention, while keeping an eye out for the fat man and his ronin companion. He made it about halfway until the strings of a koto—a harp—rang out and silenced the crowd.

All eyes including Bashō's were focused upon a beautiful young lady in a bright pink kimono. Though she was cute, her music was eerie and somehow able to echo throughout the crowded chamber. The contrast made for its own sort of charm, Bashō thought, until he shook such girlish ideas from his mind. *"I'm just here for the saké!"*

After one last pluck, the girl rose and bowed to the applause of everyone in attendance. Once the claps quieted down she began to speak.

"On behalf of the Blue Sky Poetry House, we welcome you to 'Renga of Spring'! May the cold chills of winter be behind us, and a fruitful new season welcome us all. We are graced this afternoon by masters of the written verse, each a legend in his own right."

She went on to introduce each of the old men, who took turns standing and bowing, soaking in the cheers. Bashō took the opportunity to make his move, wading through and getting ever closer to the saké table. He wasn't alone in his journey—a balding, middle-aged man with a katana at his hip had the same idea, and him being a samurai afforded him much more space than the nine-year-old boy.

"...now known as Sōkan, he served as the court calligrapher to the Emperor himself!" the woman in pink continued. "After retiring last summer, his brush now writes tremendous verses, known throughout the land for his wit and—"

"Vulgarity! Heeheehee-hehe!" Sōkan interjected, winking at the woman young enough to be his granddaughter. He bowed in a grand fashion, outstretching his hand as he did so. Out of his sleeve came a rose, which he handed to the speaker. She couldn't help but blush.

The audience broke out in laughs and even Bashō, too, caught himself chuckling. Though the boy had been momentarily pre-occupied by the performance, the samurai hadn't paid it any heed and was now enjoying a cup of alcohol as if he were a fish and it water.

He slammed the empty cup down on the table and went for another until a woman heavily coated in makeup slapped him. It turned out to be his wife.

"Control thyself, Toshiaki! Don't appear like the drunken fool that you are!" she said in a loud whisper. Following in her footsteps were three men with stern faces and katanas at their sides, each shifting their glances around like robins looking for worms. It was an apt description as under their brown cloaks were blue kimonos not unlike the bird's belly. Except these were bright blue with white mountain trim.

"Aye, aye...but what's so great about fancy writin' and talkin' anyways? I want to head back to the estate," he said in reply. He was a man after Bashō own's heart, or at least their minds were on the same page. He also had the thickest Southern accent Bashō had ever heard.

"Why, samurai," said Sōkan to the heckler, "your katana can change the present. But my quill can change the past. Legacies are not written in blood, but ink!"

The poet then dipped his finger in an ink pot, and wrote a symbol on his forehead. It read 'Sugoi', which meant amazing...until he furrowed his brow and it changed to 'Yamete' which meant stop. "Words hold a power some use far too lightly!"

The calligrapher-turned-poet-turned-comedian proceeded to change his facial expressions in all manner of goofy ways, changing the writing on his face and causing the entire crowd to erupt in laughter. Bashō was right there with them, gripping his stomach and buckling over in amusement.

"I didn't know poets could be so funny!"

The Southern samurai, now properly silenced, indulged in another drink while the poetry session began in earnest. While Bashō's stomach was still sore from laughing, after he recovered he continued his pursuit. He was now within arm's reach of a cup of the alluring brew.

The boy snatched it so quickly that half of it spilled down his hand. He didn't take so much as a whiff before plunging it down—all in one go, like the adults did. Except he couldn't keep it down.

"This is—this is terrible! It burns!"

At that frantic moment, the collaborative poem moved on to Sōkan. His line was the one everyone in the audience was holding their breath for. Bashō was, too, but for a very different reason.

"The robe of haze is wet at its hem..." the poet said, tugging his moustache as he recited the previous line. He then let out a chuckle. "Princess Saho of spring pissed while standing!"

pssSsSH

Bashō spouted out his saké as everyone roared out in unison. This was comedic gold—and borderline heretical, too, to speak about the goddess of spring in such a crass manner! Sōkan had taken a serious verse and turned it on its head, causing everyone to lose theirs as they joined in the merriment.

There was one exception, however: the Southern samurai's wife, who happened to be standing right in front of Bashō. She turned slowly as her shoulders shook and as her knuckles went white in pent-up rage.

"How dare thee spit on me!"

Bashō was frozen in fear. For the scowl facing him wasn't just deadly, but familiar.

"M-Mother?!"

■■■■

"I have never suffered such indignity! The penalty for spitting upon Her Imperial Majesty is death!" the woman yelled, whipping her hand across Bashō's reddened cheek. Welts were going to form if she kept it up. "Be lucky if I let thee live, knave!"

Bashō grimaced, his arms held up by two of the lady's samurai. They were outside the venue in one of the back alleys the boy had used to sneak in with. One of the cats from before was there too, staring at the commotion.

"Awh...come on Saki-chan. Boy's had enough, I reckon." The Southern samurai intervened on his behalf, though that only sparked his wife into an even greater rage.

"Don't you 'Saki-chan' me!" Sakiko wracked her palm across Bashō once more, before inspecting her fingernails. She began to curse about chipping a nail as a cut opened up above the Bashō's left eye. "Hmph! Very well, I'm finished with you. I do have one question, however. You called me...mother. The Lioness bares no cubs."

'Aye, not yet but soon m'dear," Toshiaki chuckled and wrapped an arm around Sakiko's waist. Or at least he tried to; she drove a sharp elbow into him to push him away.

"I'll ask you only this once, child: why did you call me your mother?"

Bashō gulped down a wad of spit and blood. It tasted just as bitter as that saké had.

"B-because you look just like her," he said. "*But you're a much greater bitch than she is!*" he wanted to add. Wisely he didn't, and that wisdom didn't just save his life.

It got him a job. The sort of job you couldn't refuse to take.

"By the power granted in me, Heir to the Imperial Throne, I demand you take me to this woman who bares my resemblance! I might have use of her."

Though Bashō didn't care for this foul lady in the slightest—it hadn't hit him that he was in the presence of royalty—he *did* care about her entourage. There were no less than four samurai under her command, and under their cloaks were the uniforms of the Shinsengumi. Every nine-year-old son of a samurai knew they were the best of the best.

And then there was Toshiaki, too, who only wanted to hurry things along to get home.

So Bashō led the affluent couple and their bodyguards to *his* home, on the decidedly poorer part of town. He had hoped his mother was working late—as she usually did—but his luck turned upon sight of their chimney smoking. The scent of supper met his nose.

The door was open and the group barged in without so much as an introduction. The Shinsengumi grabbed his mother, who screamed, kicked and flailed until she caught sight of the woman who commanded them.

"The...The Lioness?!" she cried out as she buckled her knees and bowed her head low to the ground. Looking up, she saw her son next to the Emperor's sister. "My greatest pardon for whatever Bashō-kun has done to insult you. Please forgive us, Your Grace!"

"She even sounds like ya," remarked the husband. It earned him a sharp glare from his wife.

"What is thy name and occupation?" The Lioness growled at the prey fallen before her. Bashō's mother meekly replied that her name was Chiasa Matsuo and that she was a seamstress.

"Matsuo...I fought in the war with a man by that name," the Southerner noted. The mention of his father caused Bashō to gasp in surprise. He was determined to ask about him—about the man he had never met—but was silenced by yet another slap from Sakiko.

"Ahem!" she said, shifting her focus back to the mother. "Stand. From this day forth, you are no longer Chiasa the seamstress. For I, Lady Sakiko, Sister to the Emperor, First in Line to the Throne, called the Lioness and Her Grace, enlist your services for my protection."

Chiasa did more than just stand—she lept back in shock. She then exchanged looks with each of the samurai in Sakiko's retinue. "H-how can I be of service, Your Majesty?! I cannot wield a sword!"

"You will not serve as my bodyguard...but as my body double."

■■■■

A week had passed since Bashō and his mother began living at Lady Sakiko's and Toshiaki Mukai's estate. The land and mansion had been a gift offered by the Emperor to Toshiaki in return for his deeds in the Kondo War, as well as a dowry for the marriage of his sister. Though they were the highest honors any samurai could achieve, the Southerner was treated little better than a nuisance by his new wife.

Sakiko, or Her Ladyship or Her Majesty—whichever her name was, she was a taskmaster with an insatiable appetite. Bashō learned that very quickly as he toiled away in the kitchens.

"That's not a cleaver, you imbecile! Fetch me the proper knife before I gut you like this hog!"

Sakiko's servants were all about as amiable as their mistress, which was to say they were far from pleasant. Between breakfast, lunch, supper and tea times, the boy was constantly on his feet and running about, getting yelled at and at times beaten.

"Curse that blasted poetry house! Going to school was much better than this!"

The schoolyard bully was now the lowest of the servants—though it wasn't all bad. Living in a mansion as grand as this one was amazing; it was easy to get lost in and even easier to hide from your duties. The mansion had several floors: the bedrooms for the family and guests being on the higher ones, with a parlor at the front entrance and a fully-stocked kitchen in the back. Between them was a vast dining room with the largest table the boy had ever seen.

There was also a room used solely for music, another solely to display art pieces and yet another for shogi—a game in which Lady Sakiko was very skilled in.

Yet among all these rooms it was the library that Bashō found himself most drawn to, if only because it was the best place to hide. He could easily escape clean-up duties between the large bookshelves, and even began to read their contents to stave off boredom. Though there were plenty of books on history and warriors of myth, it was the poetry verses that he drifted towards.

“All around me

Countless dewdrops: what

Might they portend-when

Those which fall upon my sleeve

Are tears...”

The verses were profound and introspective, so different than the droll murmurs the instructors went on about at length during his classes. What they spoke of wasn't cold like arithmetic or dry like history. It was something more. *“Something real...something beautiful.”*

The beauty ended at the sound of the dinner bell. Bashō reluctantly rose from his seat on the library floor to get back to work, though before he did, he stuffed a couple books and a handful of parchments inside his kimono; he was determined for some reading material to last him well into the night.

Before going to the kitchens he took a detour outside the mansion, rushing back to the ‘supplementary’ servant's quarters he and his mother resided in. It was a run-down shack they were told was still under construction, though there was little sign of it ever being completed.

As it was near suppertime in early spring, the sun had all but set as Bashō made his way to his new home. Unlike the mansion with its multitude of lanterns and torches, his quarters were dark and amid a thick woodlands where it was hard to see.

A cloaked figure, for example, could go completely unseen even beside the door frame—especially if it stood deadly still. Bashō had been so eager to stash away his goods that he didn't see the stranger until after the boy had slid opened the door, hid his papers under his futon, and then ran back outside.

Needless to say, the sight frightened him.

“Yiiii-ah!” Bashō cried out, looking for anything and everything to use as a weapon. What he found was a fistful of pebbles, which he threw with abandon until the tall stranger reacted.

“Aituo!” the figure said in a hoarse, strange voice. It held up a hand—a hairy, ghostly white hand—to show he was harmless. The gesture had quite the opposite effect on Bashō as the man was even stranger than before. He was even taller, too, as he straightened his posture to its full height.

“W-who are you?! What business do you have here?” Bashō yelled, trying to sound brave. The man replied in more words the boy couldn’t understand—whatever they were, they weren’t Hyugan. “You aren’t Hyugan,” Bashō realized. But solving that puzzle led to a hundred more, and he was already late for his supper serving duties.

Just as he was about to run and report the stranger to the samurai at the estate, the man spoke out in a language the boy *did* understand.

growl

The cloaked stranger’s stomach roared out in the familiar, pathetic fashion. Though it was against his better judgement and any practical wisdom, Bashō decided to keep his appearance a secret from the others. He even brought back some bread and cheese from the kitchens for him.

“He’s the weirdest beggar I’ve ever seen, that’s for sure.”

■■■■

A week had passed since that evening where Bashō first met the stranger, and the boy had made it his mission to teach the strange man everything he knew about speaking and writing in Hyugan. Though the boy was not much of a teacher, and they had little time together due to his duties in the kitchen, the stranger was a skilled listener and eager to learn. Having the undivided attention of an adult sparked Bashō into one animated lecture after another.

At times it was a game of charades, where he acted out drinking and swordfighting, while at others it was matching and memorizing different kinds of birds and plants, field horses and gardening tools. For the first time in his life, Bashō felt like he knew a lot—and he did, at least compared to the foreigner. He knew the names of everything!

Well, almost everything.

“Your name. You’ve never told me what it was,” Bashō said, changing the topic midway through his lecture. He pointed to himself and repeated his name, then pointed to his cloaked companion and waited.

“Leper,” was his reply. “Me is a leper.”

It was the same reply he had given yesterday and the day before that. Bashō knew a leper had diseased skin and that the condition was contagious, which explained why the foreigner kept himself so covered. But that only made him more mysterious.

The second biggest mystery was attached to the man’s hip.

“That sword you have there,” Bashō gestured, “it isn’t curved like the katanas the samurai wield. Can you unsheathe it?”

The tall leper did a shrugging motion upon the word 'unsheathe' to indicate he didn't understand its meaning. After a moment of charades the man nodded, before shaking his head and looking off into the distance.

"Will never you see it, hope I."

Bashō stomped the ground in frustration. In doing so, one of the many sheets he kept tucked under his kimono from the library came free. It flew right under the foreigner's feet. The stranger picked it up and looked at the verse before letting out a sigh of defeat.

"Read please very much, Bashō."

One of the stranger's many peculiarities was that he never used honorifics—even after the boy had told him about them days prior; whatever the foreigner's culture was must not have used them. It was refreshing in a way, and made the boy feel older. Not to mention that 'Bashō' had a ring to it that 'Bashō-kun' simply didn't.

So he complied with the request. But speaking poetry aloud was embarrassing, he realized, as his face went red and his nerves ran his throat dry. Bashō didn't know why he was so concerned—it wasn't as if his audience could understand half the words anyway—so he braced his courage, cleared his throat, and spoke.

"Snow yet remaining

The mountain slopes are misty—

An evening in spring."

The silence that lingered afterwards made Bashō nervous, though before he could rush to fill it the foreigner raised his pale and hairy hand. "This...poetry?"

Bashō nodded. Then the stranger did something most unusual of all—he wept. He braced a hand against his eyes, though saltwater dripped down them all the same.

"Orlando innamorato...Mi manchi, cugino Matteo!"

The boy was shocked at the sight as well as the sounds of the sobbing, cloaked man. Though he still had no name he had feelings just as any person did. He was alone in a world unknown to him, and the only friend he had...

"Is me," Bashō thought to himself. He patted his companion on the shoulder, supporting the much larger and fearsome figure to make for a sight that was almost comical. But there was nothing funny about it. Not wishing to worry the boy any further, the foreigner recomposed himself, stood up from his seat on a fallen log and apologized, even attempting a Hyugan-style bow.

"Sorry, I am," he said, before handing the paper back. "You like poetry, yes? Bashō should write—would en...enjoy? Enjoy me hearing it."

The accent was thick but the sentiments were clear. Though there was an obvious cultural difference between them, it was as if the much older man could see right through the younger, as Bashō had thought of little else but trying his own hand at poetry ever since hearing it from Sōkan two weeks ago.

"...I don't know if I can. Or if I even want to," he replied. Bashō still felt that poetry was effeminate, not something a son of a samurai such as himself ought to concern himself with. But he was nevertheless drawn to the phrases and the vivid images they planted inside his head.

Snow, for example, was something he had never seen—but through words he could feel the cold and wispy powder pass through his fingers.

"Will know not unless trying," the foreigner remarked with a smile. Or at least Bashō imagined he did. Try as he might, the boy had never gotten a good look at the man's face. "One day, you will—"

DING* *DONG* *DIIING

That was the supper bell ringing, which was strange considering that supper had ended two hours prior. The idea that something was amiss hadn't struck Bashō yet, who instead imagined that Sakiko wished for a second helping of roasted duck.

Regardless of the reason, Bashō cut the lecture short and hurried back to the mansion. Were it not for the full moon he would've certainly lost his footing; he sprang up the many stairs of the mansion to see what was the matter. When he did, he nearly tripped.

The sight of a dozen samurai in glowing white robes was one you didn't see very often.

"Like swans with fangs," Bashō thought. *"Why are they here?"*

The boy hurried over to the line of servants, each standing straight yet with their heads down. He expected to be berated by his mother or one of the chefs. The fact that the scolding never came spoke volumes as to the severity of the situation.

Toshiaki and his wife came out from the mansion hand-in-hand, waiting at the top step as they inspected the samurai below. Their Shinsengumi bodyguards were at their sides, though their number was only half those of the men in white.

And among those men was one head-and-shoulders above the rest, both in body and in presence. He had a thick, greying beard and a wicked snarl, above which was a broken nose and a pair of bright brown eyes that seemed to bulge from out of his face. His most notable feature was his thick mane of curly brown hair, the top half of which was tied back in a ponytail while the bottom draped down well past his shoulders.

This samurai was by all measures a Northerner, but when he spoke it felt as if all of Hyuga was made to listen.

“Is this man before me Toshiaki Mukai, the renowned swordsman and hero of the Kondo Wars?”

Before Toshiaki could respond, Sakiko stepped forward. Indignance was both on her face and between her lips. “Is it not common courtesy to introduce oneself before hailing others, samurai?! Thee stand in the presence of the Lioness herself, Sister to the Emperor! I am Lady Sakiko, known to all as—”

“Shut up, woman,” the samurai snarled. He spit on the stone stairs before taking a step upwards. The Shinsengumi jumped in unease and placed their hands atop their katanas in preparation for battle. The Northerner paid them no heed. “Mukai. You were trained in the Nitojutsu—the two swords technique, were you not?”

“A-aye, I was,” Toshiaki murmured, then coughed to clear his throat. “I see by your emblems that ye be Uesugi. May I presume I have the pleasure of welcoming Izō Uesugi, the head of his clan?”

“Aye,” Izō replied with a chuckle to mock Toshiaki’s tone. He took another step and then one more before Sakiko’s samurai rushed in front of their lady for her protection.

“State your business at once!” Sakiko yelled from behind her men. “If you wish to be received as a guest, I suggest you humble thyself this instant!”

schwinnng

Izō Uesugi unsheathed his katana and pointed it at Toshiaki. The blade glimmered in the moonlight.

“There is only one reason I’ve come here. It is to challenge you to a duel, Mukai. I wish to see the power behind the Southern schools!”

“Those schools have long since disbanded!” Toshiaki was quick to explain. “The swordmasters of that era have all retired...aye, and so have I, Lord Uesugi. My focus is on my marriage now and building this estate. Please, come as honored guests and let us speak of times long past.”

Samurai who survived wars needed more than just martial prowess—they required cunning, too, paired with a refined ability to judge their opponents. Toshiaki was no match for this Northerner and lacked the pride to be forced into a duel he couldn’t win.

“Damn. It’s as I thought,” Lord Uesugi said, returning his katana into its sheath. Both the samurai and staff of the estate let out a held-in breath all at once. “We’ll take you up on that offer. What a shame, though: I had wanted to see the style in action before my duel with Gensai.”

With tensions settled, the butlers, maids and kitchen staff went into a flurry of activity to make rooms and meals for the surprise guests. There were a dozen of them and each were hungry. Though Sakiko didn’t care for them in the slightest, she wasn’t the type of hostess to disappoint. The Uesugi were going

to have a three-course dinner paired with the best saké they had on hand—even if it was a quarter till midnight!

“Ba-kun!” the chef barked. “Keep those ovens lit or I’ll toss you in there to spare us the firewood!”

Bashō rushed from one furnace to the next, filling them with coals and pumping the bellows—a blacksmith’s tool used to make sure fires got enough air—as if his life depended on it. Might be that it did, judging from the temperament of the staff. Many had been roused from their beds at such a late hour.

In contrast, Bashō was energetic and his spirits were high upon the sight of so many fearsome samurai. Though Lord Uesugi was frightening, the other samurai were far more friendly—particularly after the saké started getting passed around. They began telling jokes and trading stories with the Shinsengumi. There was even an attempt at a game of Chō-Han for a bit of gambling before Sakiko forbade it.

“Crass games of chance have no place in a royal’s hall! If you gentlemen wish to play a game, may I suggest shogi?”

None of them took her up on the offer, opting instead to put away their dice and return to their drinking. Given the shortage of waiters, Bashō was enlisted in picking up and replacing the saké decanters. While most of the samurai were displeased it was him serving them instead of one of the maids, they mostly ignored him so long as he kept the alcohol flowing.

There was one exception, however: Lord Uesugi stared at him from the far end of the long dining table, sitting unamused as Toshiaki Mukai spoke feverishly across from him. When the Northerner raised his decanter and gestured over, Bashō knew he could ignore him no longer.

The boy reached to grab the pitcher though once he did, the samurai lord grabbed his arm.

“This one looks more like a weasel than a boy. Where did you pick him up at, Mukai?” He squeezed and traced a finger across Bashō’s arm. It took everything in the boy not to pull away, but given the strength in the man’s hand—he didn’t think he could.

“That’s er...Baru? Banka?”

“It’s Bashō. Bashō Matsuo!” the boy corrected. He then snapped his arm out from beneath Lord Uesugi’s grasp. He stuck out his tongue and pulled down an eyelid, too, in a rude gesture that earned him a slap from Sakiko—or would have, had the samurai lord not intervened.

“I like his spirit. Reminds me of my own child,” he said with a growl. “I think I’ll have you keep me company for dessert.”

He yanked Bashō down to the seat beside him, placing him across from Sakiko herself. Her Ladyship said nothing but her eyes certainly did: the black pupils were shaped like daggers that threatened all manner of misery if Bashō disobeyed. He didn’t.

"Aye, fought with the boy's father during the war. Shifty looking fellow—but one of our best scouts. His sacrifice saved many lives in that forest. You ought to be proud, Bashō-kun."

"Sacrifice?" the boy and samurai lord asked in unison.

Toshiaki was beset by a nervous fit of laughter, and scratched his balding scalp while thinking of a way to change the subject. Luckily, Lord Uesugi wasn't keen on talking about trout fishing. Toshiaki was forced to elaborate.

"Well er, you see, ain't right to talk about a man's death in front of his kid. Might be we best save this for later."

"Speak. Spare no detail," Lord Uesugi ordered, brushing his shoulder against Bashō. The boy was trembling from both fear—for being next to such a frightening samurai—as well as from grim anticipation. He wanted to know how his father died.

"Aye, very well then. Order was from His Imperial Majesty himself—your brother, Seijirō-sama," Toshiaki said, turning to his wife and grinning. Sakiko looked like she wanted to gag. "We had us a stubborn group of dirtskins raiding our backlines, and supplies were gettin' mighty sparse that time of year. Wantin' to put an end to the war, the Emperor sent us a group of his best shugenja with orders to burn the Kondos out. Said we were to send out a scout to gather them up, all to get 'em in range of the spell.

"And that...aye, that was Matsuo's job. Worst of it was," Toshiaki paused, unable to look Bashō in the eye. "Poor bastard didn't even know about it. We couldn't risk telling him, so we didn't. Burnin' alive ain't a fate I'd wish upon my worst enemy, but—"

"You're a liar!" Bashō yelled, jumping from the table and breaking a set of porcelain plates while doing so. "My father was a samurai in the Emperor's army! The Emperor couldn't...he *wouldn't* do something so horrific to his own soldier!"

"Quiet, boy," said Sakiko with her nose upturned. She had her arms crossed and was leaning back on her extravagant pillow-seat. "Seiji-kun is a lion, even if he likes to pretend that his claws are clipped. We of the Imperial Family see Hyuga through different eyes than yours. Your father was but a pawn in our game. You should be happy that he was so useful."

Bashō couldn't believe it. The shock from the truth about his father was enough to freeze him still. He wanted to scream and cry out, to curse and to lash out at the three monsters sitting beside him. He—like all Hyugans—had been taught that the Emperor was chosen by the gods, a perfect and benevolent being that could do no wrong.

"But he...he ordered my father's death?! Curse him, his sister and the rest of his family! I hate them all!"

"The poor thing is overwhelmed with grief. Allow me to escort him back to his quarters—it's far too late for a boy his age to be up."

Lord Uesugi's words were tinged in false sympathy to mask his dark intentions. Sakiko and Toshiaki obliged him, and every samurai looked the other way as the brown-haired warrior walked the boy away.

Bashō didn't realize the danger he was in—he couldn't imagine it, especially when his imagination was occupied with burning fires and the melting, screaming face of the man he had never had the chance to meet. "Father...no, please!"

"You sound just like my Little One. Don't you worry. It will all be over soon."

They went outside and down the many stairs, making their way to the Matsuo residence. In their path was a servant, rushing towards them with a bundle of sheets. She paused and nearly dropped them when she recognized who the samurai was.

She had the courtesy to bow low and grovel as expected, at least until she saw that Lord Uesugi was with her son.

"Bashō-kun? Is my son troubling you, my lord?"

"Not at all. In fact he wishes to show me something."

"I-Is that so? Please forgive me my lord, but I haven't had time to clean our household. I wasn't expecting a warrior of such renown to grace us with—"

"It's fine," Lord Uesugi said, cutting the servant off coldly. "Leave us. Do not return here before dawn."

"Mother!" Bashō yelled, finally finding his voice. "Stop him! I don't wanna go with him! Help me—let me go!" Though he kicked, punched and screamed, the boy couldn't escape the samurai's grasp. He pleaded to his mother, to the woman who had birthed him.

To the only family he had.

But she turned away, her eyes vacant and her soul absent of all feelings. She said nothing and heard nothing—none of her son's screams reached her ears. This was the last time Bashō would see her, and it was this moment that he would recall for years to come.

"Get moving," Lord Uesugi grumbled as he tugged the boy by the arm, hard enough to tear it from its socket. Bashō was on the verge of tears. He still had no idea what the man intended for him, not really, but every instinct in him told him to be terrified. And he was.

"What's this? Parchment?" the samurai asked as he pulled out a crumpled piece of paper from Bashō's kimono. "Looks like poetry. Are you a poet, then?"

Bashō didn't respond, though the thought of poetry was a far improvement from his current situation. He caught himself nodding and mumbling that he was, even though he had never written a verse in his life.

That was about to change. Lord Uesugi looked for a quill and a pot of ink, but the best he could find in this rundown shack was a chopstick and stale soy sauce. It would service as the writing equipment for Bashō's first poem.

"Write something for me then. No—" the samurai quickly corrected, "—for Juu. For my Little One. A birthday gift from me to my heir once I return home."

Bashō sat beside the small table, staring at the blank page as if it were a katana's blade. It was just as scary to him then, to confront the razor's edge in order to pass into a world beyond. In an unknown world.

"A world that has to be better than this one!"

When Bashō dipped the tip of his utensil into the soy sauce, the trembling in his hands stopped. The boy...no, the poet's eyes went wide as an unfamiliar force possessed him. The words came out all on their own.

"With Father's Love,

To My Obedient,

And My Only,

Little One."

It was straightforward in some ways yet unexplainable in others. The energy that flowed through him wasn't something Bashō could fathom much less describe. He knew only that the fear and doubt within him had subsided and that in their wake...

...were four simple lines.

Lord Uesugi took the soy-stained paper and read it to himself, once and then twice over, nodding all the while. He folded it up and faced Bashō with a grin.

"Better than I expected. Little One will be very pleased, I'm sure."

Bashō smiled as any child would after being praised. His first ever poem was a success, and this memory was one he would never forget. Unfortunately the monster known as Izō Uesugi would try to turn it into a horrific one. He grabbed the boy's kimono with the intent of tearing it apart. He got half of it undone before a thumping on the door interrupted him.

"Announce yourself!" the samurai yelled. "Who dares interrupt me?!"

There was a scratching that followed, as if the person behind the door had difficulty figuring out how to use it. Eventually the shoji door slid open and revealed the figure behind it.

Lit up by the moonlight and without his cloak, the man who claimed to be a leper proved himself to be a liar. His skin was not blemished by disease—though it was a pale white it was hardly sickly. What drew the attention of the Hyugans were his eyes—rounded and shaped like opals. Beneath them was his nose, long and pointed.

His outfit, too, was unlike any they had seen. It was tight-fitting save for his white sleeves, which puffed out over his arms from out of a black doublet with golden trim. Beneath his waist was a pair of breeches made from leather tightly wrapped around his lengthy legs.

To enter the household he had to hunch over, but after he did he took what was in his hand—a black glove made from velvet—and tossed it down in front of Izō Uesugi.

“I...am...Roderico da Mirandola! I challenge you, samurai!”

■■■■

It was a battle beneath the full moon fought between a grove and a creek. The competitors were silent but the frogs and crickets around them were more than willing to serenade them in their nightly chorus. Bashō looked on, praying a wordless prayer that the foreigner—Roderico—would come out safe and unharmed.

“Came here looking for a new sword style,” the samurai said with a grin. “Guess I found one.”

All the two had in common were that they wielding steel; the length, design and manner in which they used their swords was entirely different. For starters, the foreigner had but one hand on his weapon, with the other outstretched behind him. His blade was thinner and straight, and its hilt at the base was larger and encased his hand.

Lord Uesugi took note of it all and grinned. “Ikuzo! Let’s go, gaijin!”

The swords clashed but not in the manner Bashō had envisioned they would. It was not a series of sparks and giant swings but feints, dodges and calculated backstepping. Lord Uesugi quickly realized that the foreigner’s speed and range outmatched his own, turning his grin into a grimace as he was forced to put his weight on the back of his heels.

Roderico’s face, on the other hand, was without expression. He wielded his thin blade like a serpent did its head, spurring it forth at angles the samurai hadn’t expected and didn’t prepare for. The first blood was drawn when the Uesugi was too slow on his retreat.

“Kuso! Don’t you know who I am?! I’m the strongest swordsman in Hyuga!”

The samurai’s pale kimono was now colored by an ever-growing dot of pink at the side of his stomach. Bashō cheered though Roderico remained unphased. He prepared for the samurai’s next attack—one with enough force behind it to slice him in two.

“EEEIYAH!” Lord Uesugi wailed in a warrior’s cry. It had been a ruse, however, as in the last moment his overhead attack twisted sideways at the foreigner’s exposed ribs. Roderico had no chance of altering his sword in time to deflect.

So he charged forward instead. He closed the distance between them and used his spare hand as a second weapon. Roderico clenched his offhand into a fist and slammed it forward into Uesugi’s gaping mouth.

whuNK

The two combatants pushed off each other to recompose themselves. Roderico inspected himself for damages and found that his left hand was bleeding—though it wasn’t his blood.

“Bas...tard,” Izō grunted as he grasped his bleeding mouth. Having one hand free in battle proved superior to none, and the evidence littered the ground. The samurai spat globs of blood and eventually a tooth. One of his canines had come off.

Roderico had managed to detooth the most fierce and feared of the Northern wolves. This one just happened to take human form. He was a predator accustomed to prey much smaller than he, and when faced with an opponent that could hold his own against him...

...he could only turn tail and run.

“Mark my words, you foreign demon: I *will* avenge this dishonor! After I defeat my nemesis Gensai, I shall come for you next! THIS I SWEAR UPON MY FAMILY’S NAME!”

Lord Uesugi’s words were loud and frightening, though much less of the latter considering he was running away as he shouted them. After a moment passed and he was out of earshot, Bashō broke down into laughter.

Roderico, on the other hand, looked puzzled and shrugged. “What say he?”

“It...it doesn’t matter,” Bashō said with a smile before running to embrace his champion and savior. With that joy and relief came tears, too, as the boy at the young age of nine now knew betrayal. Not just by his own emperor, but by his mother, too.

He cried for perhaps a minute or an hour more—however long it was, Roderico kept him close until the tears were over. Once they were, the boy spoke. “We need to leave. Please...I hate everyone here. I’d rather be dead than live like this any longer!”

“*That* can be arranged,” said a voice from afar. It was Sakiko’s, whose form was frightening in its own right, though magnified by the Shinsengumi around her. “You have managed to make me an enemy out of half the entire North! You have done more damage in my plots to retake the throne than the entirety of Seijirō’s ninja!

"The death of you, child, will be the first of many gifts made to absolve me of this disgrace!"

Roderico couldn't understand half the woman's words, but based on Bashō's reactions alone he knew what he had to do. He took his hand into his young instructor's and shook it.

"Aritago. Bashō...thank you," he said with a smile. He then pushed the boy away and sent him running. "Go! Leave! Poet—great you will be! Come back when you are!"

Bashō nodded and ran into the depths of the forest, looking back from time to time even though his vision blurred with tears. He didn't know where he was going nor how he was going to survive alone. But what he did know was that he *would* come back to this place, and that him and Roderico *would* meet again.

"And when we do...I'll have tons of new poems for you! I promise!"

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

[Jan 7, 2020](#)

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 (+0)

0%

Borgia, the butler (+2)

2%

Daisuke, the servant (+7)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+2)

4%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+21)

4%

Keiko, the maid (+6)

2%

Kohaku, the samurai (+31)

16%

Kuniko, the farmer (+11)

4%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+48)

29%

Momoko, the doctor (+35)

0%

Nishi, the yakuza (+8)

2%

Satsuma, the emperor (+1)

4%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+15)

13%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+30)

18%

Poll ended Jan 31, 2020 · 45 votes total

[Oriental Weapons](#)

[Jan 10, 2020](#)

Aside from the katana, what's your favorite oriental weapon?

Bow

Claw

Naginata

Nunchucks

Sai

Shuriken

Sickle & Chain

Spear

Spiked Club

Staff

Wakizashi

Yamato-class 45-centimeter Type 94 Naval Gun

126 votes total

[MC #5's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Jan 12, 2020](#)

The design for MC #5 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Very masculine, Brutal**

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

Short (+11)

36%

Long (+18)

36%

Ponytail (+3)

6%

Chonmage (+13)

18%

Long bangs (+0)

3%

Poll ended Jan 15, 2020 · 33 votes total

[MC #5 Face Art](#)

[Jan 31, 2020](#)

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 SpookiArt ([twitter](#), [instagram](#))!

This month's build: **Very masculine, Brutal, Long hair**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[Feb 1, 2020](#)

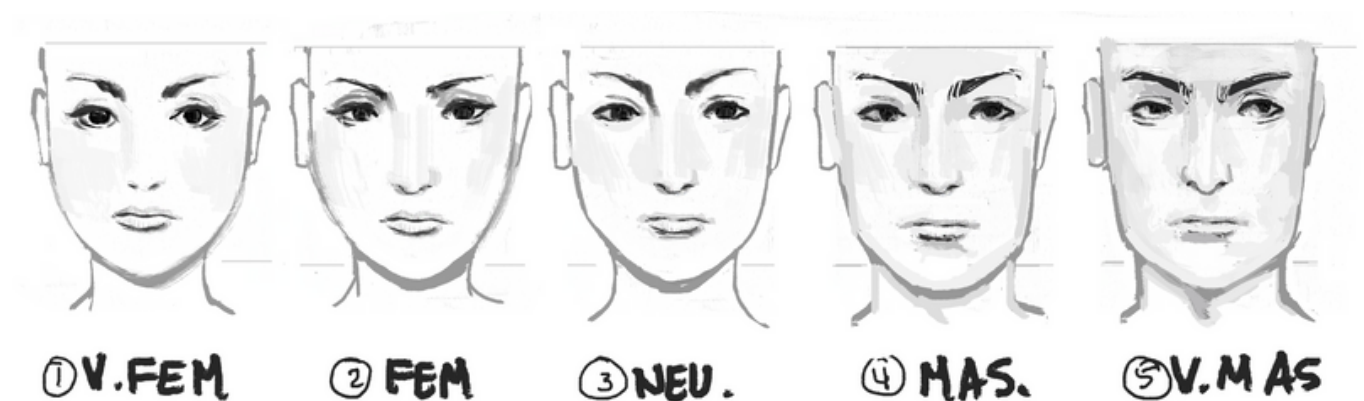
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+6)

15%

Feminine (+26)

56%

Neutral (+7)

12%

Masculine (+9)

18%

Very masculine (+0)

0%

Poll ended Feb 5, 2020 · 34 votes total

[MC #6's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Feb 6, 2020](#)

The design for MC #6 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 (+18)

21%

Calculated (+2)

3%

Perverted (+3)

15%

Chivalrous (+10)

6%

Charming (+10)

6%

Stoic (+18)

9%

Drifter (+3)

3%

Protective (+11)

32%

Brutal (+0)

0%

Finesse (+4)

6%

Poll ended Feb 10, 2020 · 34 votes total

[Side Story #19: Masami's Flowers](#)

[Feb 7, 2020](#)

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



Side Story 19: Masami's Flowers



■■ The Academy ■■

Masami clenched her teeth and furrowed her brow as she struggled to diagnose what was wrong with Hitomi's potted plant. It was a beautiful, blooming wisteria—or at least it had been: its brilliant shade of purple had turned dull and many of its petals were wilting. It appeared to be diseased and dying, which wasn't a good look at the bedside of her injured classmate.

"It's okay, Masami-chan. It's dying," Hitomi said. The girl was an itako—a blind seer—and the fact she could tell the health of a flower without seeing or touching it was a testament to her skill at floristry. She was, after all, the sole and founding member of the Flower Arrangement Club.

"Fumihiko-kun overwatered it last night," she explained, "though I don't blame him for it. Not everyone can hear the voice of flowers."

“The voice of flowers?” Masami asked. She had never heard of such a thing before and was understandably puzzled. That uncertainty only grew as Hitomi raised up her bandaged hand and asked the young shugenja to grasp it. When she did, Hitomi pressed her index finger upon Masami’s wrist to feel the pulse inside. It was beating quickly.

“Humans are not the only forms of life with hearts that beat and lungs that breathe. Plants do, too, but they’re much quieter. It takes time and patience...but if you listen closely enough, you’ll hear it. And it is a beautiful song.”

Masami listened intently in the silence that followed, her left ear no more than an inch away from the wisteria. Though no matter how much she strained and wiggled her ears, she couldn’t hear the music. She left out a sigh and apologized.

“There’s no need to apologize, Masami-chan,” the itako said with a smile. Though she was out of her shrine maiden outfit and covered in bandages, she looked as elegant as ever in Masami’s eyes. To be possessed by some foul spirit, to have your body contorted and broken, to be granted the gift of sight only to have it stolen from you again...Hitomi had been through a lot. Yet she remained as graceful as ever—and more concerned about her flowers than herself.

“Please take this wisteria back to the clubroom where there’s shade. And if you would be so kind, please remove the dead and dying leaves. This one still has a chance to heal, I think,” Hitomi said before her voice lowered. “Like me.”

Masami nodded before realizing that the gesture alone wasn’t enough. “I won’t let you down, Hitomi-san! I promise!”

With the wilting flower in her hands, Masami headed over to the other side of the Academy where the clubrooms were. She didn’t get very far, though, as waiting for her outside the medical ward was Hikiko—the sullen, ghostly girl who had black hair down to her waist and oversized kimono robes to match.

Masami made the mistake of asking if she was here to visit Hitomi.

“Her? No. Of course not!” Hikiko crossed her arms and looked away. She denied it though not with her usual, indifferent monotone. Masami didn’t know what the relationship between the two of them were, and—perhaps selfishly—she wasn’t concerned so long as she could remain friends with both.

In any case, Hikiko agreed to accompany her to the clubroom to save the wisteria. They found the room with the door open and the sound of shouting from inside. The person yelling had a distinct and familiar way of speaking.

“Forswear thy warrantless claims, you brigands, and perchance the spirits shall forgive you of your trespass! Leave this place of refuge or risk being undone!”

Masami rushed in with Hikiko close behind. Fumihiro—the passionate Kendo Club captain and ardent admirer of Hitomi—was up against six other students from various years and classes. Some held fine

porcelain tea sets while others carried sacks filled with tea leaves.

“We,” said the leader among them, a young man that was only Masami’s height but many times her weight, “are the Tea Ceremony Club. Or we will be, rather, once we take possession of this unused clubroom. For too long has it been wasted on a single student! Why does Hitomi get special treatment when—”

“You shall address the pearly-eyed maiden as Hitomi-*sama*, you vile, pot-bellied devil!” yelled Fumihiro, brandishing his bamboo practice sword. Defending his maiden’s sacred garden was reason enough to fight, but what the rival club captain said next made him go berserk.

“At least my family can afford to pay this semester’s dues, you stick-wielding thug! House Morita is all the same. You want to know the stories I’ve heard of your sister, Fumihiro? Like how she was sold to the yakuza?!”

“DAMN YOU!”

The Kendo captain charged forward with his weapon raised overhead. Fury was in his eyes and vengeance was in his heart. Masami didn’t know the young man had a sister—but she *did* know that if he attacked a fellow student he’d get expelled!

Unable to bear the idea of losing a friend, Masami jumped forward in Fumihiro’s warpath on instinct, closing her eyes and bracing for impact. While she didn’t want to get hurt, she preferred physical pain to the alternative.

“Ahh!” Masami yelled as she was knocked aside. She rolled twice before a stack of ceramic pots halted her. Her shoulder hurt and her head ached but nothing was broken. Her vision regained focus just in time to see Hikiko slap Fumihiro across the face.

When the young shugenja rose to her feet to demonstrate that she was unharmed, she did so too quickly and stumbled. Luckily, one of the tea ceremony members caught her. They weren’t all bad, Masami realized, even if they were on the opposing team.

And like any sport, there needed to be a referee. In this case it was none other than the Headmaster himself, poking his head into the room and asking what the source of the commotion was. When everyone tried explaining all at once, he raised his voice and threatened detention.

“Of all the groups I’ve checked on today, this one is the last I would expect of such misconduct! Hashimoto-san,” he said, gesturing to Masami, “is that a bruise on your forehead? Has there been an altercation?!”

“N-not at all, Headmaster!” Masami said with a forced laugh. “As for the ruckus...there’s been a misunderstanding. These students wish for the clubroom to be theirs when it belongs to the Flower Appreciation Club.”

The tea enthusiasts were quick to argue their case, while Hikiko spoke up in a rare display of defense on Hitomi's account. Someone had to, as Fumihiro was beset with grief. The somber shugenja didn't mince words: "Hitomi is recovering. Will return soon. Leave the way you came, tea drinkers."

"Ahem," the Headmaster coughed, "there are nine clubs offered at our prestigious Academy, only three of which may pertain to the 'art of refinement'. Currently, they are the Calligraphy, Incense Appreciation, and Flower Arrangement Clubs. If there is a sufficient lack of activity in one, that club may be dissolved and another may take its place."

"Headmaster-dono," Fumihiro said, bowing low, "we shall do whatever activities are required of us in the absence of Hitomi-chan. I alone volunteer to plant a hundred daisies—no, a thousand!"

The tea club leader scowled. "None of them are even proper members of the Flower Arrangement Club, Headmaster! They know nothing of art—and are anything but refined!"

Hikiko, Fumihiro and even Masami scowled in response, all determined to show just how refined they were. Thankfully, the Headmaster was the resourceful sort and had an idea in mind. He proposed a competition for the three of them, to test their flower arranging mettle.

"If you three can impress the Academy's upcoming guests with a flower display, I'll allow you to keep the clubroom. Otherwise, the club will be disbanded and the Tea Ceremony Club shall take its place."

Masami and Fumihiro jumped in excitement, while Hikiko looked mildly amused. Their joy quickly faded, however, as the Headmaster went on to explain just who these guests were.

"They're a group of poets from the Imperial Court. Some of the most profound writers of our age. Needless to say, they'll be a very difficult group to impress!"

■■■■

After the Headmaster and the tea enthusiasts left, the trio put their heads together to come up with a plan. Each had decided to take on a separate task: for Hikiko, she would take inventory of all the flowers Hitomi had in stock. Fumihiro would research the upcoming guests, using his self-proclaimed poetic mastery to plan out suitable flower arrangements.

Masami's job was to find which route around the campus the tour would take and to narrow down the best locations for the displays. In truth, she was worried: she had never had to decorate before. For holidays, feasts and birthdays, her family had a legion of servants that did all that for her. On those days, she would always wake up to a wondrous display of carnations and roses, and yet...

"...I took them all for granted," she thought to herself. "Maybe the tea ceremony leader was right. I don't know anything about art or refinement. If only I ha—uAH?!"

This would make for the second collision of the day. Though it didn't hurt nearly as much as the first, this one had come at her while she was deep in thought. Minding her manners, she got up, bowed and

apologized even before seeing who it was she bumped into.

“Oh, but it is I who ought to be bowing!” said a man in a high-pitched falsetto. Odder than his voice was his outfit: he wore patchwork kimono of various colors—all of them gaudy—along with a wrinkled, orange scarf that reminded Masami of a dried apricot. Combined with a purple bandana over his head, little of his face could be seen apart from his pair of narrow, shifty eyes.

“That look on your face tells me that I am unlike any shugenja you’ve seen,” he said as he flourished his hands. “Perhaps it’s because I am no magician at all! My name is Ba—ah, actually, let us do away with the concept of names entirely. I’m a traveling poet, you see, and I am awfully sorry to have disrupted your thoughts with my physical presence!”

It took Masami a moment to make sense of the man—what with his grandiose gestures and manner of speaking—but when she did, she smiled. “Oh! You must be with the poets from the Capital who are here to tour the school. Welcome to the Academy!”

Masami bowed once again, out of respect though also to hide her grimace. She thought they would have more time to set up the flowers!

“Thank you, thank you...but please don’t group me with that lot. They’ll be here tomorrow afternoon; they’re currently resting in the village down the mountain. We were blindfolded on our journey here...quite the mystery, this Academy.”

“The secrecy is for everyone’s protection. Untrained shugena are dangerous to be around,” Masami said, reciting what she had been told and recalling the year of isolation she had suffered when her powers first developed. “If I may ask, what is the reason for this visit?”

The poet looked around in an exaggerated gesture to make sure no one was within earshot. He looked as suspicious as humanly possible. “Well, the long and short of it is that we’ve been hired as propagandists, to glorify the Academy and the Emperor’s army of shugenja here. Someone has to justify all those taxes, after all! Though I consider it demeaning...it pays well.

“And the chance to visit this elusive school was not one I intended to miss! What secrets lie within these halls, I wonder?”

“Secrets?” Masami asked, though she wouldn’t get an answer. The poet left with a smile that seemed to stretch from ear-to-ear. He looked untrustworthy, but Masami knew it wasn’t fair to judge people based on appearances. Her only regret was not asking about the poet’s favorite flower before he left.

And though the poet was gone, his words lingered in Masami’s mind as she continued on her task.

“Propaganda...does he mean they’re being paid to lie? And an army of shugenja...I never thought of us like that.”

She had been under the impression that everyone loved shugenja and the magic they brought into Hyuga, but maybe that wasn’t the case. *“And he spoke of secrets, too...is there more to the Academy*

than I know?"

For the moment, it didn't matter—the bell for the evening classes rang. This class was the last one of both the day and the week. With the weekend to look forward to, this period was typically reserved for testing and today was no exception. The exam was on chakras: the seven focal points in the body in which spiritual energy is made and experienced.

Masami gulped as she took her seat at the front of the class. She was worried: she hadn't dedicated the usual ten hours to study for it. Given the recent events with Hitomi, she had only managed four. There was a non-insignificant chance that she might not get a perfect score.

That chance and her fears, however, dwindled after the shugenja turned over her paper and inked her quill.

"Because the average score from the last evaluation was so poor—save for a single outlier," the teacher said, referring to Masami, "I have decided to make this one multiple choice: simply circle the correct answer from the lists provided. As a personal benefit, I'll no longer have to spend hours deciphering what some of you call handwriting. Begin!"

Masami nodded and listened diligently to the instructions provided. She had never heard of a multiple choice test before, but was determined to get all the answers correct just as she had in every examination, quiz, project and report thus far.

"Let's see here...the shape of the anahata chakra is a lotus of how many petals: four, six, ten or twelve? Obviously it's twelve—everyone knows that!"

Masami moved on to the next question, which was just as easy, then the fourth and the fifth up until the forty-ninth where she noticed a spelling error in one of the principal meridians regarding the pericardium—which was, of course, the protective sac around the heart. She thought about raising her hand and asking for a clarification from the teacher, but she didn't want to disrupt the other students still hard at work.

And they were certainly working hard. The room was filled with equal amounts of grunts and groans, the clenching of foreheads and sweating of brows. *"Is this test really that difficult?"* Masami asked herself. *"I think it's the easiest we've had yet!"*

When the young shugenja turned in her paper, she got a look of surprise from her teacher and glares of resentment from most of her classmates. She quietly bowed and left the room with over an hour left to spare. Usually she waited longer before turning her test in, so as not to stand out so much, but this evening she had work to do.

She had to focus on flowers even though her mind was elsewhere: this time it was on a black swan. Not a real one but a spiritual one: the one that had spoken to her while she and Hitomi were in the spirit world. Though much of Masami's memory of that 'date' between the two of them was foggy and unclear, the swan's voice remained as clear as crystal.

"Study well and learn quickly, Hashimoto-san. For you do not have the luxury of time."

As Masami paced down the empty classroom hallways, she couldn't help but feel like she wasn't moving fast enough. Not physically, but mentally. There was so much still to learn, and yet at the pace her class was going, it would take years for her to gain mastery over her spiritual powers.

"I want to learn more...and I want to see you again, Pan-kun."

Maybe it was the summer's heat or something else entirely, but Masami felt the corridors start to blur and darken. She had lost track of where she was—a feeling she hadn't felt since her first week at school. She could've sworn the mess hall was up ahead, yet she was met with additional hallways instead.

There were smaller, likely used for staff and maintenance workers. She was about to turn around and go back the way she came when she spotted a bright red light from the corner of her eye.

It was shining off the fur of a tiny fox—no, a red panda!

"Pan-kun?!" Masami yelled and scared the critter, who hurried off down one of the smaller hallways. The young shugenja gave chase, going down a windy corridor and then a set of stairs, desperate to find the embodiment of her spiritual self. *"Please don't run away, Pan-kun! I didn't mean to scare you!"*

Her prayer was answered when the red panda found itself at a deadend. Masami slowed her approach and tried to be as gentle and non-frightening as possible, yet the animal was determined to escape. It had wedged itself against a corner and looked to be scratching at the wall.

Though it turned out that the wall was actually a door—one the red panda nudged open and ran through. This sliding door was not only the size of the entire wall but carefully designed to look like one, too. Masami didn't have time to appreciate how strange it was as she was determined to give chase.

At least until she heard an odd noise and loud cry from within. She held her breath and waited, her feet frozen in fear and her hands clutching a talisman. Unfortunately, the only spell she had on her was for freshening undergarments—which may still prove useful, given the frightening situation.

"I have to move forward...for Pan-kun's sake!"

Masami braced her courage and slid open the shoji door, which made far too much noise for her liking. She had expected the hallway to be dark within, but instead it was well-lit by torches on the wall. Each was wrapped in talismans. It didn't take more than a quick inspection for the shugena's jaw to drop in amazement.

"This is permanency magic! Just to create a single, perpetual flame is highly advanced and requires an immense amount of energy and time to create. And there's dozens of them here?!"

After recovering from her awe, she continued her pursuit for Pan-kun. Neither it nor the source of the sound was anywhere to be found. There were clues, however: while the hallway continued on a ways to some exit elsewhere, at the center of it was a door frame unlike any the shugena had seen.

For starters, it was thick and sturdy, made of some kind of metal—like iron or steel. But secondly and more strangely, the door within it was completely covered in talismans, criss-crossing one another like intricate wrapping paper.

The hairs on Masami's neck stood on end as she felt a surge of dread that prevented her from reading what the talismans said. She didn't need to in order to know that she wasn't supposed to be there. So she took a step back and took her third fall to the floor.

It wasn't that she was clumsy; there was an orange scarf sprawled out on the floor. Masami picked it and then immediately dropped it. She was shocked—quite literally—by the static it held within.

"This belongs to that poet I met earlier. And as for whatever is behind this door...it's not a place I should be!" Masami said to herself, picking up the garment and running off the way she came.

Some secrets were better left unknown.

■■■■

"That scarf. Interesting fashion statement," Hikiko said in her usual monotone as Masami took a seat across from her in the mess hall.

The younger shugena explained that it wasn't hers and went over her encounter with the odd poet from before. She purposely neglected to mention anything about Pan-kun or the strange door, however.

Somewhere during her story Fumihiro must've arrived, because he nearly choked on his tea from surprise. "You've already met one of them?! Which poet, pray tell? Nozawa-sama? Or Kyorai-san? Perhaps Takarai, also known as Enomoto-dono?"

"Sorry, but he didn't give me his name," Masami said with a sigh. "He mentioned something about them coming here to write poems praising the school and us shugenja...but he didn't seem very excited about it."

Fumihiro waved it off. "Poets are nature's most sensitive creation. One cannot coerce art by squeezing it from the minds of such men—'twould be folly! On that note, I have amassed a collection of verses from each of tomorrow's visitors. Our floral arrangements shall henceforth illustrate the following poems..."

The would-be warrior-poet then pulled out a parchment and recited a series of poems with enough passion and fervor to draw the attention of the nearby tables and cause both Hikiko and Masami to grow red with embarrassment.

“Enough!” Hikiko shouted as she snatched the paper away and crumbled it into a ball. She then proceeded to go over the inventory of what the Flower Arrangement Club had. All three of them began to discuss how best to spread flowers around the school.

During their discussion, they were approached by the Incense Appreciation Club—who they could smell coming from a mile away. Today’s incense must’ve been cedar because they smelled like pine cones.

“We’re here to help,” they said. Apparently the storage room between the flower arrangement and incense appreciation clubrooms was shared—and they didn’t want tea leaves to tarnish their aromas. They were an unlikely ally, and hardly the last.

■■■■

“Ah, hold still just a moment longer, Kajinosuke-senpai.”

Masami was adjusting a display of chrysanthemums above the door frame to the Sumo Club. She was standing on the shoulders of one of its members: a well fed wrestler who particularly favored the white-and-purple flower.

“Hai, hai! Take your time up there! And thanks again for bringing a bit of beauty to this place, Masami-kohai! This will really help liven up the arena!”

When Masami was finished and safely down, she inspected the rest of the hallway. It was filled with flowers of all varieties and students that were just as varied. Once the Incense Appreciation Club got started, members from other clubs joined in. Some did it out of respect for Hitomi, others out of fear for Hikiko, and still more that did it to shut Fumihiko up from spouting more poetry.

Most, however, just wanted to make their school a more beautiful place to live. For all of the Academy’s accommodations, it was rather dull and uniform. The rooms were laid out in a symmetric pattern, everyone’s quarters were furnished the same way, and—as many students would attest—the meal selection was few and far between.

Flowers, on the other hand, had a personality all to their own. They were unique: no two were quite the same. Even amid the same species, some were tall and quiet while others were short and loud. Each was in a differing stage of growth and health, with different petal hues and stem leaves. Masami was beginning to see their expressions and how each one had something to give.

“They’re not so different from people, are they?”

“Masami-chan? Did you say something?” asked Hikiko, who was carrying a bundle of red tulips. They so contrasted the older girl’s pale face and black wardrobe that it made for a captivating look.

Masami shook her head and smiled. “It’s nothing. I’m just happy everyone is working together. I can’t wait to see the look on the poets’ faces when they come by here tomorrow!”



It was late by the time everyone got finished furnishing the campus with flowers, so no one could fault Masami for sleeping in a little. Though she was exhausted, she didn't sleep well—memories of that door and the strange poet continued to toss and turn in her mind. The black swan, too, repeated its words over and over again.

But her most frequent visions were of the red panda, Pan-kun, who she had seen with her own eyes in *this* world, not just the spiritual one. She still hadn't mentioned it to Hikiko or Fumihiro and wondered if she ever would. *"They'll call me crazy...and they probably won't want to be friends with me anymore, either!"*

KNOCK* *KNOCK* *KNOCK

Masami was roused from her futon from a series of heavy knocks against her door. Though it was customary to announce yourself before entering, no such procedures were followed as Fumihiro burst in and fell to his knees. He hadn't fallen on his own accord or out of respect—Hikiko had tripped him.

The Kendo Club captain was close to tears while Hikiko's usually solemn face was filled with fear. Something had gone horribly wrong.

"Goats! Blasted beasts of burden, accursed creatures! How I rue the day when the gods doth made the serow—horned and hairy devils that hath no right tromping upon this sacred ground!"

Hikiko pulled him up by the ear. "What this fool is trying to say...is that a pack of goats were let into the school early this morning. They...the flowers..."

Masami didn't wait for Hikiko to finish or to even put on her sandals as she ran outside her room and into the dormitory's main hall. Her heart skipped a beat when she got there; air gasped out from her lips as all hope escaped her.

"They're...ruined."

Though the young shugenja had never been to a battlefield, she imagined it would look as horrific as this. Broken, half-eaten stems littered the floor while the few petals that could be seen were flattened and stomped upon. Leaves were scattered and ravaged with bite marks. The once fragrant aroma of roses and jasmines was covered, coated over with the stench of goat feces.

"This is bad," said Hikiko from beside her. "This was our chance to impress the poets. Who is going to tell Hitomi that the Flower Arrangement Club is finished?"

"Daughter of Hashimoto," said Fumihiro from the other side. "Though I would accept this duty gladly, to watch the pearly-eyed maiden cry would rip my heart to shreds like so many roses. I must forever remain the stalway warrior in her mind, and thus...I must insist thee speak to her in my place."

Masami sniffled and blinked away the water swelling in her eyes and nodded. She had failed Hitomi, and it was time to take responsibility.

"I wanted to make you as happy as you were in the spirit world. But now you'll...you'll wish you never came back, Hitomi-chan!"

■■■■

Masami trudged into the medical ward as if she was fresh from a funeral. She was downcast, downtrodden, and downright depressed. If there was any benefit to Hitomi being blind it was that she wouldn't have to see the shugenja's bloodshot eyes and runny nose. If Masami could keep her voice level, she might be able to dampen the blow.

"Fufufu! How humorous! Oh, but how did the monks not pay notice?"

In contrast to Masami's dreariness, Hitomi was laughing and upbeat. She wasn't alone, either—sitting at her bedside was none other than the poet Masami had bumped into before. He was missing his scarf but was wearing a cowl instead, like a warrior monk. He wielded no weapons aside from his sharp tongue.

"Hm? Why if it isn't my hallway companion. You must be the Masami this one speaks so fondly about," the poet said with a grin. "Is there something the matter? You look as if you just came from a funeral!"

Hitomi's giggles ended as a look of grave concern filled the blind girl's face instead. "What's wrong, Masami-chan?"

Masami didn't know many curse words but was tempted to use some all the same. Her attempt at hiding her feelings was foiled thanks to the poet's presence. But without much choice and being unable to delay it any longer, she told Hitomi the truth.

"Y-your flowers...they're..." Masami gulped and mumbled, explaining the events as they unfolded while holding back a sob. Hitomi kept her expression blank and unreadable as she listened intently. When Masami was finished, the one and only member of the Flower Appreciation Club spoke.

"So that was the source of the commotion last night and this morning. I am sorry that my club has inconvenienced you, Hikiko-san and Fumihiko-kun. Especially when...I had already made plans to disband it."

Masami staggered and gasped, then tried to give a retort but was too choked up on her words to do so. Hitomi proceeded to recite a phrase held deep within her heart:

"But wherever in the world, there is no place flowers cannot be arranged. Those are my mother's words. Though blind as I am, she taught me that beauty and grace can be felt in all things. I do not need a clubroom to enjoy Kadō: the way of flowers."

Her words were spoken weakly—in her current state of health—yet were so profound that they warranted a long silence afterwards. Hitomi was a few years older than Masami but, at this moment, she seemed decades more mature. She had made peace...even if that meant losing the beautiful garden where she spent her afternoons.

“Your words are very touching, even to this jaded, old soul,” said the poet. His eyes then narrowed into slits and a mischievous look fell upon what little of his face was visible. “I happen to know my poetic comrades better than they know themselves. They have become numb in their years at the Imperial Court, with their colorful silk and luscious fragrances. Numb to beauty...at least in the traditional sense.”

“What are you suggesting, then?” Masami asked.

“In a word? Contrast. In several more, dear shugena, I am suggesting we put the phrase ‘diamond in the rough’ to practice.”

Masami cupped her chin and nodded. The poet had given her an idea—but not everyone was going to like it. Especially a certain someone.

■■■■

“How much longer...do I have to fake this smile...and hold these dandelions?!”

Hikiko grumbled as she walked beside Masami and pretended not to notice the group of stalkers admiring her. Those stalkers happened to be the poets from the Capital, and those dandelions were weeds freshly picked from the Academy’s backyard.

It was all they had, yet in the hands of the gloomy girl the dull flowers seemed to blossom a brilliant gold that made these men act like bears to honey. The contrast was, as they put it, “art unfolding into itself” and “like everything and nothing at the same time”. Masami didn’t understand what they were going on about but she didn’t need to.

“You’re doing great! Just a little bit longer,” she said with a smile. “Oh...excuse me, Hikiko-san.”

Masami parted with her friend to leave the solemn girl alone to drag the poets around the Academy grounds. Everything was going well, and she reported as much to the friendly-yet-mischievous poet under the shade of a veranda.

“Of that I’m glad,” he replied with a grin. “Hitomi-chan is a wonderfully kind girl, and the art of flowers is one I hope blossoms in this era. That is...if the Emperor doesn’t decide to enlist you all in another war.”

The poet then let out an exaggerated sigh. Masami recalled what she was holding—and returned it back to its owner. “Here’s your scarf...um, I never caught your name.”

“My name? Why, that’s a secret. Just like whatever is behind that door, Masami Hashimoto.”

Side Story #19: Masashi's Flowers

Feb 7, 2020

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

Side Story 19: Masashi's Flowers

■ ■ The Academy ■ ■

Masashi clenched his teeth and furrowed his brow as he struggled to diagnose what was wrong with Hitomi's potted plant. It was a beautiful, blooming wisteria—or at least it had been: its brilliant shade of purple had turned dull and many of its petals were wilting. It appeared to be diseased and dying, which wasn't a good look at the bedside of his injured classmate.

"It's okay, Masashi-kun. It's dying," Hitomi said. The girl was an itako—a blind seer—and the fact she could tell the health of a flower without seeing or touching it was a testament to her skill at floristry. She was, after all, the sole and founding member of the Flower Arrangement Club.

“Fumihiko-kun overwatered it last night,” she explained, “though I don’t blame him for it. Not everyone can hear the voice of flowers.”

“The voice of flowers?” Masashi asked. He had never heard of such a thing before and was understandably puzzled. That uncertainty only grew as Hitomi raised up her bandaged hand and asked the young shugenja to grasp it. When he did, Hitomi pressed her index finger upon Masashi’s wrist to feel the pulse inside. It was beating quickly.

“Humans are not the only forms of life with hearts that beat and lungs that breathe. Plants do, too, but they’re much quieter. It takes time and patience...but if you listen closely enough, you’ll hear it. And it is a beautiful song.”

Masashi listened intently in the silence that followed, his left ear no more than an inch away from the wisteria. Though no matter how much he strained and wiggled his ears, he couldn't hear the music. He left out a sigh and apologized.

"There's no need to apologize, Masashi-kun," the itako said with a smile. Though she was out of her shrine maiden outfit and covered in bandages, she looked as elegant as ever in Masashi's eyes. To be possessed by some foul spirit, to have your body contorted and broken, to be granted the gift of sight only to have it stolen from you again...Hitomi had been through a lot. Yet she remained as graceful as ever—and more concerned about her flowers than herself.

"Please take this wisteria back to the clubroom where there's shade. And if you would be so kind, please remove the dead and dying leaves. This one still has a chance to heal, I think," Hitomi said before her voice lowered. "Like me."

Masashi nodded before realizing that the gesture alone wasn't enough. "I won't let you down, Hitomi-san! I promise!"

With the wilting flower in his hands, Masashi headed over to the other side of the Academy where the clubrooms were. He didn't get very far, though, as waiting for him outside the medical ward was Hikiko—the sullen, ghostly girl who had black hair down to her waist and oversized kimono robes to match.

Masashi made the mistake of asking if she was here to visit Hitomi.

"Her? No. Of course not!" Hikiko crossed her arms and looked away. She denied it though not with her usual, indifferent monotone. Masashi didn't know what the relationship between the two of them were, and—perhaps selfishly—he wasn't concerned so long as he could remain friends with both.

In any case, Hikiko agreed to accompany him to the clubroom to save the wisteria. They found the room with the door open and the sound of shouting from inside. The person yelling had a distinct and familiar way of speaking.

"Forswear thy warrantless claims, you brigands, and perchance the spirits shall forgive you of your trespass! Leave this place of refuge or risk being undone!"

Masashi rushed in with Hikiko close behind. Fumihiro—the passionate Kendo Club captain and ardent admirer of Hitomi—was up against six other students from various years and classes. Some held fine porcelain tea sets while others carried sacks filled with tea leaves.

"We," said the leader among them, a young man that was only Masashi's height but many times his weight, "are the Tea Ceremony Club. Or we will be, rather, once we take possession of this unused clubroom. For too long has it been wasted on a single student! Why does Hitomi get special treatment when—"

"You shall address the pearly-eyed maiden as Hitomi-sama, you vile, pot-bellied devil!" yelled Fumihiro, brandishing his bamboo practice sword. Defending his maiden's sacred garden was reason enough to fight, but what the rival club captain said next made him go berserk.

"At least my family can afford to pay this semester's dues, you stick-wielding thug! House Morita is all the same. You want to know the stories I've heard of your sister, Fumihiro? Like how she was sold to the

yakuza?!"

"DAMN YOU!"

The Kendo captain charged forward with his weapon raised overhead. Fury was in his eyes and vengeance was in his heart. Masashi didn't know the young man had a sister—but he *did* know that if he attacked a fellow student he'd get expelled!

Unable to bear the idea of losing a friend, Masashi jumped forward in Fumihiro's warpath on instinct, closing his eyes and bracing for impact. While he didn't want to get hurt, he preferred physical pain to the alternative.

"Ahh!" Masashi yelled as he was knocked aside. He rolled twice before a stack of ceramic pots halted him. His shoulder hurt and his head ached but nothing was broken. His vision regained focus just in time to see Hikiko slap Fumihiro across the face.

When the young shugenja rose to his feet to demonstrate that he was unharmed, he did so too quickly and stumbled. Luckily, one of the tea ceremony members caught him. They weren't all bad, Masashi realized, even if they were on the opposing team.

And like any sport, there needed to be a referee. In this case it was none other than the Headmaster himself, poking his head into the room and asking what the source of the commotion was. When everyone tried explaining all at once, he raised his voice and threatened detention.

"Of all the groups I've checked on today, this one is the last I would expect of such misconduct! Hashimoto-san," he said, gesturing to Masashi, "is that a bruise on your forehead? Has there been an altercation?!"

"N-not at all, Headmaster!" Masashi said with a forced laugh. "As for the ruckus...there's been a misunderstanding. These students wish for the clubroom to be theirs when it belongs to the Flower Appreciation Club."

The tea enthusiasts were quick to argue their case, while Hikiko spoke up in a rare display of defense on Hitomi's account. Someone had to, as Fumihiro was beset with grief. The somber shugenja didn't mince words: "Hitomi is recovering. Will return soon. Leave the way you came, tea drinkers."

"Ahem," the Headmaster coughed, "there are nine clubs offered at our prestigious Academy, only three of which may pertain to the 'art of refinement'. Currently, they are the Calligraphy, Incense Appreciation, and Flower Arrangement Clubs. If there is a sufficient lack of activity in one, that club may be dissolved and another may take its place."

"Headmaster-dono," Fumihiro said, bowing low, "we shall do whatever activities are required of us in the absence of Hitomi-chan. I alone volunteer to plant a hundred daisies—no, a thousand!"

The tea club leader scowled. “None of them are even proper members of the Flower Arrangement Club, Headmaster! They know nothing of art—and are anything but refined!”

Hikiko, Fumihiko and even Masashi scowled in response, all determined to show just how refined they were. Thankfully, the Headmaster was the resourceful sort and had an idea in mind. He proposed a competition for the three of them, to test their flower arranging mettle.

“If you three can impress the Academy’s upcoming guests with a flower display, I’ll allow you to keep the clubroom. Otherwise, the club will be disbanded and the Tea Ceremony Club shall take its place.”

Masashi and Fumihiko jumped in excitement, while Hikiko looked mildly amused. Their joy quickly faded, however, as the Headmaster went on to explain just who these guests were.

“They’re a group of poets from the Imperial Court. Some of the most profound writers of our age. Needless to say, they’ll be a very difficult group to impress!”

■■■■

After the Headmaster and the tea enthusiasts left, the trio put their heads together to come up with a plan. Each had decided to take on a separate task: for Hikiko, she would take inventory of all the flowers Hitomi had in stock. Fumihiko would research the upcoming guests, using his self-proclaimed poetic mastery to plan out suitable flower arrangements.

Masashi’s job was to find which route around the campus the tour would take and to narrow down the best locations for the displays. In truth, he was worried: he had never had to decorate before. For holidays, feasts and birthdays, his family had a legion of servants that did all that for him. On those days, he would always wake up to a wondrous display of carnations and roses, and yet...

“...I took them all for granted,” he thought to himself. “Maybe the tea ceremony leader was right. I don’t know anything about art or refinement. If only I ha—uAH?!”

This would make for the second collision of the day. Though it didn’t hurt nearly as much as the first, this one had come at him while he was deep in thought. Minding his manners, he got up, bowed and apologized even before seeing who it was he bumped into.

“Oh, but it is I who ought to be bowing!” said a man in a high-pitched falsetto. Odder than his voice was his outfit: he wore patchwork kimono of various colors—all of them gaudy—along with a wrinkled, orange scarf that reminded Masashi of a dried apricot. Combined with a purple bandana over his head, little of his face could be seen apart from his pair of narrow, shifty eyes.

“That look on your face tells me that I am unlike any shugenja you’ve seen,” he said as he flourished his hands. “Perhaps it’s because I am no magician at all! My name is Ba—ah, actually, let us do away with the concept of names entirely. I’m a traveling poet, you see, and I am awfully sorry to have disrupted your thoughts with my physical presence!”

It took Masashi a moment to make sense of the man—what with his grandiose gestures and manner of speaking—but when he did, he smiled. “Oh! You must be with the poets from the Capital who are here to tour the school. Welcome to the Academy!”

Masashi bowed once again, out of respect though also to hide his grimace. He thought they would have more time to set up the flowers!

“Thank you, thank you...but please don’t group me with that lot. They’ll be here tomorrow afternoon; they’re currently resting in the village down the mountain. We were blindfolded on our journey here...quite the mystery, this Academy.”

“The secrecy is for everyone’s protection. Untrained shugena are dangerous to be around,” Masashi said, reciting what he had been told and recalling the year of isolation he had suffered when his powers first developed. “If I may ask, what is the reason for this visit?”

The poet looked around in an exaggerated gesture to make sure no one was within earshot. He looked as suspicious as humanly possible. “Well, the long and short of it is that we’ve been hired as propagandists, to glorify the Academy and the Emperor’s army of shugenja here. Someone has to justify all those taxes, after all! Though I consider it demeaning...it pays well.

“And the chance to visit this elusive school was not one I intended to miss! What secrets lie within these halls, I wonder?”

“Secrets?” Masashi asked, though he wouldn’t get an answer. The poet left with a smile that seemed to stretch from ear-to-ear. He looked untrustworthy, but Masashi knew it wasn’t fair to judge people based on appearances. His only regret was not asking about the poet’s favorite flower before he left.

And though the poet was gone, his words lingered in Masashi’s mind as he continued on his task. *“Propaganda...does he mean they’re being paid to lie? And an army of shugenja...I never thought of us like that.”*

He had been under the impression that everyone loved shugenja and the magic they brought into Hyuga, but maybe that wasn’t the case. *“And he spoke of secrets, too...is there more to the Academy than I know?”*

For the moment, it didn’t matter—the bell for the evening classes rang. This class was the last one of both the day and the week. With the weekend to look forward to, this period was typically reserved for testing and today was no exception. The exam was on chakras: the seven focal points in the body in which spiritual energy is made and experienced.

Masashi gulped as he took his seat at the front of the class. He was worried: he hadn’t dedicated the usual ten hours to study for it. Given the recent events with Hitomi, he had only managed four. There was a non-insignificant chance that he might not get a perfect score.

That chance and his fears, however, dwindled after the shugenja turned over his paper and inked his quill.

"Because the average score from the last evaluation was so poor—save for a single outlier," the teacher said, referring to Masashi, "I have decided to make this one multiple choice: simply circle the correct answer from the lists provided. As a personal benefit, I'll no longer have to spend hours deciphering what some of you call handwriting. Begin!"

Masashi nodded and listened diligently to the instructions provided. He had never heard of a multiple choice test before, but was determined to get all the answers correct just as he had in every examination, quiz, project and report thus far.

"Let's see here...the shape of the anahata chakra is a lotus of how many petals: four, six, ten or twelve? Obviously it's twelve—everyone knows that!"

Masashi moved on to the next question, which was just as easy, then the fourth and the fifth up until the forty-ninth where he noticed a spelling error in one of the principal meridians regarding the pericardium—which was, of course, the protective sac around the heart. He thought about raising his hand and asking for a clarification from the teacher, but he didn't want to disrupt the other students still hard at work.

And they were certainly working hard. The room was filled with equal amounts of grunts and groans, the clenching of foreheads and sweating of brows. *"Is this test really that difficult?"* Masashi asked himself. *"I think it's the easiest we've had yet!"*

When the young shugenja turned in his paper, he got a look of surprise from his teacher and glares of resentment from most of his classmates. He quietly bowed and left the room with over an hour left to spare. Usually he waited longer before turning his test in, so as not to stand out so much, but this evening he had work to do.

He had to focus on flowers even though his mind was elsewhere: this time it was on a black swan. Not a real one but a spiritual one: the one that had spoken to him while he and Hitomi were in the spirit world. Though much of Masashi's memory of that 'date' between the two of them was foggy and unclear, the swan's voice remained as clear as crystal.

"Study well and learn quickly, Hashimoto-san. For you do not have the luxury of time."

As Masashi paced down the empty classroom hallways, he couldn't help but feel like he wasn't moving fast enough. Not physically, but mentally. There was so much still to learn, and yet at the pace his class was going, it would take years for him to gain mastery over his spiritual powers.

"I want to learn more...and I want to see you again, Pan-kun."

Maybe it was the summer's heat or something else entirely, but Masashi felt the corridors start to blur and darken. He had lost track of where he was—a feeling he hadn't felt since his first week at school.

He could've sworn the mess hall was up ahead, yet he was met with additional hallways instead.

There were smaller, likely used for staff and maintenance workers. He was about to turn around and go back the way he came when he spotted a bright red light from the corner of his eye.

It was shining off the fur of a tiny fox—no, a red panda!

“Pan-kun?!” Masashi yelled and scared the critter, who hurried off down one of the smaller hallways. The young shugenja gave chase, going down a windy corridor and then a set of stairs, desperate to find the embodiment of his spiritual self. *“Please don’t run away, Pan-kun! I didn’t mean to scare you!”*

His prayer was answered when the red panda found itself at a deadend. Masashi slowed his approach and tried to be as gentle and non-frightening as possible, yet the animal was determined to escape. It had wedged itself against a corner and looked to be scratching at the wall.

Though it turned out that the wall was actually a door—one the red panda nudged open and ran through. This sliding door was not only the size of the entire wall but carefully designed to look like one, too. Masashi didn’t have time to appreciate how strange it was as he was determined to give chase.

At least until he heard an odd noise and loud cry from within. He held his breath and waited, his feet frozen in fear and his hands clutching a talisman. Unfortunately, the only spell he had on him was for freshening undergarments—which may still prove useful, given the frightening situation.

“I have to move forward...for Pan-kun’s sake!”

Masashi braced his courage and slid open the shoji door, which made far too much noise for his liking. He had expected the hallway to be dark within, but instead it was well-lit by torches on the wall. Each was wrapped in talismans. It didn’t take more than a quick inspection for the shugena’s jaw to drop in amazement.

“This is permanency magic! Just to create a single, perpetual flame is highly advanced and requires an immense amount of energy and time to create. And there’s dozens of them here?!”

After recovering from his awe, he continued his pursuit for Pan-kun. Neither it nor the source of the sound was anywhere to be found. There were clues, however: while the hallway continued on a ways to some exit elsewhere, at the center of it was a door frame unlike any the shugena had seen.

For starters, it was thick and sturdy, made of some kind of metal—like iron or steel. But secondly and more strangely, the door within it was completely covered in talismans, criss-crossing one another like intricate wrapping paper.

The hairs on Masashi’s neck stood on end as he felt a surge of dread that prevented him from reading what the talismans said. He didn’t need to in order to know that he wasn’t supposed to be there. So he took a step back and took his third fall to the floor.

It wasn't that he was clumsy; there was an orange scarf sprawled out on the floor. Masashi picked it and then immediately dropped it. He was shocked—quite literally—by the static it held within.

"This belongs to that poet I met earlier. And as for whatever is behind this door...it's not a place I should be!" Masashi said to himself, picking up the garment and running off the way he came.

Some secrets were better left unknown.

■■■■

"That scarf. Interesting fashion statement," Hikiko said in her usual monotone as Masashi took a seat across from her in the mess hall.

The younger shugena explained that it wasn't his and went over his encounter with the odd poet from before. He purposely neglected to mention anything about Pan-kun or the strange door, however.

Somewhere during his story Fumihiro must've arrived, because he nearly choked on his tea from surprise. "You've already met one of them?! Which poet, pray tell? Nozawa-sama? Or Kyorai-san? Perhaps Takarai, also known as Enomoto-dono?"

"Sorry, but he didn't give me his name," Masashi said with a sigh. "He mentioned something about them coming here to write poems praising the school and us shugenja...but he didn't seem very excited about it."

Fumihiro waved it off. "Poets are nature's most sensitive creation. One cannot coerce art by squeezing it from the minds of such men—'twould be folly! On that note, I have amassed a collection of verses from each of tomorrow's visitors. Our floral arrangements shall henceforth illustrate the following poems..."

The would-be warrior-poet then pulled out a parchment and recited a series of poems with enough passion and fervor to draw the attention of the nearby tables and cause both Hikiko and Masashi to grow red with embarrassment.

"Enough!" Hikiko shouted as she snatched the paper away and crumbled it into a ball. She then proceeded to go over the inventory of what the Flower Arrangement Club had. All three of them began to discuss how best to spread flowers around the school.

During their discussion, they were approached by the Incense Appreciation Club—who they could smell coming from a mile away. Today's incense must've been cedar because they smelled like pine cones.

"We're here to help," they said. Apparently the storage room between the flower arrangement and incense appreciation clubrooms was shared—and they didn't want tea leaves to tarnish their aromas. They were an unlikely ally, and hardly the last.

■■■■

“Ah, hold still just a moment longer, Kajinosuke-senpai.”

Masashi was adjusting a display of chrysanthemums above the door frame to the Sumo Club. He was standing on the shoulders of one of its members: a well fed wrestler who particularly favored the white-and-purple flower.

“Hai, hai! Take your time up there! And thanks again for bringing a bit of beauty to this place, Masashi-kohai! This will really help liven up the arena!”

When Masashi was finished and safely down, he inspected the rest of the hallway. It was filled with flowers of all varieties and students that were just as varied. Once the Incense Appreciation Club got started, members from other clubs joined in. Some did it out of respect for Hitomi, others out of fear for Hikiko, and still more that did it to shut Fumihiko up from spouting more poetry.

Most, however, just wanted to make their school a more beautiful place to live. For all of the Academy’s accommodations, it was rather dull and uniform. The rooms were laid out in a symmetric pattern, everyone’s quarters were furnished the same way, and—as many students would attest—the meal selection was few and far between.

Flowers, on the other hand, had a personality all to their own. They were unique: no two were quite the same. Even amid the same species, some were tall and quiet while others were short and loud. Each was in a differing stage of growth and health, with different petal hues and stem leaves. Masashi was beginning to see their expressions and how each one had something to give.

“They’re not so different from people, are they?”

“Masashi-kun? Did you say something?” asked Hikiko, who was carrying a bundle of red tulips. They so contrasted the older girl’s pale face and black wardrobe that it made for a captivating look.

Masashi shook his head and smiled. “It’s nothing. I’m just happy everyone is working together. I can’t wait to see the look on the poets’ faces when they come by here tomorrow!”

■■■■

It was late by the time everyone got finished furnishing the campus with flowers, so no one could fault Masashi for sleeping in a little. Though he was exhausted, he didn’t sleep well—memories of that door and the strange poet continued to toss and turn in his mind. The black swan, too, repeated its words over and over again.

But his most frequent visions were of the red panda, Pan-kun, who he had seen with his own eyes in *this* world, not just the spiritual one. He still hadn’t mentioned it to Hikiko or Fumihiko and wondered if he ever would. *“They’ll call me crazy...and they probably won’t want to be friends with me anymore, either!”*

KNOCK *KNOCK* *KNOCK*

Masashi was roused from his futon from a series of heavy knocks against his door. Though it was customary to announce yourself before entering, no such procedures were followed as Fumihiro burst in and fell to his knees. He hadn't fallen on his own accord or out of respect—Hikiko had tripped him.

The Kendo Club captain was close to tears while Hikiko's usually solemn face was filled with fear. Something had gone horribly wrong.

"Goats! Blasted beasts of burden, accursed creatures! How I rue the day when the gods doth made the serow—horned and hairy devils that hath no right tromping upon this sacred ground!"

Hikiko pulled him up by the ear. "What this fool is trying to say...is that a pack of goats were let into the school early this morning. They...the flowers..."

Masashi didn't wait for Hikiko to finish or to even put on his sandals as he ran outside his room and into the dormitory's main hall. His heart skipped a beat when he got there; air gasped out from his lips as all hope escaped him.

"They're...ruined."

Though the young shugenja had never been to a battlefield, he imagined it would look as horrific as this. Broken, half-eaten stems littered the floor while the few petals that could be seen were flattened and stomped upon. Leaves were scattered and ravaged with bite marks. The once fragrant aroma of roses and jasmines was covered, coated over with the stench of goat feces.

"This is bad," said Hikiko from beside him. "This was our chance to impress the poets. Who is going to tell Hitomi that the Flower Arrangement Club is finished?"

"Son of Hashimoto," said Fumihiro from the other side. "Though I would accept this duty gladly, to watch the pearly-eyed maiden cry would rip my heart to shreds like so many roses. I must forever remain the stalwart warrior in her mind, and thus...I must insist thee speak to her in my place."

Masashi sniffled and blinked away the water swelling in his eyes and nodded. He had failed Hitomi, and it was time to take responsibility.

"I wanted to make you as happy as you were in the spirit world. But now you'll...you'll wish you never came back, Hitomi-chan!"

■■■■

Masashi trudged into the medical ward as if he was fresh from a funeral. He was downcast, downtrodden, and downright depressed. If there was any benefit to Hitomi being blind it was that she wouldn't have to see the shugenja's bloodshot eyes and runny nose. If Masashi could keep his voice level, he might be able to dampen the blow.

"Fufufu! How humorous! Oh, but how did the monks not pay notice?"

In contrast to Masashi's dreariness, Hitomi was laughing and upbeat. She wasn't alone, either—sitting at her bedside was none other than the poet Masashi had bumped into before. He was missing his scarf but was wearing a cowl instead, like a warrior monk. He wielded no weapons aside from his sharp tongue.

"Hm? Why if it isn't my hallway companion. You must be the Masashi this one speaks so fondly about," the poet said with a grin. "Is there something the matter? You look as if you just came from a funeral!"

Hitomi's giggles ended as a look of grave concern filled the blind girl's face instead. "What's wrong, Masashi-kun?"

Masashi didn't know many curse words but was tempted to use some all the same. His attempt at hiding his feelings was foiled thanks to the poet's presence. But without much choice and being unable to delay it any longer, he told Hitomi the truth.

"Y-your flowers...they're..." Masashi gulped and mumbled, explaining the events as they unfolded while holding back a sob. Hitomi kept her expression blank and unreadable as she listened intently. When Masashi was finished, the one and only member of the Flower Appreciation Club spoke.

"So that was the source of the commotion last night and this morning. I am sorry that my club has inconvenienced you, Hikiko-san and Fumihiko-kun. Especially when...I had already made plans to disband it."

Masashi staggered and gasped, then tried to give a retort but was too choked up on his words to do so. Hitomi proceeded to recite a phrase held deep within her heart:

"But wherever in the world, there is no place flowers cannot be arranged. Those are my mother's words. Though blind as I am, she taught me that beauty and grace can be felt in all things. I do not need a clubroom to enjoy Kadō: the way of flowers."

Her words were spoken weakly—in her current state of health—yet were so profound that they warranted a long silence afterwards. Hitomi was a few years older than Masashi but, at this moment, she seemed decades more mature. She had made peace...even if that meant losing the beautiful garden where she spent her afternoons.

"Your words are very touching, even to this jaded, old soul," said the poet. His eyes then narrowed into slits and a mischievous look fell upon what little of his face was visible. "I happen to know my poetic comrades better than they know themselves. They have become numb in their years at the Imperial Court, with their colorful silk and luscious fragrances. Numb to beauty...at least in the traditional sense."

"What are you suggesting, then?" Masashi asked.

"In a word? Contrast. In several more, dear shugena, I am suggesting we put the phrase 'diamond in the rough' to practice."

Masashi cupped his chin and nodded. The poet had given him an idea—but not everyone was going to like it. Especially a certain someone.

■■■■

“How much longer...do I have to fake this smile...and hold these dandelions?!”

Hikiko grumbled as she walked beside Masashi and pretended not to notice the group of stalkers admiring her. Those stalkers happened to be the poets from the Capital, and those dandelions were weeds freshly picked from the Academy’s backyard.

It was all they had, yet in the hands of the gloomy girl the dull flowers seemed to blossom a brilliant gold that made these men act like bears to honey. The contrast was, as they put it, “art unfolding into itself” and “like everything and nothing at the same time”. Masashi didn’t understand what they were going on about but he didn’t need to.

“You’re doing great! Just a little bit longer,” he said with a smile. “Oh...excuse me, Hikiko-san.”

Masashi parted with his friend to leave the solemn girl alone to drag the poets around the Academy grounds. Everything was going well, and he reported as much to the friendly-yet-mischievous poet under the shade of a veranda.

“Of that I’m glad,” he replied with a grin. “Hitomi-chan is a wonderfully kind girl, and the art of flowers is one I hope blossoms in this era. That is...if the Emperor doesn’t decide to enlist you all in another war.”

The poet then let out an exaggerated sigh. Masashi recalled what he was holding—and returned it back to its owner. “Here’s your scarf...um, I never caught your name.”

“My name? Why, that’s a secret. Just like whatever is behind that door, Masashi Hashimoto.”

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

[Feb 7, 2020](#)

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 (+0)

2%

Borgia, the butler (+3)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+7)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+4)

0%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+23)

2%

Keiko, the maid (+7)

5%

Kohaku, the samurai (+38)

7%

Kuniko, the farmer (+13)

2%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+0)

7%

Momoko, the doctor (+35)

12%

Nishi, the yakuza (+9)

2%

Satsuma, the emperor (+3)

7%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+21)

28%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+38)

26%

Poll ended Feb 29, 2020 · 43 votes total

[Gensai-sensei](#)

[Feb 10, 2020](#)

How do you feel about MC and Junko/Jun's Sensei?





I hate that guy!

I don't like him, but he's not ALL bad.

I don't feel strongly one way or the other about him.

I feel like he's misunderstood.

Sensei didn't do nothin' wrong!

155 votes total

[MC #6's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Feb 11, 2020](#)

The design for MC #6 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Feminine, Impulsive**

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

Short (+23)

32%

Long (+0)

11%

Ponytail (+5)

18%

Chonmage (+19)

26%

Long bangs (+1)

13%

Poll ended Feb 15, 2020 · 38 votes total

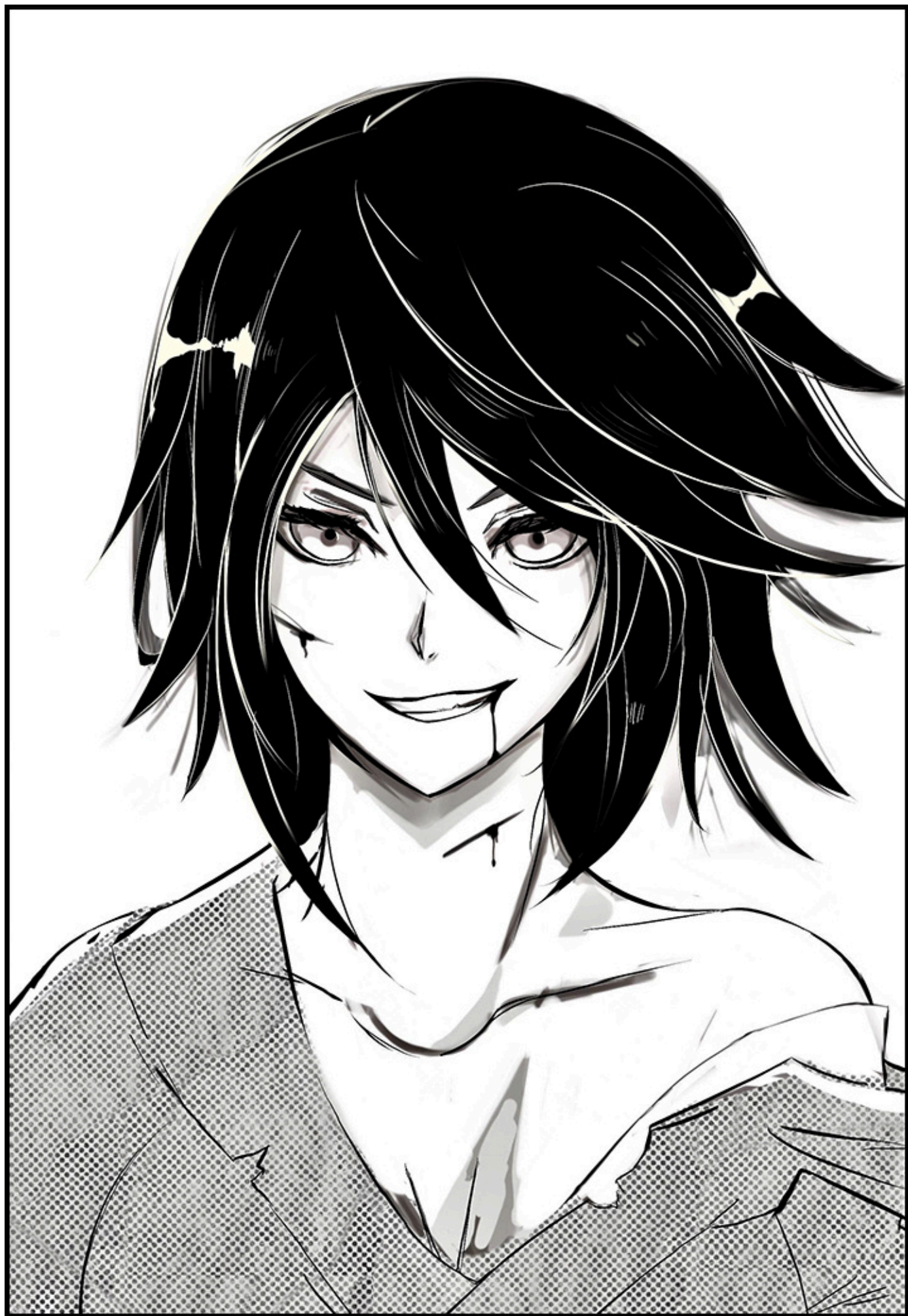
[MC #6 Face Art](#)

[Feb 29, 2020](#)

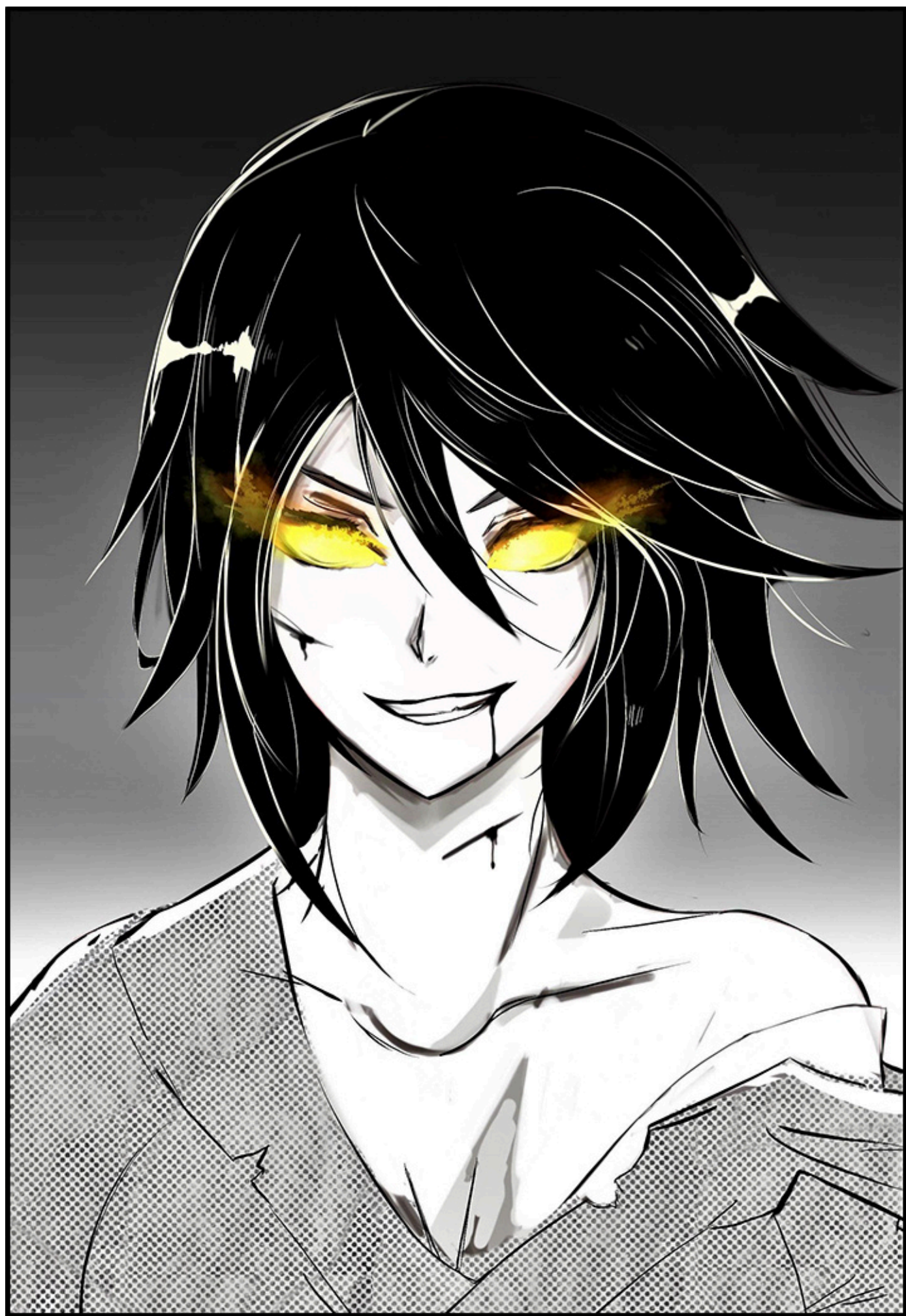
A new month, a new face! That's right: in Book 5, players will be able to (optionally) select a face for their main character! Faces will be designed each month by the intermediate+ tiers via polls. This month's face was drawn by Rym! If you like it, feel free to tell him about it on the patreon discord!

This month's build: **Feminine, Impulsive, Short hair**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[Mar 1, 2020](#)

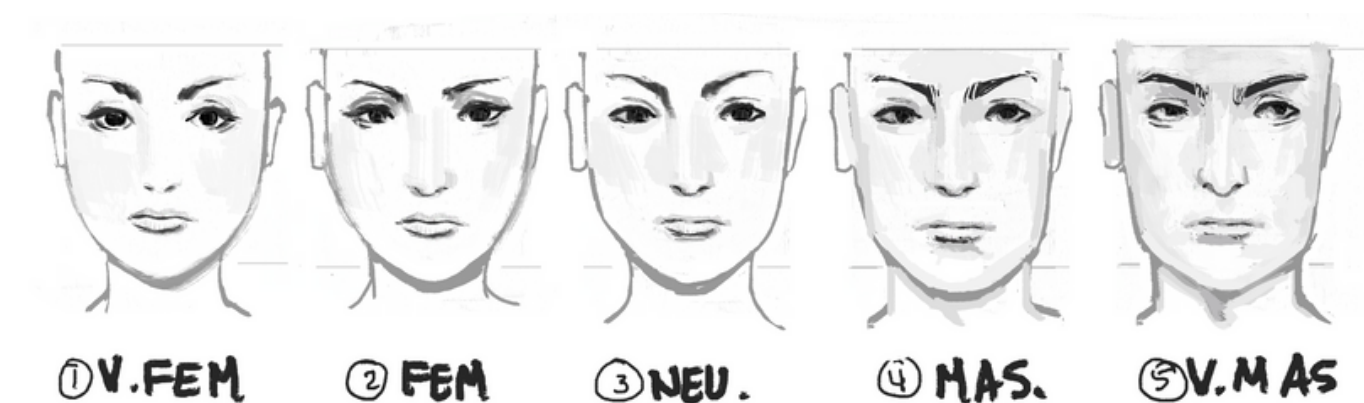
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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)

17%

Feminine (+0)

3%

Neutral (+11)

43%

Masculine (+15)

34%

Very masculine (+0)

3%

Poll ended Mar 5, 2020 · 35 votes total

[MC #7's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Mar 6, 2020](#)

The design for MC #7 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 (+0)

0%

Calculated (+3)

0%

Perverted (+8)

16%

Chivalrous (+12)

25%

Charming (+12)

9%

Stoic (+21)

13%

Drifter (+4)

9%

Protective (+22)

25%

Brutal (+0)

0%

Finesse (+6)

3%

Poll ended Mar 10, 2020 · 32 votes total

[Side Story #20: Isamu's Horse \(Female Kohaku Version\)](#)

[Mar 7, 2020](#)

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



Side Story 20: Isamu's Horse (Female Kohaku Version)



■■ Shima ■■

Isamu was thirteen today—his father's servants had to remind him. For a boy his age to forget his own birthday was unheard of, but the only son and heir to General Shatao was often reading, daydreaming or both. He preferred to be lost in his head than stuck in his body.

The former was far less frail.

With practiced patience, the boy rose from his futon over to his desk where an elaborate meal of grilled tuna, miso soup and fresh tea waited for him. It was a hearty meal to start the day, and—as always—far too much for Isamu to finish. Which was fine considering the half-dozen cats waiting outside his window for their daily portions. Isamu was about to toss over his tuna when he heard the drill sergeant down below.

"Keep those arms up, men! Swing faster!"

Spring had come early to the rocky coastline and wooded hills of Eastern Hyuga. It was Isamu's least favorite season, but not because he enjoyed the snow. It was because the cold no longer kept the soldiers indoors, and from his windows he could see the barracks rouse with activity, from marching drills to sword training to archery on horseback.

It was what every son of a samurai dreamed of doing—but for Isamu at least, it would forever remain a dream. He was forbidden from doing anything fun, or at least that was it felt like to him. The boy left out a wistful sigh as he choked down chunks of fish and watched the soldiers train. Some weren't much older than he was, Isamu knew. Not that he knew any of them personally.

It wasn't like he had any friends.

BahRoo

A familiar horn sounded and put a pause to Isamu's despair. The boy had an ear for horns and knew this one was carried by none other than General Shatao himself. *"Father has returned from the Capital! He's early, isn't he?"*

Isamu rushed to get dressed just as the soldiers scattered into lines by the roadside in preparation to bow and greet their liege lord. Shatao led his entourage of over a hundred mounted samurai atop his brilliant steed which was armored from head to hooves just like its rider.

Shima samurai were known to be the toughest and most stubborn warriors on the battlefield—the animal on their banners, the King Crab, was evidence of that. Of course they weren't all of one family, nor of any clan. Isamu's father had to renounce his claims in the aftermath of the Golden Era to end the endless wars.

The proud Taira clan had bent the knee to the Imperial Throne, and instead of fighting a losing battle, Shatao was granted a general's rank and the Shima territories. It did not come without an air of dishonor, however, as some even whispered that the spirits had cursed the man for his cowardice. The early death of his wife and the frailty of his son was proof, they said.

Though they said it nowhere near Isamu, the inner walls of Shatao's fortress-turned-mansion were much thinner than those facing the coastline. Isamu had cried himself to sleep more than a few nights after that. How cruel fate could be, for a boy's very presence to bring shame to his father.

And that was why Isamu kept to himself and in his room more often than not. Though today was an exception—he marched down to the main hall in his best silk kimono, prepared to receive his father with a smile and cheer. The general had been away since the start of winter and no doubt had plenty of stories to tell.

By the time Isamu reached the main hall it was a blur of activity: chefs running to prepare for an impromptu feast, servants rushing to prepare rooms, and guards hurrying to their posts. More than a

few had bumped into the boy as he went about his much slower pace, but Isamu was undeterred as he took his rightful seat beside his father's throne.

When the grand doors opened, the chamber went quiet. A single set of armored footsteps echoed as Shatao's tall figure emerged. His red armor, though dirtied from his travels, glistened under the morning's light. Everyone bowed low as he passed in silence, his gaze unseen behind his white-maned helmet.

That was until he took it off once he reached the foot of the stairs facing the three thrones. The man was scarred and grizzled, and just beyond middle aged—with a bushy beard and a balding head of hair that made for a natural chonmage that had no need for shaving.

Most importantly, for the first time in a year or longer, Isamu saw him smile.

"Happy birthday, Isamu-kun."

Isamu returned the gesture before bowing low and thanking him. When he raised back up his head, his father was no longer alone—there was a man beside him holding a crate covered in silk.

"I left Yamato early to make sure I got here in time. It has been far too many years since we last celebrated your birthday together," said Shatao. Though his voice was stern and monotone, the words were more than enough kindness for Isamu. "You are thirteen now—well on your way to becoming a man. And so I give you these, my son."

The silk was removed and a suit of Kendo armor and a bamboo sword was revealed underneath. Isamu couldn't believe his eyes. Shatao then gestured to the man beside him, introducing him as a sword instructor from Yamato—one of the best teachers in Hyuga.

"Under his tutelage, you shall come to master the way of the sword," Shatao said, giving an order his son was all too eager to obey. "More than that, I expect you to follow my footsteps in the way of the warrior: Bushido."

"Hai! I will, Father! I swear it!"

Though to others this was a son inheriting his father's position, lands and titles, to Isamu it was something far simpler and much more meaningful. For this was the first time that his father had asked and expected *anything* from his frail, forgotten son.

And Isamu would rather die than let him down.

■■■■

"Eiyah...yah...uh..." Isamu shouted his kiai—his warrior cry—though it came out more like a groan. His arms were in a tremendous amount of pain, but that was nothing compared to the blisters opening up under his feet as he was forced to swing and step, swing and step across the dojo floor.

"Enough," said the instructor, whose name was Hiroku Toshizō. He came from a rich family with close ties to the Emperor, and he held this job and the countryside of Shima in low regard. "It's hardly been five minutes, but at this rate you'll break down if I push you further. Your limits are as low as I feared."

Isamu fell to his knees both to catch his breath and to apologize at the same time. Toshizō ignored him, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. "I know about your condition: your bones are more brittle than most. It's like fighting with a porcelain blade and hoping it doesn't shatter...sheer nonsense—just like this assignment."

"Please, Sensei! I can do it! I can learn how to be a samurai! I, I have to..." Isamu pleaded, snout running down his nose and tears welling in his eyes. He had just enough time to wipe his face and stand when his father entered the dojo, asking about his progress.

The instructor's tone and personality changed completely. "The young master is learning exceedingly fast, my lord! Why, by the time summer starts he should be ready for practice duels!"

Shatao nodded and praised Isamu for the first time in his life. His son couldn't help but smile even if he had to clench his teeth in pain to do so. He had already broken something in his right foot since the start of this morning's lesson, but he'd be damned if a broken toe would stop him from becoming a samurai.

"I'm not going to let you down, Father! No matter what!"

Just as Shatao was about to observe Isamu's training, a horn sounded off yet again. The boy knew this one belonged to the Westerners—those of the Nanbu clan who swore their loyalty to his father. They were allowed to return to their families and ranches during the winter months, provided they returned with steeds for the soldiers.

Nanbu horses were the best around, and combined with the heavy armor of Shima samurai, Shatao's army made for a formidable force. The only downside was the cultural differences between the two—though fear of General Shatao's wrath kept everyone in check.

The presence of the Westerners drove the chefs into an even greater frenzy as the number of mouths increased even further. Isamu's training was suspended for the day as festivities ensued. Everyone had forgotten about the boy's birthday until Shatao brought it up at supper, for which the—now intoxicated—leader of the Western samurai promised a special gift befitting the son of their leige lord, to be granted after the feast was over.

"Arigato gozaimasu! Thank you very much, Nobunao Nanbu-san," Isamu said with the utmost respect. It was perhaps more respect than the drunken rancher-turned-samurai deserved, but he was the brother of Haramusa Nanbu—a man his father had respected a great deal. The two had fought against each other in the Golden Era before joining forces, and after quelling the uprisings in the West, Haramusa swore fealty to Shatao.

His immediate family had done likewise, and speaking of which—there was a new face at their table. A young one.

"Thirteen, you say you were? Darn near a man! Shapin' up just like 'yer father, yes sir! Oh," said Haramusa, noticing who Isamu was staring at, "that's right. Go up and introduce yourself, Kohaku!"

The boy called Kohaku was a head and a half taller than Isamu was. He was broader, too, and his clothes were plain—yet there was gracefulness in him even still. He was shy, as well, or at least he couldn't look up at them as he approached their table. And once he did, he fell to his knees and placed his forehead to the floor.

"Lord Shatao, I, Kohaku of House Nanbu, swear 'ah serve you as my father did. I hum-humbly offer you this oath, milord!"

Isamu was taken aback by the boy's display. Though spoken in the Western dialect, his words were clear and brimming with passion. The respect he had for Shatao was evident, so much so that he had to be told twice unbow before he did.

"This is Hara-kun's...son? I did not know that he was blessed with one, but it is my honor that one so young dedicates himself to me. May everyone in this hall take notice!" Shatao shouted, to which everyone cheered. He then asked for Kohaku's age, which turned out to be twelve. "A year younger than my Isamu-kun. I have no doubt you two will be as close friends as myself and your father were, Kohaku Nanbu."

The thought of having friends at all thrilled Isamu, and he became eager to meet Kohaku in less formal circumstances. So much so that after the feast was over, instead of returning to his room for the night, Isamu sneaked off to the section of the barracks where the Westerners dwelled.

He spotted Kohaku entering the stables, but before Isamu could do the same, yelling came from inside. The voice was Kohaku's and it was far less respectful than the one Isamu had heard at supper.

"Let him go! You ain't takin' my horse! I don't care what'cha promised that brat, Uncle!"

"Shush your mouth, Koha-chan! This colt don't belong to nobody but Lord Shatao—or was that oath o' yours just words?"

"But! But I helped birthed him! He's *mine*! Give that kid someone else's horse!"

Isamu's gaze fell to the ground. The disparaging words from Kohaku—the Westerner's honest feelings—crushed any hope of them becoming friends. Isamu was going to end up taking the horse Kohaku cared so dearly about. The boy was no doubt going to hold a grudge against him for the rest of his time here, unless...

"...unless I come up with a plan!"

Isamu hurried as best he could with a broken toe back to the throne room where he waited for the Westerners to arrive with his birthday gift. Though it was growing late at night, fatigue was hardly a concern as the boy's mind raced with what he had to do to fix this problem.

Before he knew it, the large doors opened once more and three figures emerged. The first was the uncle who bore an exaggerated grin on his face. To contrast him, at his side was Kohaku looking at the floor helplessly, his head bobbing upwards at every snuffle.

Led by the reins in the boy's hand was the third and final figure—the horse. He was two years old though already impressive in size, with a healthy shine to his chestnut coat, black mane and tail. He was nervous as most would be, though not because he was in the presence of General Shatao. The movement of servants along with the raging fires in the braziers was too much for the colt to be comfortable.

And though Kohaku was amidst a fit of despair, the boy petted and soothed the horse as they marched forward. Both his skill and attachment to it was obvious. It made what Isamu had to do next all the more clear.

After the uncle presented it and General Shatao voiced his praise and approval of the steed, it was Isamu's turn to speak. Though instead of speaking, he approached the horse and stroked its back, then asked Kohaku for its name.

"He...he doesn't have one. Milord," the boy said, wiping his nose.

"Then how does 'Tatsuya' sound?" Isamu asked, and for the first time Kohaku raised his head and looked him in the eyes. He nodded in approval. The name meant 'he who is an achievement', and he certainly would be—for Isamu to ride such a steed by his father's side would be more than he could ever hope for.

"I shall fetch the best rider among my ranks to instruct you in horsemanship," Shatao said. Though as he did, Isamu could see the smile on Kohaku's face turn back to a frown. Tatsuya neighed out as if to personally oppose the idea.

"Father," Isamu asked, "would it not be better to learn from a rider my age and size? I believe Kohaku Nanbu would be more than suitable as an instructor."

The boy in question gasped and nodded, looking first at his uncle and then at Shatao with pleading eyes. The samurai general would not deny his son's request, and so tonight Isamu gained more than just a horse.

He gained a friend.

■■■■

The week after Isamu's thirteenth birthday was the boy's most eventful in years. Though there were cultural and class differences between him and Kohaku, none of that mattered. The two chatted for hours about samurai and famous battles, particularly their fathers and their deeds in the Golden Era. Kohaku wasn't as well-read as Isamu but his enthusiasm to learn and his penchant for asking questions made Isamu feel smart and important.

This week was also, however, the most taxing on Isamu's body. After drilling and disappointing his sword instructor each morning, Isamu was sore all over and aching from broken blisters. But he held in the pain as he helped Kohaku clean and feed Tatsuya his lunch.

Isamu was hardly a natural around horses, but Tatsuya had a gentle demeanor for a colt his age. While just getting on the saddle was the extent of his horsemanship training, he hoped one day to be able to do all the jumps, turns and sprinting that Kohaku was able to do with ease. He was jealous of the Westerner's expertise, but in return, Kohaku was jealous of him.

"It just ain't fair," he pouted late one afternoon, "I don't gets to use a katana like the others do. Uncle says I have to sit and watch—some samurai that'll make me! I'm just doing chores."

"If you would like, we could use the practice swords at my father's dojo. We should have the place to ourselves for an hour or so."

"R-really?!" Kohaku shouted, jumping to his feet and shaking in excitement. "Reckon that's the best news I've heard, Isamu-kun! Let's get goin'!"

Isamu couldn't help but laugh. Not just at the accent, but of Kohaku's unrestrained excitement. There was something about the boy's emotions that was contagious—his happiness made Isamu happy, too. *"Is this what having friends is like?"* he wondered.

The two entered the training hall within the mansion but only Isamu walked in. Kohaku was stunned by the size of the hall and the shine of the lacquered, pinewood floor. "Wow...this is amazin'! You're so lucky to have a place like this to train, Isamu-kun!"

Isamu supposed he was, though considering he had been raised in this mansion all his life he had thought little of it. Mostly, he was pitied for his condition; to be envied instead—even if it was just because of this large training hall—was a welcome change.

When one son of a samurai handed a bamboo practice sword to the other, it wasn't long before the boys got themselves into a duel. It was just for practice and fun, but that didn't mean either of them was going to hold back.

Which was a problem when you had bones made of glass.

It ended after a single strike. Kohaku hadn't hit him—he didn't need to for the damage to have been done. When their swords collided, the force of their swings did, too, and the vibration was enough to cause bones within Isamu's arms to crack. The boy let out a painful wail, but the pain was far more than physical.

It was embarrassing and shameful, too.

■■■■

The second week of Isamu's thirteenth birthday was much more akin to the ones of his younger years, spent alone in his bed save for when it was time for his meals to be fed to him by his servants. Recovering like this was life as usual for Isamu, though after having a taste of adventure and camaraderie with Kohaku—he realized just how lacking it was.

"Not that it matters," Isamu grumbled as he stared at the ceiling. "He won't want to be friends with a weakling like me, anymore."

A crash outside his door roused Isamu from his futon. It was about time for the servants to deliver him his lunch, but the footsteps outside weren't any he recognized. Isamu was suspicious and even more so when his shoji door slid open and the cart with his meal moved in by itself.

Or rather, it was being pushed by someone who couldn't be seen above the dish's silver cover. That person was none other than Kohaku, who had a giant grin on his face as he removed the cover from the dish.

"Bet'cha never had Westlands-style tempura before, have ya?" Kohaku asked with a giggle before his voice grew with concern. "Don'tcha like chicken, Isamu-kun?"

Isamu wiped away his watery eyes with his kimono sleeve. His tears weren't of sadness but of relief and joy. He had thought Kohaku wouldn't want to be friends with him again after the incident—and told him as much.

"That's silly. Now open your trap," Kohaku said as he plucked a piece of fried chicken with a pair of chopsticks and motioned it over to Isamu's mouth. He managed to drop it on Isamu's futon twice, causing them both to laugh.

"Thank you for the meal, Kohaku-kun...I'm sorry if you got into any trouble on my account. I really am...huh?"

Isamu stopped mid sentence when the Westerner fell to his knees and pressed his forehead to the floor. "I'm the one who needs to be apologizin'. I hurt milord's son, and now you gotta spend weeks cramped up in here 'till you get better! I promise I won't be so rough around ya' ever again, Isamu-kun!"

The apology only made Isamu feel worse. No matter how well Kohaku tried to hide it, the boy would forever act differently around Isamu after that day. "I know it is too much to ask of you to treat me as you did before...but if I am ever to become a samurai, I cannot continue to be coddled. I can't let this weakness hold me back."

"I know what you mean," Kohaku said with a seriousness that erased all doubt. "One day, we'll both become as strong as our fathers!"

Isamu smiled and agreed. "That's a promise. Now...how is Tatsuya-kun?"

■■■■■

The leaves on the maples that Shima was known for had grown, flourished and changed colors in the seasons that followed. Its unchanged cycle was perhaps the only constant in Isamu's world, which—thanks entirely to Kohaku—had grown tremendously from the confines of Shatao's mansion.

Together, the two went on adventures everywhere: from the rocky shores where they collected seashells to the forests where they set up traps for both rabbits and Kondo barbarians alike. They had little luck catching either, but fun nonetheless. Enough fun to make the aches in Isamu's body go numb and ignored.

Most of their time however, was spent in the stretch of plains reserved for the horses. Tatsuya was growing at a rapid pace and Isamu's fledgling skills as a rider were struggling to keep up. The boy had a newfound appreciation for the majestic animals: not only were they incredibly smart, they had personalities and mood swings the same as any person.

Not only that, they had an uncanny ability to detect fear. Try as Isamu might to mimic Kohaku's handling—from keeping Tatsuya still while putting on his saddle to turning him left or right mid-trot—it was helpless so long as Isamu remained afraid. Tatsuya would either rebuff him or ignore his order entirely.

"Still doesn't trust ya yet," Kohaku said, consoling his friend. "Gotta keep yer grip on the reins stern and yer voice level. Horse and riders are partners, but you gotta be the boss. Else you're just diggin' for water under the outhouse!"

Isamu sighed and nodded at Kohaku's rancher wisdom. It seemed as if all Westerners were born to the saddle and equipped with a multitude of sayings, idioms and phrases to go along with their unique dialect.

"I wish there was something I could give Tatsuya to make him like me more," Isamu thought aloud. "Like a reward for when he does as I ask...a treat—and I know just the one!"

That was how the pair of boys and their horse ended up searching for grapes in a far-off field over an hour away from the barracks. There was no road to get there, but Isamu had overheard the servants speak of it in the past. Kyoho grapes were large, dark-purple orbs that were very sweet and juicy. They were also exceedingly hard to come by—but it was worth the effort if it helped Isamu gain Tatsuya's trust.

Speaking of the horse, the chestnut colt was already quite pleased with the new area. Grapes or no, the grass here had been untouched and ungrazed upon, making for long and tasty feed. Tatsuya's ever-present hunger was one of the reasons the going was so slow; according to the map Isamu had borrowed from his father's war room, they were only halfway there.

Still, being away from the adults and their responsibilities were enough to put the boys in high spirits. They both had their bamboo swords on their backs along with bandages, army rations, blankets and buckets for their hopeful haul. They were two samurai out on a campaign, or so they imagined.

“Nanbu-san!” Isamu said, pitching his voice low, “I see movement in the bushes out yonder. Could be savages. Investigate and report back immediately!”

“Hai! For the Emperor!”

The two acted like how they imagined mature samurai did, pretending the water from their bottles was stiff saké and the blades of grass in their mouths were tobacco pipes. Tatsuya put an end to their imaginary smoking habit with a quick nibble.

All that saké had caught up with Kohaku, who had to relieve himself in a nearby thicket. Isamu found it odd that the boy would always walk so far just to take a piss, when most men—young or old—just took to the nearest bush. And so, out of curiosity, Isamu tailed him this time. Shifting behind one tree to another, he got close enough to inspect his friend while doing the deed.

And that was when Isamu discovered that Kohaku was actually a girl.

A gasp, a scream, and a punch to the shoulder later, Isamu was sore and defeated but confused most of all. Nothing was broken except for the boy’s perception of his best friend. Kohaku made him swear up and down to tell nobody and no one about what he had seen. When asked why it was such a secret, the boy—or girl, rather—admitted the truth between embarrassed mumbles.

“I need’ta follow in my father’s footsteps...I can’t do that wearin’ a lady’s sandals. I’m as tough and strong as any boy...and I—I ain’t answering to ‘Koha-chan’ anymore, you hear?!”

Isamu laughed and then assured Kohaku that he wasn’t laughing at her. “It would seem we both have conditions to overcome, to be the samurai our fathers were. In a way, I am relieved...I had always wondered why you were so cute.”

“U-urusai! Shut up, you idiot!”

■■■■

They didn’t find any grapes that day as their search was cut short by a rainstorm that left the two drenched by the time they returned to the barracks. Kohaku was scolded and punished for going out without telling anyone, while Isamu—who was just as much to blame—was given no punishment considering he was the son of their liege lord.

It wasn’t anything new, but Isamu still hated being treated differently than his friend. He wouldn’t get to see Kohaku for days later—the rains continued the next day and then several more, letting up only long enough to let the horses graze and stretch their legs before being forced into the stables again.

With winter on the horizon and the supplies dwindling fast, it was time for the Shima samurai to go out on patrol across the many villages that dotted the countryside. Their task would be to conduct a census on the farmers there, but more importantly, to gather up taxes in the form of rice.

General Shatao always led the regiment that went out for this yearly assignment, saying it was important for his people to know what their ruler looked like. His imposing figure covered in an ornate suit of armor was all it took to dissuade any potential uprisings. He would often be away for a month or more during this expedition.

And this year, unlike all the others, Isamu was going to go with him. The only men that accompanied Shatao were mounted samurai and cart drivers, and so the boy would ride Tatsuya for the journey.

“Even if I’ll never be able to fight like a samurai—I’ll ride like one! If I can do that much, then for once...I’ll be a son to be proud of!”

General Shatao didn’t know about the boy’s plans—Isamu was hoping to surprise him. When his father announced that they were leaving tomorrow at dawn come rain or shine, his son knew he had to prepare.

He had to master riding Tatsuya and only had one day to do it.

“I dunno about this, Isamu-kun. This ain’t just a tempest in a teapot!” Kohaku yelled, trying to carry her voice over the wind. She had saddled Tatsuya just as Isamu had asked her to, and while the colt looked eager for a ride, the weather was bad and getting worse.

“I’m just going to do a couple circles around the field. We’ll follow the fence,” Isamu said, bracing himself as he took up his seat and grabbed a hold of the harness. He knew that if he was afraid, Tatsuya would be, too, and so the frail son of a samurai embraced his courage and hung on for dear life as the horse sped forward.

Isamu had ridden atop Tatsuya before, of course, but never this quickly or in the pouring rain. He used his voice, his legs and the reins to calm the horse’s initial excitement. He then directed Tatsuya beside the fence where they’d begin their first lap around the perimeter.

Tatsuya picked up speed from a trot to a canter, bouncing Isamu up and down atop the saddle. The boy braced himself for the bumps, following the horse’s rhythm and trying his best to remain steady. He had to squint his eyes to see the path ahead as drops of rain pounded against his face.

Though visibility was poor and the winds were strong, the two-and-a-half-year-old Tatsuya was one of Clan Nanbu’s finest, and proved his mettle by spurring forth undeterred. Loud splashes of water broke beneath his hooves like thunder as the steed moved forth like lightning—as if to challenge the skies above.

“That’s it! Great job, Tatsuya!” Isamu shouted with glee. The horse had just completed its first lap and had done so at a record pace. Not even Kohaku had gone that fast before, which gave Isamu a rare sense of pride. He knew he would be able to keep up with his father and the others tomorrow. He’d be able to ride alongside the samurai without shame or disgrace.

The boy was too focused on his daydreaming to notice the growing roars of thunder that broke out above. Isamu was too thrilled, too excited and too hopeful to be cautious. For the first time in his life he

had forgotten that he was born weak and frail. At this moment he was nothing less than the son of a samurai, a boy no different than any other.

At least until the lightning struck.

CRACK

Tatsuya bucked up in fear as the lightning bolt came crashing down into a tree just ahead of them. His rider was flung from his saddle, left in a crumpled heap as the horse took off on its own. A thousand bony creaks popped and cracked all at once as Isamu lay sprawled atop a field of mud.

Isamu heard a yell out in the distance as he stared up into the cloudy sky. The rain was quieting to a stop and the midday sun threatened to peek out from behind the clouds. His father would have good weather for his journey tomorrow. But his son wouldn't be accompanying him.

When the broken boy tried to move his head, every nerve in his neck and skull made him regret it. He tried likewise with his legs, arms and hands. While there was no pain in his limbs, there was nothing else, either—he was paralyzed from the neck down. Even his lungs were numb, making something as simple as breathing a near impossible task.

He could still hear, at least, and as the winds died down, the cries from Kohaku broke through.

"Isamu! Please be okay! You gotta be—you gotta!"

Tears were streaming down Kohaku's face as Isamu peered upwards into it. Though the girl had a boyish demeanor, she was a girl all the same and it wasn't right to make them cry. Isamu tried to smile and say he was fine, but he choked on his words and they came out with a bloody cough.

"Kohaku-kun...Tatsuya, he...listened to me," Isamu said, his shortness of breath only allowing several words at a time. Each syllable was like a knife to the ribs. "Have to go...find him...not his fault."

"I-I'll be right back! I need to get you help, Isamu-kun!"

"No!" Isamu coughed, shaking his head even though it was agonizing to do so. "You can't be...near me. Don't tell...anyone you were here. You have to be a...samurai," he gasped, "for both of us."

Kohaku couldn't believe what she was hearing. Her best friend was telling her to leave, to abandon him as he laid in pain and dying. It had always been Kohaku's dream to become a samurai, but ever since the two of them met...that dream had always had Isamu in it.

"Y-you're not gonna die, are ya?! We promised to be as strong as our fathers one day! I'm gonna be your best samurai, and together we'll, we'll..." Kohaku broke down into tears. She had sworn an oath to Shatao, that day during the feast when she first arrived. But her greatest loyalty was to her friend who now struggled to draw breath.

The yells from soldiers rang out from afar. There wasn't much time left if Kohaku was going to run and be spared Shatao's wrath. Isamu knew this, and, as much as it pained him to speak, as much as it hurt the heart within his crumpled chest, he spoke:

"Kohaku-kun...we will never be as strong as our fathers were. NOW GO!"

And the girl went. With tears streaming down her face, Kohaku looked back just once as she ran from the best friend she would ever have.

■■■■

With his vision blurred and with his consciousness fading in and out, it was hard for Isamu to know where he was or how much time had passed. From what little he could still feel behind his neck was a pillow, and above him was the ceiling he was all too accustomed to seeing.

He was in his room, broken again. But this time he wasn't alone. By his bedside wasn't a doctor, a nurse or any of the servants. His father was there with a look Isamu had never seen on the samurai before: complete and total fear. He looked thinner, pale and sickly, and beneath his eyes were long shadows as if he hadn't slept in days.

"Spirits save him, if there is any good in this forsaken world—save my son!" he pleaded and prayed. When Isamu tilted his head, the fear in his father's haggard face turned to shock and awe. "Isamu-kun! Have you awakened?!"

"Fa...ther..." was all the boy could say. His mouth was as dry as dust and his lungs no longer drew in air. General Shatao said he needn't speak, but Isamu had his final words to say.

"I wanted you...to be proud of me," his son gasped, forcing out the last of his breath. "Every time...you saw me...you looked so...disappointed."

And like a candle's flame at the bottom of its wick, Isamu's life was snuffed out. In its place was silence—the absence of painful and gasping breaths. Peace had enveloped the boy, who had lived and died broken but was now made whole in the heavens above.

But fires, when put out all too quickly, had a habit of drawing smoke. And in this case, a black gas drew forth from the ether. Shatao, consumed by grief and guilt over the death of his one and only son, clutched at his face and began ripping off skin with his fingers.

The foul, dark smoke gathered within him, consuming his spirit, body and mind. When it was over, Shatao gave Isamu one final look before putting on his helmet.

"My son...this cursed face of mine...no one shall see it again!"

Side Story #20: Isamu's Horse (Male Kohaku Version)

Mar 7, 2020

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

Side Story 20: Isamu's Horse (Male Kohaku Version)

■■ *Shima* ■■

Isamu was thirteen today—his father's servants had to remind him. For a boy his age to forget his own birthday was unheard of, but the only son and heir to General Shatao was often reading, daydreaming or both. He preferred to be lost in his head than stuck in his body.

The former was far less frail.

With practiced patience, the boy rose from his futon over to his desk where an elaborate meal of grilled tuna, miso soup and fresh tea waited for him. It was a hearty meal to start the day, and—as always—far too much for Isamu to finish. Which was fine considering the half-dozen cats waiting outside his window for their daily portions. Isamu was about to toss over his tuna when he heard the drill sergeant down below.

“Keep those arms up, men! Swing faster!”

Spring had come early to the rocky coastline and wooded hills of Eastern Hyuga. It was Isamu's least favorite season, but not because he enjoyed the snow. It was because the cold no longer kept the soldiers indoors, and from his windows he could see the barracks rouse with activity, from marching drills to sword training to archery on horseback.

It was what every son of a samurai dreamed of doing—but for Isamu at least, it would forever remain a dream. He was forbidden from doing anything fun, or at least that was it felt like to him. The boy left out a wistful sigh as he choked down chunks of fish and watched the soldiers train. Some weren't much older than he was, Isamu knew. Not that he knew any of them personally.

It wasn't like he had any friends.

BahRoo

A familiar horn sounded and put a pause to Isamu's despair. The boy had an ear for horns and knew this one was carried by none other than General Shatao himself. *"Father has returned from the Capital! He's early, isn't he?"*

Isamu rushed to get dressed just as the soldiers scattered into lines by the roadside in preparation to bow and greet their liege lord. Shatao led his entourage of over a hundred mounted samurai atop his brilliant steed which was armored from head to hooves just like its rider.

Shima samurai were known to be the toughest and most stubborn warriors on the battlefield—the animal on their banners, the King Crab, was evidence of that. Of course they weren't all of one family, nor of any clan. Isamu's father had to renounce his claims in the aftermath of the Golden Era to end the endless wars.

The proud Taira clan had bent the knee to the Imperial Throne, and instead of fighting a losing battle, Shatao was granted a general's rank and the Shima territories. It did not come without an air of dishonor, however, as some even whispered that the spirits had cursed the man for his cowardice. The early death of his wife and the frailty of his son was proof, they said.

Though they said it nowhere near Isamu, the inner walls of Shatao's fortress-turned-mansion were much thinner than those facing the coastline. Isamu had cried himself to sleep more than a few nights after that. How cruel fate could be, for a boy's very presence to bring shame to his father.

And that was why Isamu kept to himself and in his room more often than not. Though today was an exception—he marched down to the main hall in his best silk kimono, prepared to receive his father with a smile and cheer. The general had been away since the start of winter and no doubt had plenty of stories to tell.

By the time Isamu reached the main hall it was a blur of activity: chefs running to prepare for an impromptu feast, servants rushing to prepare rooms, and guards hurrying to their posts. More than a few had bumped into the boy as he went about his much slower pace, but Isamu was undeterred as he took his rightful seat beside his father's throne.

When the grand doors opened, the chamber went quiet. A single set of armored footsteps echoed as Shatao's tall figure emerged. His red armor, though dirtied from his travels, glistened under the morning's light. Everyone bowed low as he passed in silence, his gaze unseen behind his white-maned helmet.

That was until he took it off once he reached the foot of the stairs facing the three thrones. The man was scarred and grizzled, and just beyond middle aged—with a bushy beard and a balding head of hair that made for a natural chonmage that had no need for shaving.

Most importantly, for the first time in a year or longer, Isamu saw him smile.

"Happy birthday, Isamu-kun."

Isamu returned the gesture before bowing low and thanking him. When he raised back up his head, his father was no longer alone—there was a man beside him holding a crate covered in silk.

“I left Yamato early to make sure I got here in time. It has been far too many years since we last celebrated your birthday together,” said Shatao. Though his voice was stern and monotone, the words were more than enough kindness for Isamu. “You are thirteen now—well on your way to becoming a man. And so I give you these, my son.”

The silk was removed and a suit of Kendo armor and a bamboo sword was revealed underneath. Isamu couldn’t believe his eyes. Shatao then gestured to the man beside him, introducing him as a sword instructor from Yamato—one of the best teachers in Hyuga.

“Under his tutelage, you shall come to master the way of the sword,” Shatao said, giving an order his son was all too eager to obey. “More than that, I expect you to follow my footsteps in the way of the warrior: Bushido.”

“Hai! I will, Father! I swear it!”

Though to others this was a son inheriting his father’s position, lands and titles, to Isamu it was something far simpler and much more meaningful. For this was the first time that his father had asked and expected *anything* from his frail, forgotten son.

And Isamu would rather die than let him down.

■■■■

“Eiyah...yah...uh...” Isamu shouted his kiai—his warrior cry—though it came out more like a groan. His arms were in a tremendous amount of pain, but that was nothing compared to the blisters opening up under his feet as he was forced to swing and step, swing and step across the dojo floor.

“Enough,” said the instructor, whose name was Hiroku Toshizō. He came from a rich family with close ties to the Emperor, and he held this job and the countryside of Shima in low regard. “It’s hardly been five minutes, but at this rate you’ll break down if I push you further. Your limits are as low as I feared.”

Isamu fell to his knees both to catch his breath and to apologize at the same time. Toshizō ignored him, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. “I know about your condition: your bones are more brittle than most. It’s like fighting with a porcelain blade and hoping it doesn’t shatter...sheer nonsense—just like this assignment.”

“Please, Sensei! I can do it! I can learn how to be a samurai! I, I have to...” Isamu pleaded, snout running down his nose and tears welling in his eyes. He had just enough time to wipe his face and stand when his father entered the dojo, asking about his progress.

The instructor’s tone and personality changed completely. “The young master is learning exceedingly fast, my lord! Why, by the time summer starts he should be ready for practice duels!”

Shatao nodded and praised Isamu for the first time in his life. His son couldn't help but smile even if he had to clench his teeth in pain to do so. He had already broken something in his right foot since the start of this morning's lesson, but he'd be damned if a broken toe would stop him from becoming a samurai.

"I'm not going to let you down, Father! No matter what!"

Just as Shatao was about to observe Isamu's training, a horn sounded off yet again. The boy knew this one belonged to the Westerners—those of the Nanbu clan who swore their loyalty to his father. They were allowed to return to their families and ranches during the winter months, provided they returned with steeds for the soldiers.

Nanbu horses were the best around, and combined with the heavy armor of Shima samurai, Shatao's army made for a formidable force. The only downside was the cultural differences between the two—though fear of General Shatao's wrath kept everyone in check.

The presence of the Westerners drove the chefs into an even greater frenzy as the number of mouths increased even further. Isamu's training was suspended for the day as festivities ensued. Everyone had forgotten about the boy's birthday until Shatao brought it up at supper, for which the—now intoxicated—leader of the Western samurai promised a special gift befitting the son of their leige lord, to be granted after the feast was over.

"Arigato gozaimasu! Thank you very much, Nobunao Nanbu-san," Isamu said with the utmost respect. It was perhaps more respect than the drunken rancher-turned-samurai deserved, but he was the brother of Haramusa Nanbu—a man his father had respected a great deal. The two had fought against each other in the Golden Era before joining forces, and after quelling the uprisings in the West, Haramusa swore fealty to Shatao.

His immediate family had done likewise, and speaking of which—there was a new face at their table. A young one.

"Thirteen, you say you were? Darn near a man! Shapin' up just like 'yer father, yes sir! Oh," said Haramusa, noticing who Isamu was staring at, "that's right. Go up and introduce yourself, Kohaku!"

The boy called Kohaku was almost a head taller than Isamu was, and twice as broad. Though his clothes were as messy as his unruly hair, there was seriousness in him that made him seem older than he was. He was shy, too—or at least, he couldn't look up at them as he approached their table. And once he did, he fell to his knees and placed his forehead to the floor.

"Lord Shatao, I, Kohaku of House Nanbu, swear 'ah serve you as my father did. I hum-humbly offer you this oath, milord!"

Isamu was taken aback by the boy's display. Though spoken in the Western dialect, his words were clear and brimming with passion. The respect he had for Shatao was evident, so much so that he had to be told twice unbow before he did.

“By both look and mannerisms, you are Haru-kun’s son. It is my honor that one so young dedicates himself to me. May everyone in this hall take notice!” Shatao shouted, to which everyone cheered. He then asked for Kohaku’s age, which turned out to be twelve. “A year younger than my Isamu-kun. I have no doubt you two will be as close friends as myself and your father were, Kohaku Nanbu.”

The thought of having friends at all thrilled Isamu, and he became eager to meet Kohaku in less formal circumstances. So much so that after the feast was over, instead of returning to his room for the night, Isamu sneaked off to the section of the barracks where the Westerners dwelled.

He spotted Kohaku entering the stables, but before Isamu could do the same, yelling came from inside. The voice was Kohaku’s and it was far less respectful than the one Isamu had heard at supper.

“Let him go! You ain’t takin’ my horse! I don’t care what’cha promised that brat, Uncle!”

“Shush your mouth, Koha-kun! This colt don’t belong to nobody but Lord Shatao—or was that oath o’ yours just words?”

“But! But I helped birthed him! He’s *mine*! Give that kid someone else’s horse!”

Isamu’s gaze fell to the ground. The disparaging words from Kohaku—the Westerner’s honest feelings—crushed any hope of them becoming friends. Isamu was going to end up taking the horse Kohaku cared so dearly about. The boy was no doubt going to hold a grudge against him for the rest of his time here, unless...

“...unless I come up with a plan!”

Isamu hurried as best he could with a broken toe back to the throne room where he waited for the Westerners to arrive with his birthday gift. Though it was growing late at night, fatigue was hardly a concern as the boy’s mind raced with what he had to do to fix this problem.

Before he knew it, the large doors opened once more and three figures emerged. The first was the uncle who bore an exaggerated grin on his face. To contrast him, at his side was Kohaku looking at the floor helplessly, his head bobbing upwards at every snuffle.

Led by the reins in the boy’s hand was the third and final figure—the horse. He was two years old though already impressive in size, with a healthy shine to his chestnut coat, black mane and tail. He was nervous as most would be, though not because he was in the presence of General Shatao. The movement of servants along with the raging fires in the braziers was too much for the colt to be comfortable.

And though Kohaku was amidst a fit of despair, the boy petted and soothed the horse as they marched forward. Both his skill and attachment to it was obvious. It made what Isamu had to do next all the more clear.

After the uncle presented it and General Shatao voiced his praise and approval of the steed, it was Isamu's turn to speak. Though instead of speaking, he approached the horse and stroked its back, then asked Kohaku for its name.

"He...he doesn't have one. Milord," the boy said, wiping his nose.

"Then how does 'Tatsuya' sound?" Isamu asked, and for the first time Kohaku raised his head and looked him in the eyes. He nodded in approval. The name meant 'he who is an achievement', and he certainly would be—for Isamu to ride such a steed by his father's side would be more than he could ever hope for.

"I shall fetch the best rider among my ranks to instruct you in horsemanship," Shatao said. Though as he did, Isamu could see the smile on Kohaku's face turn back to a frown. Tatsuya neighed out as if to personally oppose the idea.

"Father," Isamu asked, "would it not be better to learn from a rider my age and size? I believe Kohaku Nanbu would be more than suitable as an instructor."

The boy in question gasped and nodded, looking first at his uncle and then at Shatao with pleading eyes. The samurai general would not deny his son's request, and so tonight Isamu gained more than just a horse.

He gained a friend.

■■■■

The week after Isamu's thirteenth birthday was the boy's most eventful in years. Though there were cultural and class differences between him and Kohaku, none of that mattered. The two chatted for hours about samurai and famous battles, particularly their fathers and their deeds in the Golden Era. Kohaku wasn't as well-read as Isamu but his enthusiasm to learn and his penchant for asking questions made Isamu feel smart and important.

This week was also, however, the most taxing on Isamu's body. After drilling and disappointing his sword instructor each morning, Isamu was sore all over and aching from broken blisters. But he held in the pain as he helped Kohaku clean and feed Tatsuya his lunch.

Isamu was hardly a natural around horses, but Tatsuya had a gentle demeanor for a colt his age. While just getting on the saddle was the extent of his horsemanship training, he hoped one day to be able to do all the jumps, turns and sprinting that Kohaku was able to do with ease. He was jealous of the Westerner's expertise, but in return, Kohaku was jealous of him.

"It just ain't fair," he pouted late one afternoon, "I don't gets to use a katana like the others do. Uncle says I have to sit and watch—some samurai that'll make me! I'm just doing chores."

"If you would like, we could use the practice swords at my father's dojo. We should have the place to ourselves for an hour or so."

"R-really?!" Kohaku shouted, jumping to his feet and shaking in excitement. "Reckon that's the best news I've heard, Isamu-kun! Let's get goin'!"

Isamu couldn't help but laugh. Not just at the accent, but of Kohaku's unrestrained excitement. There was something about the boy's emotions that was contagious—his happiness made Isamu happy, too. *"Is this what having friends is like?"* he wondered.

The two entered the training hall within the mansion but only Isamu walked in. Kohaku was stunned by the size of the hall and the shine of the lacquered, pinewood floor. "Wow...this is amazin'! You're so lucky to have a place like this to train, Isamu-kun!"

Isamu supposed he was, though considering he had been raised in this mansion all his life he had thought little of it. Mostly, he was pitied for his condition; to be envied instead—even if it was just because of this large training hall—was a welcome change.

When one son of a samurai handed a bamboo practice sword to the other, it wasn't long before the boys got themselves into a duel. It was just for practice and fun, but that didn't mean either of them was going to hold back.

Which was a problem when you had bones made of glass.

It ended after a single strike. Kohaku hadn't hit him—he didn't need to for the damage to have been done. When their swords collided, the force of their swings did, too, and the vibration was enough to cause bones within Isamu's arms to crack. The boy let out a painful wail, but the pain was far more than physical.

It was embarrassing and shameful, too.

■■■■

The second week of Isamu's thirteenth birthday was much more akin to the ones of his younger years, spent alone in his bed save for when it was time for his meals to be fed to him by his servants. Recovering like this was life as usual for Isamu, though after having a taste of adventure and camaraderie with Kohaku—he realized just how lacking it was.

"Not that it matters," Isamu grumbled as he stared at the ceiling. "He won't want to be friends with a weakling like me, anymore."

A crash outside his door roused Isamu from his futon. It was about time for the servants to deliver him his lunch, but the footsteps outside weren't any he recognized. Isamu was suspicious and even more so when his shoji door slid open and the cart with his meal moved in by itself.

Or rather, it was being pushed by someone who couldn't be seen above the dish's silver cover. That person was none other than Kohaku, who had a giant grin on his face as he removed the cover from the dish.

"Bet'cha never had Westlands-style tempura before, have ya?" Kohaku asked with a chuckle before his voice grew with concern. "Don'tcha like chicken, Isamu-kun?"

Isamu wiped away his watery eyes with his kimono sleeve. His tears weren't of sadness but of relief and joy. He had thought Kohaku wouldn't want to be friends with him again after the incident—and told him as much.

"That's silly. Now open your trap," Kohaku said as he plucked a piece of fried chicken with a pair of chopsticks and motioned it over to Isamu's mouth. He managed to drop it on Isamu's futon twice, causing them both to laugh.

"Thank you for the meal, Kohaku-kun...I'm sorry if you got into any trouble on my account. I really am...huh?"

Isamu stopped mid sentence when the Westerner fell to his knees and pressed his forehead to the floor. "I'm the one who needs to be apologizin'. I hurt milord's son, and now you gotta spend weeks cramped up in here 'till you get better! I promise I won't be so rough around ya' ever again, Isamu-kun!"

The apology only made Isamu feel worse. No matter how well Kohaku tried to hide it, the boy would forever act differently around Isamu after that day. "I know it is too much to ask of you to treat me as you did before...but if I am ever to become a samurai, I cannot continue to be coddled. I can't let this weakness hold me back."

"I know what you mean," Kohaku said with a seriousness that erased all doubt. "One day, we'll both become as strong as our fathers!"

Isamu smiled and agreed. "That's a promise. Now...how is Tatsuya-kun?"

■■■■

The leaves on the maples that Shima was known for had grown, flourished and changed colors in the seasons that followed. Its unchanged cycle was perhaps the only constant in Isamu's world, which—thanks entirely to Kohaku—had grown tremendously from the confines of Shatao's mansion.

Together, the two went on adventures everywhere: from the rocky shores where they collected seashells to the forests where they set up traps for both rabbits and Kondo barbarians alike. They had little luck catching either, but fun nonetheless. Enough fun to make the aches in Isamu's body go numb and ignored.

Most of their time however, was spent in the stretch of plains reserved for the horses. Tatsuya was growing at a rapid pace and Isamu's fledgling skills as a rider were struggling to keep up. The boy had a

newfound appreciation for the majestic animals: not only were they incredibly smart, they had personalities and mood swings the same as any person.

Not only that, they had an uncanny ability to detect fear. Try as Isamu might to mimic Kohaku's handling—from keeping Tatsuya still while putting on his saddle to turning him left or right mid-trot—it was helpless so long as Isamu remained afraid. Tatsuya would either rebuff him or ignore his order entirely.

“Still doesn't trust ya yet,” Kohaku said, consoling his friend. “Gotta keep yer grip on the reins stern and yer voice level. Horse and riders are partners, but you gotta be the boss. Else you're just diggin' for water under the outhouse!”

Isamu sighed and nodded at Kohaku's rancher wisdom. It seemed as if all Westerners were born to the saddle and equipped with a multitude of sayings, idioms and phrases to go along with their unique dialect.

“I wish there was something I could give Tatsuya to make him like me more,” Isamu thought aloud. “Like a reward for when he does as I ask...a treat—and I know just the one!”

That was how the pair of boys and their horse ended up searching for grapes in a far-off field over an hour away from the barracks. There was no road to get there, but Isamu had overheard the servants speak of it in the past. Kyoho grapes were large, dark-purple orbs that were very sweet and juicy. They were also exceedingly hard to come by—but it was worth the effort if it helped Isamu gain Tatsuya's trust.

Speaking of the horse, the chestnut colt was already quite pleased with the new area. Grapes or no, the grass here had been untouched and ungrazed upon, making for long and tasty feed. Tatsuya's ever-present hunger was one of the reasons the going was so slow; according to the map Isamu had borrowed from his father's war room, they were only halfway there.

Still, being away from the adults and their responsibilities were enough to put the boys in high spirits. They both had their bamboo swords on their backs along with bandages, army rations, blankets and buckets for their hopeful haul. They were two samurai out on a campaign, or so they imagined.

“Nanbu-san!” Isamu said, pitching his voice low, “I see movement in the bushes out yonder. Could be savages. Investigate and report back immediately!”

“Hai! For the Emperor!”

The two acted like how they imagined mature samurai did, pretending the water from their bottles was stiff saké and the blades of grass in their mouths were tobacco pipes. Tatsuya put an end to their imaginary smoking habit with a quick nibble.

All that saké had caught up with Kohaku who had to relieve himself in a nearby thicket. Isamu had come up with a grand idea, which involved untying his hairband and covering his face with mud. He had heard

the soldiers re-enact the yells of savage Kondos before, and he was about to release his own just as Kohaku began to take a tinkle.

“Aii-YaYaYAH!” he screamed, jumping from behind a tree and flailing his sword. Kohaku jumped back in shock just as Isamu expected he would, but instead of scrambling for his weapon or cursing Isamu for his stupidity, Kohaku’s body locked up and fell to the ground. When he stayed like that for moments longer, Isamu dropped the act and concern started seeping in.

“Kohaku-kun, it’s just me. Are you okay?” he asked as he fell to his friend’s side. The boy’s breathing was short and rapid as he clutched his chest and gasped out in pain. It was less than a minute later when his breathing returned to normal and the pain subsided, but Isamu’s concern for his friend lasted far longer.

“It’s nothin’...just had me a fright is all,” Kohaku said, trying to dismiss it. When Isamu wouldn’t let it go, the Westerner admitted the truth. “I got some kinda heart problem. Sometimes, when I get scared, it stops beatin’ for a while...don’t tell my uncle this happened, okay? Nobody is going to stop me from bein’ a samurai like my father!”

Isamu laughed and then assured Kohaku that he wasn’t laughing at him. “It would seem we both have conditions to overcome, to be the samurai our fathers were. In a way, I am relieved...we’re even more alike than I thought.”

“Huh, I guess you’re right. Now let’s get those grapes, already!”

■■■■

They didn’t find any grapes that day as their search was cut short by a rainstorm that left the two drenched by the time they returned to the barracks. Kohaku was scolded and punished for going out without telling anyone, while Isamu—who was just as much to blame—was given no punishment considering he was the son of their liege lord.

It wasn’t anything new, but Isamu still hated being treated differently than his friend. He wouldn’t get to see Kohaku for days later—the rains continued the next day and then several more, letting up only long enough to let the horses graze and stretch their legs before being forced into the stables again.

With winter on the horizon and the supplies dwindling fast, it was time for the Shima samurai to go out on patrol across the many villages that dotted the countryside. Their task would be to conduct a census on the farmers there, but more importantly, to gather up taxes in the form of rice.

General Shatao always led the regiment that went out for this yearly assignment, saying it was important for his people to know what their ruler looked like. His imposing figure covered in an ornate suit of armor was all it took to dissuade any potential uprisings. He would often be away for a month or more during this expedition.

And this year, unlike all the others, Isamu was going to go with him. The only men that accompanied Shatao were mounted samurai and cart drivers, and so the boy would ride Tatsuya for the journey. *“Even if I’ll never be able to fight like a samurai—I’ll ride like one! If I can do that much, then for once...I’ll be a son to be proud of!”*

General Shatao didn’t know about the boy’s plans—Isamu was hoping to surprise him. When his father announced that they were leaving tomorrow at dawn come rain or shine, his son knew he had to prepare.

He had to master riding Tatsuya and only had one day to do it.

“I dunno about this, Isamu-kun. This ain’t just a tempest in a teapot!” Kohaku yelled, trying to carry his voice over the wind. He had saddled Tatsuya just as Isamu had asked him to, and while the colt looked eager for a ride, the weather was bad and getting worse.

“I’m just going to do a couple circles around the field. We’ll follow the fence,” Isamu said, bracing himself as he took up his seat and grabbed a hold of the harness. He knew that if he was afraid, Tatsuya would be, too, and so the frail son of a samurai embraced his courage and hung on for dear life as the horse sped forward.

Isamu had ridden atop Tatsuya before, of course, but never this quickly or in the pouring rain. He used his voice, his legs and the reins to calm the horse’s initial excitement. He then directed Tatsuya beside the fence where they’d begin their first lap around the perimeter.

Tatsuya picked up speed from a trot to a canter, bouncing Isamu up and down atop the saddle. The boy braced himself for the bumps, following the horse’s rhythm and trying his best to remain steady. He had to squint his eyes to see the path ahead as drops of rain pounded against his face.

Though visibility was poor and the winds were strong, the two-and-a-half-year-old Tatsuya was one of Clan Nanbu’s finest, and proved his mettle by spurring forth undeterred. Loud splashes of water broke beneath his hooves like thunder as the steed moved forth like lightning—as if to challenge the skies above.

“That’s it! Great job, Tatsuya!” Isamu shouted with glee. The horse had just completed its first lap and had done so at a record pace. Not even Kohaku had gone that fast before, which gave Isamu a rare sense of pride. He knew he would be able to keep up with his father and the others tomorrow. He’d be able to ride alongside the samurai without shame or disgrace.

The boy was too focused on his daydreaming to notice the growing roars of thunder that broke out above. Isamu was too thrilled, too excited and too hopeful to be cautious. For the first time in his life he had forgotten that he was born weak and frail. At this moment he was nothing less than the son of a samurai, a boy no different than any other.

At least until the lightning struck.

CRACK

Tatsuya bucked up in fear as the lightning bolt came crashing down into a tree just ahead of them. His rider was flung from his saddle, left in a crumpled heap as the horse took off on its own. A thousand bony creaks popped and cracked all at once as Isamu lay sprawled atop a field of mud.

Isamu heard a yell out in the distance as he stared up into the cloudy sky. The rain was quieting to a stop and the midday sun threatened to peek out from behind the clouds. His father would have good weather for his journey tomorrow. But his son wouldn't be accompanying him.

When the broken boy tried to move his head, every nerve in his neck and skull made him regret it. He tried likewise with his legs, arms and hands. While there was no pain in his limbs, there was nothing else, either—he was paralyzed from the neck down. Even his lungs were numb, making something as simple as breathing a near impossible task.

He could still hear, at least, and as the winds died down, the cries from Kohaku broke through.

"Isamu! Please be okay! You gotta be—you gotta!"

Tears were streaming down Kohaku's face as Isamu peered upwards into it. Though the Westerner was as tough as any, the sight of his friend's mangled body was more he could stand. Kohaku clutched his heart and fell to his knees, shaking his head while the rest of him trembled.

"Kohaku-kun...Tatsuya, he...listened to me," Isamu said, his shortness of breath only allowing several words at a time. Each syllable was like a knife to the ribs. "Have to go...find him...not his fault."

"I-I'll be right back! I need to get you help, Isamu-kun!"

"No!" Isamu coughed, shaking his head even though it was agonizing to do so. "You can't be...near me. Don't tell...anyone you were here. You have to be a...samurai," he gasped, "for both of us."

Kohaku couldn't believe what he was hearing. His best friend was telling him to leave, to abandon him as he laid in pain and dying. It had always been Kohaku's dream to become a samurai, but ever since the two of them met...that dream had always had Isamu in it.

"Y-you're not gonna die, are ya?! We promised to be as strong as our fathers one day! I'm gonna be your best samurai, and together we'll, we'll..." Kohaku broke down into tears. He had sworn an oath to Shatao, that day during the feast when he first arrived. But his greatest loyalty was to his friend who now struggled to draw breath.

The yells from soldiers rang out from afar. There wasn't much time left if Kohaku was going to run and be spared Shatao's wrath. Isamu knew this, and, as much as it pained him to speak, as much as it hurt the heart within his crumpled chest, he spoke:

"Kohaku-kun...we will never be as strong as our fathers were. NOW GO!"

And the boy went. With tears streaming down his face, Kohaku looked back just once as he ran from the best friend he would ever have.

■■■■■

With his vision blurred and with his consciousness fading in and out, it was hard for Isamu to know where he was or how much time had passed. From what little he could still feel behind his neck was a pillow, and above him was the ceiling he was all too accustomed to seeing.

He was in his room, broken again. But this time he wasn't alone. By his bedside wasn't a doctor, a nurse or any of the servants. His father was there with a look Isamu had never seen on the samurai before: complete and total fear. He looked thinner, pale and sickly, and beneath his eyes were long shadows as if he hadn't slept in days.

"Spirits save him, if there is any good in this forsaken world—save my son!" he pleaded and prayed. When Isamu tilted his head, the fear in his father's haggard face turned to shock and awe. "Isamu-kun! Have you awakened?!"

"Fa...ther..." was all the boy could say. His mouth was as dry as dust and his lungs no longer drew in air. General Shatao said he needn't speak, but Isamu had his final words to say.

"I wanted you...to be proud of me," his son gasped, forcing out the last of his breath. "Every time...you saw me...you looked so...disappointed."

And like a candle's flame at the bottom of its wick, Isamu's life was snuffed out. In its place was silence—the absence of painful and gasping breaths. Peace had enveloped the boy, who had lived and died broken but was now made whole in the heavens above.

But fires, when put out all too quickly, had a habit of drawing smoke. And in this case, a black gas drew forth from the ether. Shatao, consumed by grief and guilt over the death of his one and only son, clutched at his face and began ripping off skin with his fingers.

The foul, dark smoke gathered within him, consuming his spirit, body and mind. When it was over, Shatao gave Isamu one final look before putting on his helmet.

"My son...this cursed face of mine...no one shall see it again!"

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

[Mar 7, 2020](#)

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 (+1)

5%

Borgia, the butler (+3)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+7)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+4)

0%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+24)

8%

Keiko, the maid (+9)

3%

Kohaku, the samurai (+41)

5%

Kuniko, the farmer (+14)

8%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+3)

8%

Momoko, the doctor (+40)

5%

Nishi, the yakuza (+10)

13%

Satsuma, the emperor (+6)

10%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+33)

31%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+0)

5%

Poll ended Mar 31, 2020 · 39 votes total

[MC #7's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Mar 11, 2020](#)

The design for MC #7 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 (+0)

26%

Long (+4)

4%

Ponytail (+12)

33%

Chonmage (+29)

33%

Long bangs (+6)

4%

Poll ended Mar 15, 2020 · 27 votes total

[MC #7 Face Art](#)

[Mar 31, 2020](#)

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 [mutanttac0](#)! If you like it, feel free to tell her about it on the patreon discord!

This month's build: **Masculine, Protective, Chonmage**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[Apr 1, 2020](#)

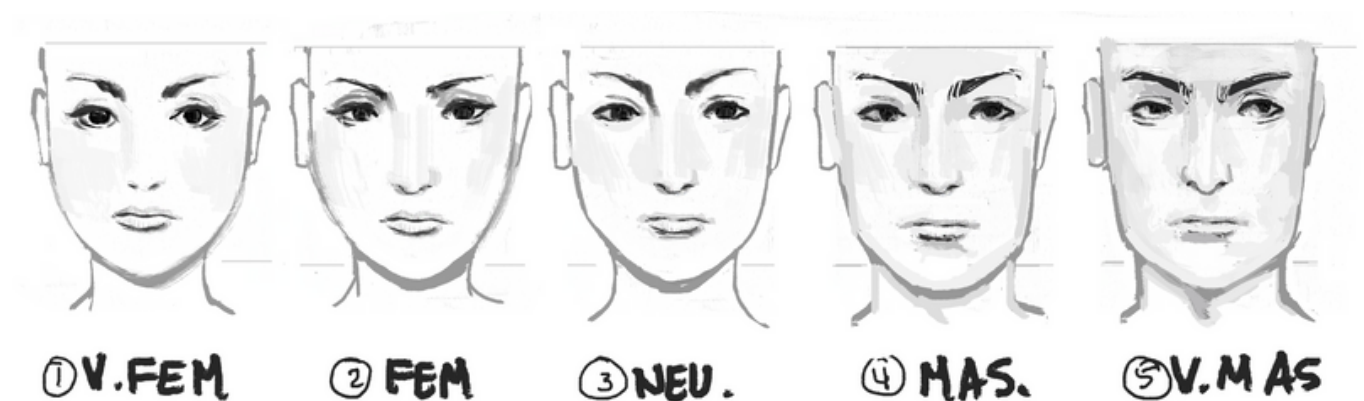
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+17)

44%

Feminine (+1)

13%

Neutral (+26)

25%

Masculine (+0)

3%

Very masculine (+1)

16%

Poll ended Apr 5, 2020 · 32 votes total

[MC #8's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Apr 6, 2020](#)

The design for MC #8 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 (+0)

3%

Calculated (+3)

6%

Perverted (+13)

31%

Chivalrous (+20)

13%

Charming (+15)

3%

Stoic (+25)

34%

Drifter (+7)

6%

Protective (+0)

0%

Brutal (+0)

0%

Finesse (+7)

3%

Poll ended Apr 10, 2020 · 32 votes total

[Side Story #21: Toshie's Matchmaking Service](#)

[Apr 7, 2020](#)

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



Side Story 21: Toshie's Matchmaking Service



■■ Jijinto ■■

"A marriage counselor, you say? I do a bit of consoling, myself, and I'm sure my tips are better than yours," said the geisha with a wink. She bent down low in front of Toshie to pour the ninja a cup of tea, her low-cut yukata leaving little to the imagination. "Let me know if you're interested in a different line of work—you've got the figure for it."

"I'm fully satisfied in my current employment. Thank you for the offer," Toshie replied without a hint of humor. She didn't understand the playful behavior of their waitress, but that was hardly the only thing that eluded the kunoichi's grasp inside the mansion of Hyuga's most powerful yakuza family: the Yamagata-gumi.

"Ain't this place just a treat? What a lucky dog you are, Tanji—you'll be livin' here some day! I can see your old man is gonna have to pay you some visits! Make sure you don't get up to *too* much mischief,"

Shibuya laughed, elbowing his son who sat between himself and Toshie.

“Uh...yeah, sure,” Tanjiro replied. The sole nautical engineer of Shibuya & Sons looked down at his cup of tea with a frown, a bead of sweat falling from his brow. He was nervous as most men would be before meeting their potential bride in a marriage interview. That he didn’t want to be there was obvious, but he had no choice—Toshie had assured him of that much.

Not above using blackmail, the ninja known as the Heartless Hound leveraged the shipwreck of the Tekkōsen against the shipbuilders. Knowing that reporting the disaster to the Emperor would sink them in more ways than one, Shibuya had no choice but to comply with Toshie’s demand.

Luckily for him, the demand was more than agreeable.

“Oh hey, sweetie,” Shibuya hailed the geisha over, “could use a refill of saké. No—don’t leave the bottle. Alcohol tastes better when poured by a beautiful woman! Ah-hahaha!”

Toshie’s demand was simple: a meeting with Shiroyama, the soon-to-be wife of the esteemed yakuza boss. More importantly, she was a demon. Emperor Satsuma had seen her in his dreams just as Toshie had seen her with her own two eyes, in a shrine deep within the Yamato slums.

She was a dangerous foe unlike any the ninja had faced before. But Toshie was as determined as ever to destroy her. *“I’ll prove it to you, Satsu-kun. The Sword Who Strikes the Heavens...they aren’t the only weapon you have at hand!”*

“—I swear it! Just one more week is all I ask!”

A muffled yell from another room broke Toshie away from her thoughts. It was the sound of a woman beset by grief, and provided as a reminder that this carpeted and brightly decorated mansion was home to a dark, criminal enterprise.

“If I had a ryō for every stupid broad begging for an extension on their payment, I’d retire from puttin’ up with this shit!” said a voice, also female, though in much more vulgar tongue. She continued her scolding until she was interrupted. “Damn, they’re here already? Alright...you’re lucky I’ve got other shit to do, nurse. Just make sure you and that fossil of a doctor pay on time next week—otherwise you’ll be workin’ for us! Let’s go, Daisuke!”

“A protection racket,” Toshie mumbled to herself, “this wouldn’t be permitted in Yamato. To see such lawlessness is—*ahCHOO!*”

The ninja sneezed just as the shoji doors across from their table slid open to reveal two yakuza thugs. The taller and much larger among them was a bald man who had to slouch in order to get through the door frame. Though even after he did, his slouch remained—poor posture accompanied poor hygiene as Toshie could smell his breath from across the room.

“Tha’s them over there, Nishi,” the giant bellowed.

'Nishi' was the much shorter figure who somehow had the larger presence. The woman wore sarashi wrapping across her otherwise bare chest, hakama pants, and a sleeveless jacket that designated her as some sort of captain. If that didn't allow her the proper respect, the spiked iron club she wielded certainly did. What would typically be her most remarkable feature—the dragon inked around her left arm—was at present the most ordinary, as Toshie had seen well over a hundred tattoos just by waiting in the mansion's lobby.

"Alright, let's get this over with," Nishi said with a sigh as she took a seat at the table. She sat across from Toshie and gave her a look-over from top to bottom. She let out a grunt after she was done. "You're too fit and too young to be a mother. So who the hell are ya?"

"That there's Inspec—I mean, er, Counselor Toshie-san. She's somethin' of a professional matchmaker, you see," Shibuya said before Toshie could reply. It wasn't the ideal cover story, considering Toshie had no experience in marital affairs, but it was better than nothing.

"...which means this kid here is supposed to be Tanjiro, right?" Nishi asked with a voice of disdain. The man in question had shrunk in his seat to the size of a child, and it didn't help that he was on the scrawny side as well. Tanjiro had a muted sort of personality—which was a nicer way of saying he was meek—and that came out through his voice by way of a mumble.

"It's...nice to meet you. I am eager to meet with Keiko-san. I hope she feels likewise," Tanjiro said while bowing his head low. It was more a display of fear than respect—and the difference didn't go unnoticed by the foul-mouthed yakuza.

"Sure don't look eager to me, but hell—maybe somethin' under your obi sash is tellin' a different story," Nishi grinned. "But what gives? We already had a meeting scheduled for next month. Why are you tryin' to push up the wedding date? You shipbuilders better not be thinkin' of using my Kei-chan to get a loan!"

Shibuya assured her that it had nothing to do with business, and that business, in fact, had been booming. He went on at length about recent dealings he had done and boats he had finished, embellishing all the details as usual. Daisuke, the bald giant, had long since zoned out while Nishi's stare remained fixated on Tanjiro.

Needless to say, Tanjiro was extremely uncomfortable.

"You look as firm as fresh tofu to me," Nishi said, interrupting Shibuya's story. "We yakuza deal with threats all the time—and no one gets threatened more than Keiko does. Every man and woman in our family would die for her if we had to. Hell, we'd cut a finger off if one of our enemies so much as laid a finger on her."

She pulled out a knife from behind her sash and lunged over the table faster than Tanjiro could react—though Toshie was another story. The ninja let her instincts and training take over, which at this point were one and the same. She grabbed Nishi's outstretched wrist and twisted it, forcing the blade to fall onto the table and for the yakuza to let out a loud groan.

“Erh! Damn it—get your hands off my arm!”

The dining hall went quiet as everyone’s attention was drawn to their table. From Toshie’s count there were just over a dozen yakuza ready to jump in at any moment. Considering that Nishi was their captain, one command in their direction was going to make matters dire and fast.

Luckily for Toshie and the shipbuilders, the future bride had arrived.

“Oh my, I see Nishi-chan has started the fun without me! Please, everyone, settle down and return to your seats~”

Keiko had a regal sort of elegance that Toshie had not witnessed even after years in the Imperial Palace. Perhaps it was amplified in contrast to Nishi and the other yakuza, but she looked as delicate and as charming as the blossoms inked across her cheek and down her neck. Only members of the head family bore facial tattoos; there was no hiding what she was under a kimono.

Speaking of which, her kimono was an ivory shade of white, all silk, with elaborate embroidering of pink cherry blossoms across the sleeves. The sleeves themselves were long enough to drape across the carpet, making her approach akin to a swan gliding across a pond. The ripples across the water in this case were psychological: everyone stood straighter, even Tanjiro, who had turned a shade purple. The poor fellow hadn’t taken a breath since Nishi tried to stab him.

“You must be Tanjiro-san,” she bowed. “And you are his father, yes? Thank you for joining with us today, Shibuya-san.”

“T-the honor is mine, princess!” the boatbuilder said, stumbling to his feet and bowing several times over. He pulled his son to his feet afterwards, forcing him to bow as well. “You must forgive Tanji, milady, he’s simply stunned by your beauty. I know I sure am!”

Keiko gave a polite laugh before the attention shifted towards Toshie. The ninja bowed and introduced herself—lying, of course.

“Oh, that is simply wondrous, Counselor Toshie-san,” Keiko said with a smile. “With this interview forming about so suddenly, I was concerned that there was some issue. But with your expertise, my worries are at ease.”

“Your words are very kind, Lady Keiko. If I may ask, where is your father, Yamagata-sama, and his fiancée? Sh...Shiroyama-san, I believe her name was?” Toshie asked with a look of puzzlement, playing dumb. She noted that upon saying the demon’s name, all three of the yakuza flinched.

“They...they are busy, I’m afraid,” Keiko said in an apologetic tone. “But in a way, I think this is better: Tanjiro-san and I may get to know each other in a more relaxed atmosphere.”

Shibuya and Toshie exchanged glances. Surrounded by a dozen muscled street thugs inside a dining hall that rivaled the Emperor’s own was hardly a casual get together. The one at most unease was

Tanjiro, who barely looked up from his tea cup. He had every right to be nervous—but he was going to ruin Toshie's plans to get to Shiroyama if he kept this up.

"Lady Keiko, perhaps we should begin this interview with you and Tanjiro asking questions of one another. Learning about the other's experiences is a crucial part of the marriage process."

Though Toshie knew little of courtship and even less of marriage, she sounded professional and so Keiko began with the questioning. They were easy questions, for the most part, but Tanjiro was so indecisive that one would think he was amid a brutal interrogation.

"Red—er, I mean, orange. Yes, orange is my favorite color," he stuttered. His answer was followed by an awkward silence as Keiko waited for an elaboration that never came. Tanjiro's answers were brief and quick, making what Toshie had hoped to be a spirited conversation into a disaster.

"Now then, Tanjiro, do you have questions for—*ahCHOO!*" Toshie sneezed once again. The ninja had gotten sick while buried beneath the capsized Tekkōsen for over an hour. Compared to the fear and despair Toshie had felt back then, an awkward interview was nothing. Her sickness had given her an idea, however. "My apologies, Lady Keiko. If you would excuse me, I need a moment of fresh air."

"Oh, I'll go with you, Counselor Toshie-san," said Tanjiro with an eager smile. It was obvious that he wanted to escape—which was going to ruin Toshie's attempt to sneak around the mansion, locate Shiroyama, and put a kunai through her back. The ninja-turned-matchmaker held back a grimace.

Instead of espionage and subterfuge, Toshie was going to have to contend with matters far outside her expertise.

"I feel so trapped in there...Keiko-san, she's pretty, but...she belongs to a different world than I do, you know? It doesn't help that everyone in there is a thug, a trained killer, or both! If you didn't stop that crazed woman when you did—I would be dead right now!"

Tanjiro voiced his grievances as Toshie paced about in an alley just across from the yakuza's mansion. The groom was getting cold feet, a stomach full of butterflies, and whatever other idioms were appropriate for a man who wanted anything else than to go back inside and face his fears. Toshie had to remind Tanjiro that he had fears of another sort—and summoned the Heartless Hound to do so.

"Ouch!" Tanjiro shouted as Toshie slammed him against the wall. The ninja twisted one of the shipbuilder's arms backwards and used her elbow to drive a sharp pressure into Tanjiro's ribs. If he didn't try to struggle or breathe too deeply he'd be fine. Unfortunately for him, he did both.

"Listen here. You'd rather every yakuza in Hyuga be your enemy than me. You and your father promised me a meeting with Shiroyama. I'm going to get to her one way or another—whether it's here and now or on your wedding day. More than just your father's company is at stake here, Tanjiro!"

Toshie released Tanjiro but not before another slam against the wall. The boatbuilder slid down and collapsed, gasping at the side of his stomach in pain. The kunoichi hadn't wanted to resort to measures

like this, but was left with no choice if she was to fulfill her duty.

“Are...are all naval inspectors like this?” Tanjiro groaned in pain.

“I take my job very seriously. Now then,” Toshie said, cupping her chin and going deep into thought, “I believe I have an idea to salvage this marriage interview. Though time will tell if it’s a good one.”

■■■■

“Going on a date was such a wonderous idea, Tanji-kun! Oh, may I call you that? I’ve just been aching to stretch my legs. Where is it you plan on taking me?”

The idea of a social outing across the city was a hit with Keiko, who turned out to be eager to escape the confines of the yakuza mansion. This was apparently called a ‘date’—a term Toshie was unfamiliar with, but was apparently an integral part of modern courtship. It was also a logistical disaster for the yakuza bodyguards, Nishi and Daisuke, who were supposed to protect their princess from any and all danger.

“Kuso—you’re squishing me, you idiot!” Nishi said in a harsh whisper as the two squeezed through a side alley. The yakuza were tailing the future newlyweds and being as subtle as bush warblers at the start of spring. Luckily, Tanjiro and Keiko were too occupied to pay them any notice.

“Well, I, er, was thinking of visiting Asakusa Shrine. We could pay our respects to our ancestors,” Tanjiro replied. Keiko didn’t appear too thrilled, however, and dragged her feet as she trailed Tanjiro up towards the temple district. Her reluctance had come to a surprise to Toshie.

Taking Keiko out to visit the shrine had been *her* idea, afterall. *“I don’t understand. A partner who prays, observes and respects the spirits is very appealing. A spiritual congregation is therefore ideal for a date, is it not?”*

Toshie continued to doubt herself as she stalked the couple. The crowd parted for them in a mixture of reverence and fear—one look at Keiko’s face was enough to send more than a few passerbys running. Those who didn’t flee let out sighs of relief when the yakuza princess passed them by. If Keiko noticed this, she paid it no mind; Tanjiro, on the other hand, was even more self-conscious than before.

The shrine itself was immense, especially with the new additions added to it at the turn of the Golden Age. It was a single floor and most of it was contained in a single room, yet that only made it appear more grand. During the summer it was an open-air shrine: the walls were removed while a hundred giant red columns remained to serve as the foundation.

Toshie was hiding behind one such column after making certain preparations, watching the two pray at one of the many stations. It had become clear that neither of them was particularly religious: their chanting was more than offkey, it was a garbled mess. But no monk would correct the daughter of Yamagata-sama; the bald holymen simply smiled and pretended not to be terrified.

Their interest quickly waned until Keiko spotted the stall for charms they were selling. A souvenir for good luck and other blessings was very popular among girls—both young and old—and that wasn't the only thing in shrines that held a magical sort of appeal.

"Fortunes! Oh, I haven't gotten mine told in ages! Come on, Tanji-kun~"

For a fee, shrine goers could stick their hand in a large wooden box filled with strips of paper. They weren't shugenja talismans, of course, but on them were fortunes written by either the spirits themselves or shrine maidens during their off hours. Regardless, they inspired excitement in many including the yakuza princess.

Toshie had made preparations in advance, procuring, reading, and discarding as many less-than-favorable fortunes as possible. The romantic ones in particular she had made sure to place on top. Her plan was foolproof...until it wasn't.

"I hear that the trick is," Tanjiro said, "that you have to get the ones on the bottom. That's where they keep the best fortunes!"

Toshie wanted to strangle him. Keiko went an arm's length deep into the box, pulling out a pair of slips for her and Tanjiro. They read them both at once, and it turned out they got a duplicate.

"You will find true love and happiness once you begin searching elsewhere."

■■■■

"Dates include visiting establishments for food and beverages," Toshie observed. After finishing with the shrine, Tanjiro and Keiko headed to a decidedly poorer part of Jijinto towards the docks. The slums were a questionable place for a yakuza princess to visit, but she had asked Tanjiro to take her to his favorite place to eat.

That place turned out to be The Canary, an izakaya that was as seedy as they came. It also had an annoyingly squeaky floor that made overhearing their conversation difficult. The two of them took seats at the bar; while Tanjiro appeared at ease, Keiko struggled to even sit atop the raised bar stool.

"Hey, Tanji! What's this? Brought a girl with..you..." the bartender's greeting ended as his body went numb. The glass he had been cleaning fell and shattered, though even still his stare remained on Keiko's face. He blinked twice as if that would dispel the illusion, but the reality of the yakuza princess could not be denied.

He gulped and asked, "W-what would you like, milady?"

The atmosphere returned once the awkward introductions were over. Toshie looked over her saké-stained menu—which consisted of illustrations only, as most of the patrons here were illiterate—and sighed. This was not a place to impress a person of Keiko's status. Even more concerning were her yakuza companions.

"Nishi and Daisuke...I haven't seen either of them since we left the shrine. Something feels wrong."

The ninja's hunches were rarely wrong, and this one was no exception: the door to the izakaya was forced open revealing a scarred and bare-chested figure. He was nearly as tan as Toshie was (without makeup) and smelled of the sea, which meant he was probably a sailor.

But right now he was nothing but a nuisance. He darted right towards the bar, pushing himself between Tanjiro and Keiko. "Not 'ery day we get such a cutie at The Canary, ay Eguchi? What's say I buys you a drink and you keep me company tonight? Sure to be more fun than hangin' with this *loser*!"

"Urusai! Leave us be, you two-bit hoodlum! Do you have any idea who I am?" Keiko asked, rightfully upset.

"Oh, I've got plenty of ideas about you. Unless your boyfriend over here is thinkin' of fightin' for ya—fat chance of that! I know a wimp when I see one!"

While Toshie's first instinct was to jump in there, her second was to consider the scene itself: it seemed almost eerily contrived. That was to say, the sailor was acting upon someone else's order. That someone else stood at the izakaya's front entrance with her arms crossed and a smug look on her face.

"Nishi. This is your doing, isn't it?"

Tanjiro may have worked with sailors all his life, but he was an engineer who worked with quills and parchment instead of anchors and oars. He was the most valuable employee at Shibuya & Sons, but he'd be the last you'd bet on in a fight. Perhaps the worst was that he knew it, too, and hesitated instead of defending Keiko.

Because of all the drama, The Canary had gone silent. It made the single set of squeaking footsteps from the backroom all the louder. A tall, young man in a martial artist's uniform emerged with his hands up and behind his head, completely oblivious to everything going on.

"Whoo-wee, sure did need that piss break! Really oughta consider cleanin' up back there one of these weeks, Eguchi, startin' to smell like a..." the young man lingered on the vowel as he took in the scene at the counter. His look of surprise quickly became a boyish grin.

He cracked his knuckles and asked, "This fellow botherin' ya, Tan-kun?"

When Tanjiro said that he was, a fistfight broke out and ended after the first bloody nose. It turned out that the thug wasn't getting paid enough to get beaten up by a trained fighter. He got out of The Canary fast, getting bottles thrown at him from the other patrons as he ran.

Hatch—the streetfighter—was cheered by all as a hero, and was offered a round of drinks from the barkeep. The young man was tempted by the offer but ultimately refused. Tanjiro—his close friend, as it turned out—pleaded with him to stay. Hatch gave him a grin and a wink and said he'd best be on his way.

He walked out with a confident swagger that impressed even Toshie. There was something familiar about him, too, though try as she might the ninja couldn't recall. Regardless, he had stolen whatever glory Tanjiro could've had, but at least Nishi's attempt at sabotaging the date was thwarted.

Toshie believed that the outing still had a chance of ending on a high note, at least until Keiko lost her appetite and wanted to visit somewhere else. That somewhere being the very last place Tanjiro would want her to be.

"The place you work, Shibuya & Sons—it's nearby, isn't it? I would love to see the ships you've built, Tanji-kun!"

■■■■

"It's...this is...this is why I didn't want you to come here," Tanjiro said in a defeated sigh. No amount of protesting had been able to stop Keiko from visiting the shipwright's place of business. The yakuza princess had marched down to the docks filled with excitement of sailing upon Tanjiro's largest and most magnificent ship yet: the Tekkōsen.

What Keiko found within the warehouse, however, were only the remains of her. The Tekkōsen's corpse had been dragged in by a fleet of fishing boats, the crew working desperately to salvage her remains like buzzards atop carrion. Oars, masts, iron plating and anchors—what could be reclaimed had to be if Shibuya & Sons were ever going to set sail again.

"I've never seen such a horrendous wreck. Please tell me you weren't onboard when it capsized!" Keiko said, her hands up against her lips. It wasn't a good sight, especially when considering that with this marriage, her yakuza family and Shibuya & Sons would essentially be business partners.

Nishi said as much when she arrived, though much more crudely.

"Well if this ain't a proper fuck-up, I don't know what is. You guys aren't fit to build a damn raft—much less a ship!" she yelled, causing the crewmembers to pause and hang their heads in shame. "The Yamagata-gumi can't be associated with losers like you! Bunch of mindless, prickless sons of—wUUAH!"

Tanjiro snapped, shoving the yakuza off the pier. She fell with a splash and flailed about madly as if she couldn't swim. Turned out she could—she was simply furious. Keiko had to stand between her and Tanjiro to spare the young man his life. Only after a hundred threats and a thousand curses did Nishi storm off, drenched in saltwater.

"I'm...I'm sorry, Keiko-san. I don't know what came over me...I just couldn't stand it any more."

The yakuza princess closed her eyes and smiled. "It's okay, Tanji-kun...no, Tanjiro-san. You were defending your family's honor. Samurai, yakuza, and even shipbuilders, it seems, are not so different after all. I'm happy to see you finally take pride in who you are."

She reached out and gave Tanjiro a hug. The workers gave out hoots and hollers—as one would expect—while the future groom simply stood there in shock. Though it turned out he wasn't to be a future groom any longer.

"I had a wonderful time today," Keiko said as she ended the embrace. "But I think it's time we parted. You have a lot of passion bundled inside you, Tanjiro-san, but I don't think I'm the one to bring it out of you. Perhaps it's selfish, but I do not wish for a husband who doesn't love me above all others. I hope you understand."

She bowed and said her goodbye, leaving a dejected Tanjiro at the edge of the pier. He stood like that for a while, watching her go. He wasn't anxious but quite the opposite—he was at such ease that Toshie's sudden appearance from out the shadows didn't surprise him in the slightest.

"Well, I guess that's it then. I've failed you, haven't I, Inspector? I've made the yakuza my enemy and you'll never get to Shiroyama now. Gomenasai."

Toshie shook her head. The kunoichi may have failed in what she had set out to do in Jijinto, but she had learned plenty during her time here: not just of her weaknesses, but of courtship, love and romance. Tanjiro's own confusion and frustration throughout all this in many ways mirrored herself.

"You have done all that I've asked of you and more. Thank you for your cooperation throughout all this, Tanjiro...and my condolences about the marriage."

The shipbuilder put on a grin to hide his pain and looked out towards the sea and the setting sun. "Inspector...it's not easy. To love someone when you know that your love will never be returned...it's tough."

Toshie stared at Tanjiro for a long moment after that, considering his words before joining him as they watched the sun set beneath the Celestial Sea.

"Is that so?"

[Side Story #21: Toshio's Matchmaking Service](#)

[Apr 7, 2020](#)

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





■■ Jijinto ■■

"If all marriage counselors look like you, hun, then I've got myself an excuse to settle down," said the geisha with a wink. She bent down low in front of Toshio to pour him a cup of tea, her low-cut yukata leaving little to the imagination. "You're a sight for sore eyes after serving sailors and samurai all day."

"If your eyes are sore, I recommend warm compresses," Toshio replied without a hint of humor. Flirting was something he didn't understand, but that was hardly the only thing that eluded the shinobi's grasp inside the mansion of Hyuga's most powerful yakuza family: the Yamagata-gumi.

"Ain't this place just a treat? What a lucky dog you are, Tanji—you'll be livin' here some day! I can see your old man is gonna have to pay you some visits! Make sure you don't get up to *too* much mischief," Shibuya laughed, elbowing his son who sat between himself and Toshio.

"Uh...yeah, sure," Tanjiro replied. The sole nautical engineer of Shibuya & Sons looked down at his cup of tea with a frown, a bead of sweat falling from his brow. He was nervous as most men would be before meeting their potential bride in a marriage interview. That he didn't want to be there was obvious, but he had no choice—Toshio had assured him of that much.

Not above using blackmail, the ninja known as the Heartless Hound leveraged the shipwreck of the Tekkōsen against the shipbuilders. Knowing that reporting the disaster to the Emperor would sink them in more ways than one, Shibuya had no choice but to comply with Toshio's demand.

Luckily for him, the demand was more than agreeable.

"Oh hey, sweetie," Shibuya hailed the geisha over, "could use a refill of saké. No—don't leave the bottle. Alcohol tastes better when poured by a beautiful woman! Ah-hahaha!"

Toshio's demand was simple: a meeting with Shiroyama, the soon-to-be wife of the esteemed yakuza boss. More importantly, she was a demon. Emperor Satsuma had seen her in his dreams just as Toshio had seen her with his own two eyes, in a shrine deep within the Yamato slums.

She was a dangerous foe unlike any the ninja had faced before. But Toshio was as determined as ever to destroy her. "*I'll prove it to you, Satsu-kun. The Sword Who Strikes the Heavens...they aren't the only weapon you have at hand!*"

"—I swear it! Just one more week is all I ask!"

A muffled yell from another room broke Toshio away from his thoughts. It was the sound of a woman beset by grief, and provided as a reminder that this carpeted and brightly decorated mansion was home to a dark, criminal enterprise.

"If I had a ryō for every stupid broad begging for an extension on their payment, I'd retire from puttin' up with this shit!" said a voice, also female, though in much more vulgar tongue. She continued her scolding until she was interrupted. "Damn, they're here already? Alright...you're lucky I've got other shit to do, nurse. Just make sure you and that fossil of a doctor pay on time next week—otherwise you'll be workin' for us! Let's go, Daisuke!"

"A protection racket," Toshio mumbled to himself, "this wouldn't be permitted in Yamato. To see such lawlessness is—*ahCHOO!*"

The ninja sneezed just as the shoji doors across from their table slid open to reveal two yakuza thugs. The taller and much larger among them was a bald man who had to slouch in order to get through the door frame. Though even after he did, his slouch remained—poor posture accompanied poor hygiene as Toshio could smell his breath from across the room.

"Tha's them over there, Nishi," the giant bellowed.

'Nishi' was the much shorter figure who somehow had the larger presence. The woman wore sarashi wrapping across her otherwise bare chest, hakama pants, and a sleeveless jacket that designated her as some sort of captain. If that didn't allow her the proper respect, the spiked iron club she wielded certainly did. What would typically be her most remarkable feature—the dragon inked around her left arm—was at present the most ordinary, as Toshio had seen well over a hundred tattoos just by waiting in the mansion's lobby.

"Alright, let's get this over with," Nishi said with a sigh as she took a seat at the table. She sat across from Toshio and gave him a look-over from top to bottom. She let out a grunt after she was done.

"Tanjiro, huh? Too clever-lookin' to be a shipwright. Hell, too clever for your own good, I'd wager. Daisuke—you know how I feel about clever men, don'tcha?"

"You don't like 'em none," Daisuke said as if this was a routine response.

"W-well then, you lot are in luck," Shibuya said with a nervous chuckle, "that there's actually Inspec—I mean, er, Counselor Toshio-san. He's something of a professional matchmaker, you see," Shibuya said before Toshio could reply. "My boy Tanji is right here!"

Tanjiro had shrunk in his seat so low that he was easy to miss. It didn't help that his features were plain and his personality was muted—which was a nicer way of saying that he was meek. This came out through his voice by way of a mumble.

"It's...nice to meet you. I am eager to meet with Keiko-san. I hope she feels likewise," Tanjiro said while bowing his head low. It was more a display of fear than respect—and the difference didn't go unnoticed by the foul-mouthed yakuza.

"Sure don't look eager to me, but hell—maybe somethin' under your obi sash is tellin' a different story," Nishi grinned. "But what gives? We already had a meeting scheduled for next month. Why are you tryin' to push up the wedding date? You shipbuilders better not be thinkin' of using my Kei-chan to get a loan!"

Shibuya assured her that it had nothing to do with business, and that business, in fact, had been booming. He went on at length about recent dealings he had done and boats he had finished, embellishing all the details as usual. Daisuke, the bald giant, had long since zoned out while Nishi's stare remained fixated on Tanjiro.

Needless to say, Tanjiro was extremely uncomfortable.

"You look as firm as fresh tofu to me," Nishi said, interrupting Shibuya's story. "We yakuza deal with threats all the time—and no one gets threatened more than Keiko does. Every man and woman in our family would die for her if we had to. Hell, we'd cut a finger off if one of our enemies so much as laid a finger on her."

She pulled out a knife from behind her sash and lunged over the table faster than Tanjiro could react—though Toshio was another story. The ninja let his instincts and training take over, which at this point were one and the same. He grabbed Nishi's outstretched wrist and twisted it, forcing the blade to fall onto the table and for the yakuza to let out a loud groan.

"Erh! Damn it—get your hands off my arm!"

The dining hall went quiet as everyone's attention was drawn to their table. From Toshio's count there were just over a dozen yakuza ready to jump in at any moment. Considering that Nishi was their captain, one command in their direction was going to make matters dire and fast.

Luckily for Toshio and the shipbuilders, the future bride had arrived.

"Oh my, I see Nishi-chan has started the fun without me! Please, everyone, settle down and return to your seats~"

Keiko had a regal sort of elegance that Toshio had not witnessed even after years in the Imperial Palace. Perhaps it was amplified in contrast to Nishi and the other yakuza, but she looked as delicate and as charming as the blossoms inked across her cheek and down her neck. Only members of the head family bore facial tattoos; there was no hiding what she was under a kimono.

Speaking of which, her kimono was an ivory shade of white, all silk, with elaborate embroidering of pink cherry blossoms across the sleeves. The sleeves themselves were long enough to drape across the carpet, making her approach akin to a swan gliding across a pond. The ripples across the water in this case were psychological: everyone stood straighter, even Tanjiro, who had turned a shade purple. The poor fellow hadn't taken a breath since Nishi tried to stab him.

"You must be Tanjiro-san," she bowed. "And you are his father, yes? Thank you for joining with us today, Shibuya-san."

"T-the honor is mine, princess!" the boatbuilder said, stumbling to his feet and bowing several times over. He pulled his son to his feet afterwards, forcing him to bow as well. "You must forgive Tanji, milady, he's simply stunned by your beauty. I know I sure am!"

Keiko gave a polite laugh before the attention shifted towards Toshio. The ninja bowed and introduced himself—lying, of course.

“Oh, that is simply wondrous, Counselor Toshio-san,” Keiko said with a smile. “With this interview forming about so suddenly, I was concerned that there was some issue. But with your expertise, my worries are at ease.”

“Your words are very kind, Lady Keiko. If I may ask, where is your father, Yamagata-sama, and his fiancée? Sh...Shiroyama-san, I believe her name was?” Toshio asked with a look of puzzlement, playing dumb. He noted that upon saying the demon’s name, all three of the yakuza flinched.

“They...they are busy, I’m afraid,” Keiko said in an apologetic tone. “But in a way, I think this is better: Tanjiro-san and I may get to know each other in a more relaxed atmosphere.”

Shibuya and Toshio exchanged glances. Surrounded by a dozen muscled street thugs inside a dining hall that rivaled the Emperor’s own was hardly a casual get together. The one at most unease was Tanjiro, who barely looked up from his tea cup. He had every right to be nervous—but he was going to ruin Toshio’s plans to get to Shiroyama if he kept this up.

“Lady Keiko, perhaps we should begin this interview with you and Tanjiro asking questions of one another. Learning about the other’s experiences is a crucial part of the marriage process.”

Though Toshio knew little of courtship and even less of marriage, he sounded professional and so Keiko began with the questioning. They were easy questions, for the most part, but Tanjiro was so indecisive that one would think he was amid a brutal interrogation.

“Red—er, I mean, orange. Yes, orange is my favorite color,” he stuttered. His answer was followed by an awkward silence as Keiko waited for an elaboration that never came. Tanjiro’s answers were brief and quick, making what Toshio had hoped to be a spirited conversation into a disaster.

“Now then, Tanjiro, do you have questions for—*ahCHOO!*” Toshio sneezed once again. The ninja had gotten sick while buried beneath the capsized Tekkōsen for over an hour. Compared to the fear and despair Toshio had felt back then, an awkward interview was nothing. His sickness had given him an idea, however. “My apologies, Lady Keiko. If you would excuse me, I need a moment of fresh air.”

“Oh, I’ll go with you, Counselor Toshio-san,” said Tanjiro with an eager smile. It was obvious that he wanted to escape—which was going to ruin Toshio’s attempt to sneak around the mansion, locate Shiroyama, and put a kunai through her back. The ninja-turned-matchmaker held back a grimace.

Instead of espionage and subterfuge, Toshio was going to have to contend with matters far outside his expertise.

“I feel so trapped in there...Keiko-san, she’s pretty, but...she belongs to a different world than I do, you know? It doesn’t help that everyone in there is a thug, a trained killer, or both! If you didn’t stop that crazed woman when you did—I would be dead right now!”

Tanjiro voiced his grievances as Toshio paced about in an alley just across from the yakuza's mansion. The groom was getting cold feet, a stomach full of butterflies, and whatever other idioms were appropriate for a man who wanted anything else than to go back inside and face his fears. Toshio had to remind Tanjiro that he had fears of another sort—and summoned the Heartless Hound to do so.

"Ouch!" Tanjiro shouted as Toshio slammed him against the wall. The ninja twisted one of the shipbuilder's arms backwards and used his elbow to drive a sharp pressure into Tanjiro's ribs. If he didn't try to struggle or breathe too deeply he'd be fine. Unfortunately for him, he did both.

"Listen here. You'd rather every yakuza in Hyuga be your enemy than me. You and your father promised me a meeting with Shiroyama. I'm going to get to her one way or another—whether it's here and now or on your wedding day. More than just your father's company is at stake here, Tanjiro!"

Toshio released Tanjiro but not before another slam against the wall. The boatbuilder slid down and collapsed, gasping at the side of his stomach in pain. The shinobi hadn't wanted to resort to measures like this, but was left with no choice if he was to fulfill his duty.

"Are...are all naval inspectors like this?" Tanjiro groaned in pain.

"I take my job very seriously. Now then," Toshio said, cupping his chin and going deep into thought, "I believe I have an idea to salvage this marriage interview. Though time will tell if it's a good one."

■■■■

"Going on a date was such a wonderful idea, Tanji-kun! Oh, may I call you that? I've just been aching to stretch my legs. Where is it you plan on taking me?"

The idea of a social outing across the city was a hit with Keiko, who turned out to be eager to escape the confines of the yakuza mansion. This was apparently called a 'date'—a term Toshio was unfamiliar with, but was apparently an integral part of modern courtship. It was also a logistical disaster for the yakuza bodyguards, Nishi and Daisuke, who were supposed to protect their princess from any and all danger.

"Kuso—you're squishing me, you idiot!" Nishi said in a harsh whisper as the two squeezed through a side alley. The yakuza were tailing the future newlyweds and being as subtle as bush warblers at the start of spring. Luckily, Tanjiro and Keiko were too occupied to pay them any notice.

"Well, I, er, was thinking of visiting Asakusa Shrine. We could pay our respects to our ancestors," Tanjiro replied. Keiko didn't appear too thrilled, however, and dragged her feet as she trailed Tanjiro up towards the temple district. Her reluctance had come to a surprise to Toshio.

Taking Keiko out to visit the shrine had been *his* idea, afterall. *"I don't understand. A partner who prays, observes and respects the spirits is very appealing. A spiritual congregation is therefore ideal for a date, is it not?"*

Toshio continued to doubt himself as he stalked the couple. The crowd parted for them in a mixture of reverence and fear—one look at Keiko's face was enough to send more than a few passerbys running. Those who didn't flee let out sighs of relief when the yakuza princess passed them by. If Keiko noticed this, she paid it no mind; Tanjiro, on the other hand, was even more self-conscious than before.

The shrine itself was immense, especially with the new additions added to it at the turn of the Golden Age. It was a single floor and most of it was contained in a single room, yet that only made it appear more grand. During the summer it was an open-air shrine: the walls were removed while a hundred giant red columns remained to serve as the foundation.

Toshio was hiding behind one such column after making certain preparations, watching the two pray at one of the many stations. It had become clear that neither of them was particularly religious: their chanting was more than offkey, it was a garbled mess. But no monk would correct the daughter of Yamagata-sama; the bald holymen simply smiled and pretended not to be terrified.

Their interest quickly waned until Keiko spotted the stall for charms they were selling. A souvenir for good luck and other blessings was very popular among girls—both young and old—and that wasn't the only thing in shrines that held a magical sort of appeal.

"Fortunes! Oh, I haven't gotten mine told in ages! Come on, Tanji-kun~"

For a fee, shrine goers could stick their hand in a large wooden box filled with strips of paper. They weren't shugenja talismans, of course, but on them were fortunes written by either the spirits themselves or shrine maidens during their off hours. Regardless, they inspired excitement in many including the yakuza princess.

Toshio had made preparations in advance, procuring, reading, and discarding as many less-than-favorable fortunes as possible. The romantic ones in particular he had made sure to place on top. His plan was foolproof...until it wasn't.

"I hear that the trick is," Tanjiro said, "that you have to get the ones on the bottom. That's where they keep the best fortunes!"

Toshio wanted to strangle him. Keiko went an arm's length deep into the box, pulling out a pair of slips for her and Tanjiro. They read them both at once, and it turned out they got a duplicate.

"You will find true love and happiness once you begin searching elsewhere."

■■■■

"Dates include visiting establishments for food and beverages," Toshio observed. After finishing with the shrine, Tanjiro and Keiko headed to a decidedly poorer part of Jijinto towards the docks. The slums were a questionable place for a yakuza princess to visit, but she had asked Tanjiro to take her to his favorite place to eat.

That place turned out to be The Canary, an izakaya that was as seedy as they came. It also had an annoyingly squeaky floor that made overhearing their conversation difficult. The two of them took seats at the bar; while Tanjiro appeared at ease, Keiko struggled to even sit atop the raised bar stool.

“Hey, Tanji! What’s this? Brought a girl with..you...” the bartender’s greeting ended as his body went numb. The glass he had been cleaning fell and shattered, though even still his stare remained on Keiko’s face. He blinked twice as if that would dispel the illusion, but the reality of the yakuza princess could not be denied.

He gulped and asked, “W-what would you like, milady?”

The atmosphere returned once the awkward introductions were over. Toshio looked over his saké-stained menu—which consisted of illustrations only, as most of the patrons here were illiterate—and sighed. This was not a place to impress a person of Keiko’s status. Even more concerning were her yakuza companions.

“Nishi and Daisuke...I haven’t seen either of them since we left the shrine. Something feels wrong.”

The ninja’s hunches were rarely wrong, and this one was no exception: the door to the izakaya was forced open revealing a scarred and bare-chested figure. He was nearly as tan as Toshio was (without makeup) and smelled of the sea, which meant he was probably a sailor.

But right now he was nothing but a nuisance. He darted right towards the bar, pushing himself between Tanjiro and Keiko. “Not ‘ery day we get such a cutie at The Canary, ay Eguchi? What’s say I buys you a drink and you keep me company tonight? Sure to be more fun than hangin’ with this *loser!*”

“Urusai! Leave us be, you two-bit hoodlum! Do you have any idea who I am?” Keiko asked, rightfully upset.

“Oh, I’ve got plenty of ideas about you. Unless your boyfriend over here is thinkin’ of fightin’ for ya—fat chance of that! I know a wimp when I see one!”

While Toshio’s first instinct was to jump in there, his second was to consider the scene itself: it seemed almost eerily contrived. That was to say, the sailor was acting upon someone else’s order. That someone else stood at the izakaya’s front entrance with her arms crossed and a smug look on her face.

“Nishi. This is your doing, isn’t it?”

Tanjiro may have worked with sailors all his life, but he was an engineer who worked with quills and parchment instead of anchors and oars. He was the most valuable employee at Shibuya & Sons, but he’d be the last you’d bet on in a fight. Perhaps the worst was that he knew it, too, and hesitated instead of defending Keiko.

Because of all the drama, The Canary had gone silent. It made the single set of squeaking footsteps from the backroom all the louder. A tall, young man in a martial artist’s uniform emerged with his hands

up and behind his head, completely oblivious to everything going on.

“Whoo-wee, sure did need that piss break! Really oughta consider cleanin’ up back there one of these weeks, Eguchi, startin’ to smell like a...” the young man lingered on the vowel as he took in the scene at the counter. His look of surprise quickly became a boyish grin.

He cracked his knuckles and asked, “This fellow botherin’ ya, Tan-kun?”

When Tanjiro said that he was, a fistfight broke out and ended after the first bloody nose. It turned out that the thug wasn’t getting paid enough to get beaten up by a trained fighter. He got out of The Canary fast, getting bottles thrown at him from the other patrons as he ran.

Hatch—the streetfighter—was cheered by all as a hero, and was offered a round of drinks from the barkeep. The young man was tempted by the offer but ultimately refused. Tanjiro—his close friend, as it turned out—pleaded with him to stay. Hatch gave him a grin and a wink and said he’d best be on his way.

He walked out with a confident swagger that impressed even Toshio. There was something familiar about him, too, though try as he might the ninja couldn’t recall. Regardless, he had stolen whatever glory Tanjiro could’ve had, but at least Nishi’s attempt at sabotaging the date was thwarted.

Toshio believed that the outing still had a chance of ending on a high note, at least until Keiko lost her appetite and wanted to visit somewhere else. That somewhere being the very last place Tanjiro would want her to be.

“The place you work, Shibuya & Sons—it’s nearby, isn’t it? I would love to see the ships you’ve built, Tanji-kun!”

■■■■

“It’s...this is...this is why I didn’t want you to come here,” Tanjiro said in a defeated sigh. No amount of protesting had been able to stop Keiko from visiting the shipwright’s place of business. The yakuza princess had marched down to the docks filled with excitement of sailing upon Tanjiro’s largest and most magnificent ship yet: the Tekkōsen.

What Keiko found within the warehouse, however, were only the remains of her. The Tekkōsen’s corpse had been dragged in by a fleet of fishing boats, the crew working desperately to salvage her remains like buzzards atop carrion. Oars, masts, iron plating and anchors—what could be reclaimed had to be if Shibuya & Sons were ever going to set sail again.

“I’ve never seen such a horrendous wreck. Please tell me you weren’t onboard when it capsized!” Keiko said, her hands up against her lips. It wasn’t a good sight, especially when considering that with this marriage, her yakuza family and Shibuya & Sons would essentially be business partners.

Nishi said as much when she arrived, though much more crudely.

“Well if this ain’t a proper fuck-up, I don’t know what is. You guys aren’t fit to build a damn raft—much less a ship!” she yelled, causing the crewmembers to pause and hang their heads in shame. “The Yamagata-gumi can’t be associated with losers like you! Bunch of mindless, prickless sons of—wuUAH!”

Tanjiro snapped, shoving the yakuza off the pier. She fell with a splash and flailed about madly as if she couldn’t swim. Turned out she could—she was simply furious. Keiko had to stand between her and Tanjiro to spare the young man his life. Only after a hundred threats and a thousand curses did Nishi storm off, drenched in saltwater.

“I’m...I’m sorry, Keiko-san. I don’t know what came over me...I just couldn’t stand it any more.”

The yakuza princess closed her eyes and smiled. “It’s okay, Tanji-kun...no, Tanjiro-san. You were defending your family’s honor. Samurai, yakuza, and even shipbuilders, it seems, are not so different after all. I’m happy to see you finally take pride in who you are.”

She reached out and gave Tanjiro a hug. The workers gave out hoots and hollers—as one would expect—while the future groom simply stood there in shock. Though it turned out he wasn’t to be a future groom any longer.

“I had a wonderful time today,” Keiko said as she ended the embrace. “But I think it’s time we parted. You have a lot of passion bundled inside you, Tanjiro-san, but I don’t think I’m the one to bring it out of you. Perhaps it’s selfish, but I do not wish for a husband who doesn’t love me above all others. I hope you understand.”

She bowed and said her goodbye, leaving a dejected Tanjiro at the edge of the pier. He stood like that for a while, watching her go. He wasn’t anxious but quite the opposite—he was at such ease that Toshio’s sudden appearance from out the shadows didn’t surprise him in the slightest.

“Well, I guess that’s it then. I’ve failed you, haven’t I, Inspector? I’ve made the yakuza my enemy and you’ll never get to Shiroyama now. Gomenasai.”

Toshio shook his head. The shinobi may have failed in what he had set out to do in Jijinto, but he had learned plenty during his time here: not just of his weaknesses, but of courtship, love and romance. Tanjiro’s own confusion and frustration throughout all this in many ways mirrored himself.

“You have done all that I’ve asked of you and more. Thank you for your cooperation throughout all this, Tanjiro...and my condolences about the marriage.”

The shipbuilder put on a grin to hide his pain and looked out towards the sea and the setting sun. “Inspector...it’s not easy. To love someone when you know that your love will never be returned...it’s tough.”

Toshio stared at Tanjiro for a long moment after that, considering his words before joining him as they watched the sun set beneath the Celestial Sea.

“Is that so?”

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

[Apr 7, 2020](#)

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 (+3)

8%

Borgia, the butler (+3)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+7)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+4)

3%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+27)

5%

Keiko, the maid (+10)

0%

Kohaku, the samurai (+43)

8%

Kuniko, the farmer (+17)

3%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+6)

8%

Momoko, the doctor (+42)

30%

Nishi, the yakuza (+15)

11%

Satsuma, the emperor (+10)

0%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+0)

22%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+2)

3%

Poll ended Apr 30, 2020 · 37 votes total

[MC #8's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Apr 11, 2020](#)

The design for MC #8 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Neutral, Stoic**

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

Short (+7)

30%

Long (+5)

13%

Ponytail (+21)

50%

Chonmage (+0)

0%

Long bangs (+1)

7%

Poll ended Apr 15, 2020 · 30 votes total

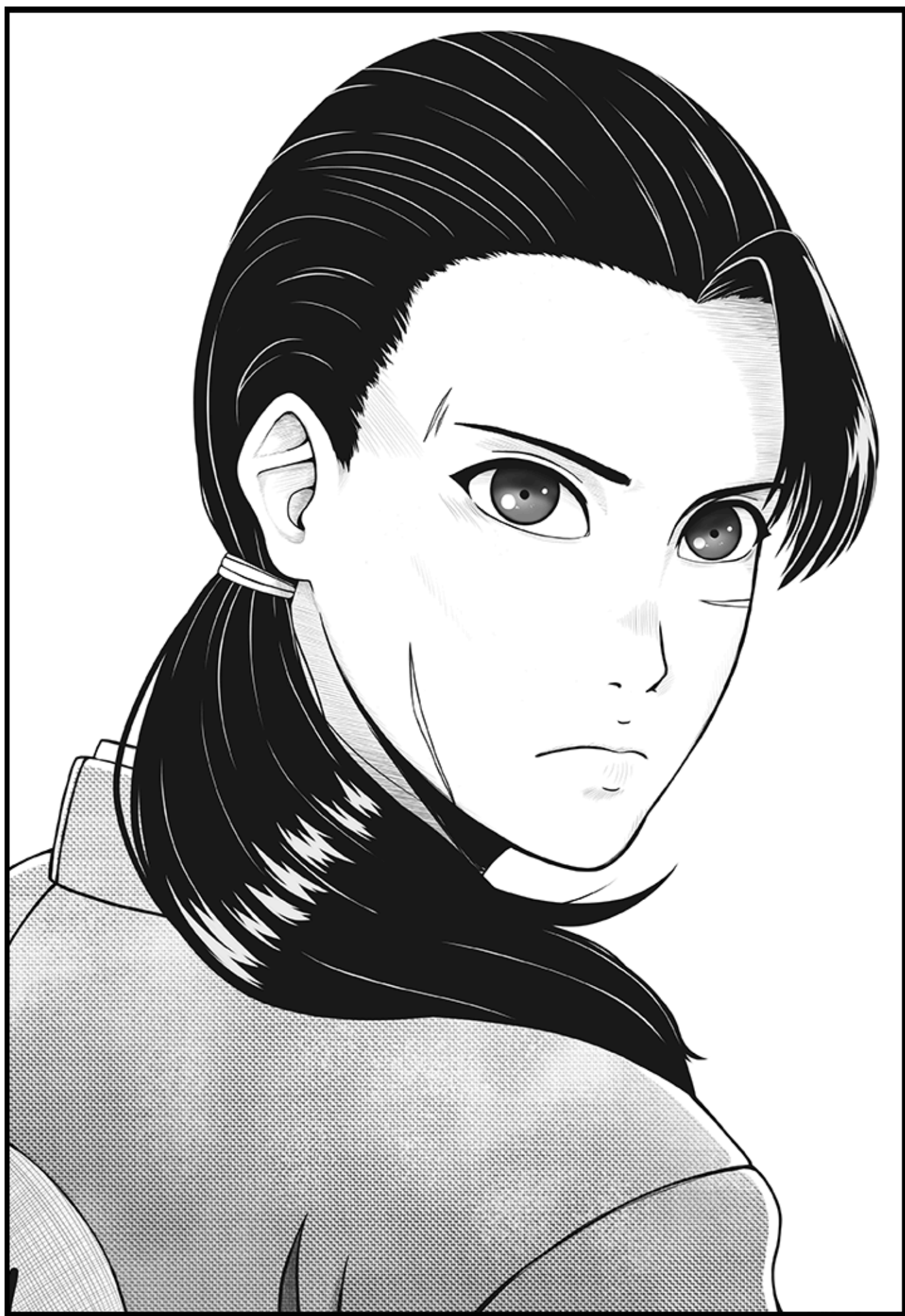
[MC #8 Face Art](#)

[Apr 30, 2020](#)

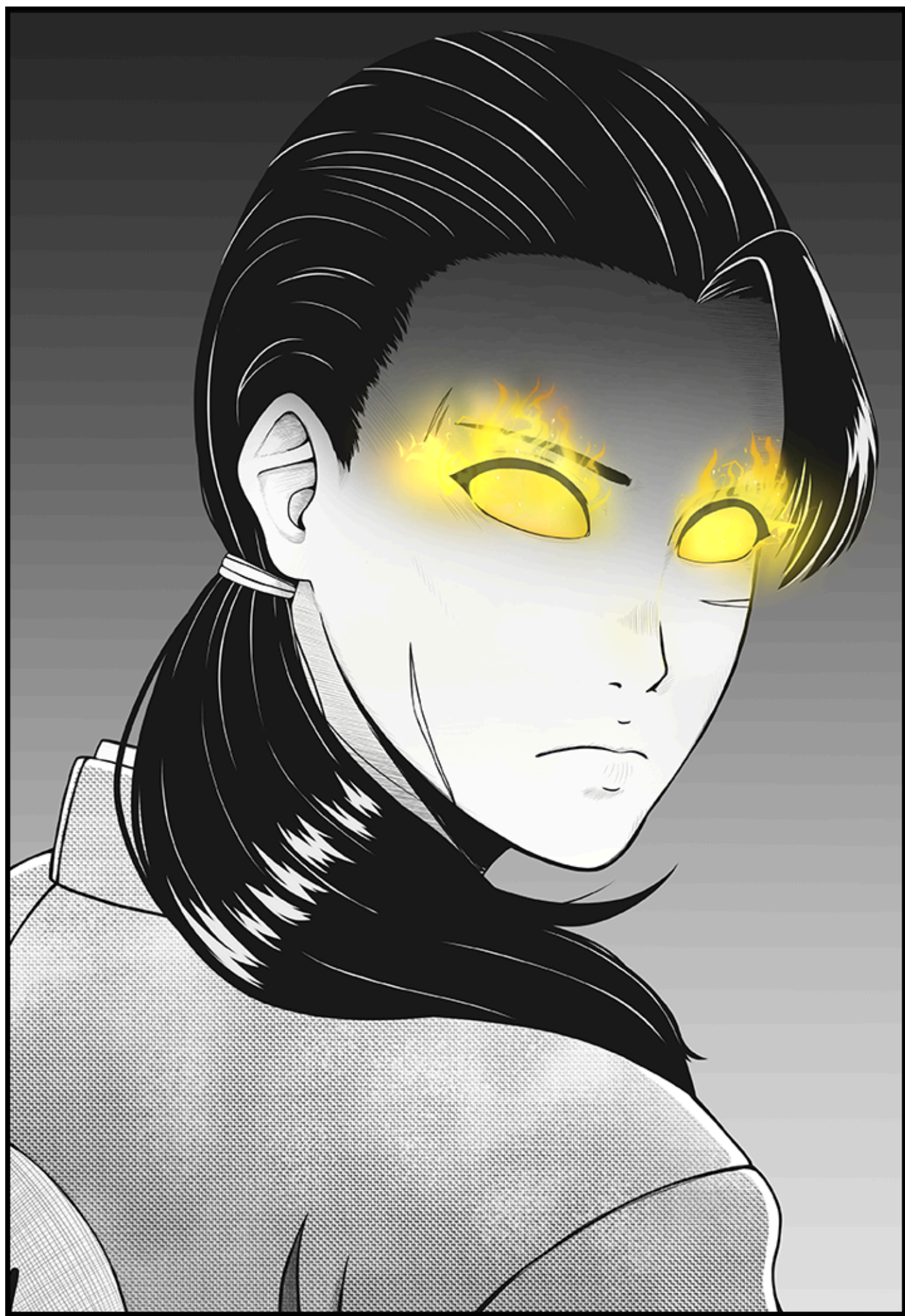
A new month, a new face! That's right: in Book 5, players will be able to (optionally) select a face for their main character! Faces will be designed each month by the intermediate+ tiers via polls. This month's face was drawn by Tokiko220 ([twitter](#), [deviantart](#))!

This month's build: **Neutral, Stoic, Ponytail**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[May 1, 2020](#)

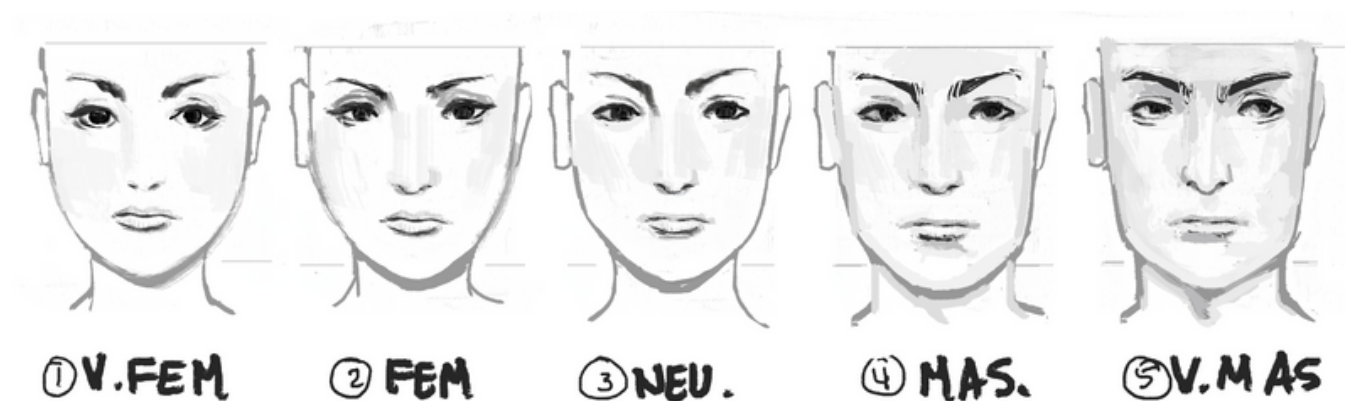
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+31)

54%

Feminine (+5)

17%

Neutral (+0)

3%

Masculine (+1)

6%

Very masculine (+6)

20%

Poll ended May 5, 2020 · 35 votes total

[MC #9's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[May 6, 2020](#)

The design for MC #9 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 (+1)

8%

Calculated (+5)

0%

Perverted (+23)

34%

Chivalrous (+24)

18%

Charming (+16)

13%

Stoic (+0)

3%

Drifter (+9)

0%

Protective (+0)

3%

Brutal (+0)

8%

Finesse (+8)

13%

Poll ended May 10, 2020 · 38 votes total

[Side Story #22: Momoko's Funeral](#)

[May 7, 2020](#)

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



Side Story 22: Momoko's Funeral



■■ Jijinto ■■

"Please—I swear it! Just one more week is all I ask!"

Momoko pleaded inside the mansion of the Yamagata-gumi, beset with grief, anger and frustration most of all. She was surrounded by glorified thugs covered in tattoos; this particular yakuza family controlled most of Jijinto, including the corner of the Eastside slums where her clinic was. Fish-Eye Hospital was late on its protection payments.

"If I had a ryō for every stupid broad begging for an extension on their payment, I'd retire from puttin' up with this shit!" Nishi yelled, swinging her iron club around close enough to make Momoko flinch. Dealing with crude types like her was never pleasant, but it was even worse after a second sleepless night of work.

The bald, giant man standing beside her was also unpleasant though for a different reason: he stared at her lustfully without enough manners to wipe away his drool. The yakuza made it clear what manner of work Momoko would take to pay off her debts if this trend continued.

"It won't come to that," Momoko assured herself. *"I'll never work for the yakuza—much less sell my body to them!"*

A prompt knock on the door interrupted Nishi's verbal lashing. "Damn, they're here already? Alright...you're lucky I've got other shit to do, nurse. Just make sure you and that fossil of a doctor pay on time next week—otherwise you'll be workin' for us! Let's go, Daisuke!"

Momoko put on her most grateful smile and kept wearing it until after she was escorted out of the mansion. By the time she had walked the span of Tetsuzan Bridge, her smile had turned into a frown and then a scowl once she was within sight of the clinic. Smiling and greeting patients day-in and day-out, always being charming and pleasant—even when their patients were anything but—taxed the young doctor not just physically but mentally as well.

"Next! Oh, Yua-chan! What a pleasant surprise!"

Momoko let out a giggle, shaking both her head and all those negative thoughts away. That elderly voice belonged to Matsuyo Fujii, the most accomplished doctor in the country and a genuine hero back in the Golden Era. He was well into his seventies, was halfway blind even with his glasses, and forgot everything that wasn't written down.

"Everything but the names of his patients," Momoko thought. Though her mentor was several times her age, his bedside manner never faltered and the spring in his step never seemed to fail. He was a true doctor—and an inspiration for Momoko to keep pushing herself and to keep their clinic afloat.

Afternoon rolled into the evening far too quickly as Fish-Eye Hospital was once again overwhelmed with more patients than they could handle. It was early summer yet already one of the hottest Momoko could recall, and dehydration went rampant—especially among the elderly, who sometimes took to drinking seawater.

"...which only compounds the problem," Momoko said, more than a little irritated. "Akamine-san, you must stop drinking from the ocean. Alcohol, too, only makes the body thirstier...please refrain from drinking saké—at least while you're in this clinic!"

"I don't need no lecture from you," said Akamine, a retired sailor who was midway through a chug from his flask. "If I wanted a sermon I'd—*hiccup*—go up to them there shrines and pray. I'm just here for my medicayshun."

Momoko clenched her fist, ready to partake in a shouting match until Doctor Fujii arrived and placed a gentle hand atop her shoulder. He had an almost supernatural ability at dissolving conflict before it occurred. Akamine didn't get his 'medicayshun' but somehow left with a smile on his face all the same.

"You take it easy now, won't you?" Fujii said with a laugh. "And stop laying out in the sun all day, before they tan your hide for leather!"

Momoko all but collapsed once their last patient of the day left. It was close to midnight before the two sat down for dinner amidst their experiments in the lab. Though she was reluctant to burden her old mentor with matters of money and financials—something had to be done. They had to start charging their patients upfront.

"Hm...hm..." Fujii said, nodding and otherwise politely pretending to give the matter some thought. Though the truth was, the aged doctor was terrible with money and far too charitable for his own good. "Oh, that reminds me! Touma-kun came over to pay off his surgery fees. I think you'll like what he brought in!"

Momoko's eyes lit up. Touma's surgery had been the primary reason she had been up the past two nights without rest or sleep. The middle-aged fisherman had a multitude of puss-filled sacs down his throat that had to be leaked and cleaned, as well as necrotic bone growth in his mostly-rotten teeth. The smell of his breath was a horror Momoko would recall for the rest of her life.

"Here it is: dinner!" Fujii laughed as he pulled over a barrel. Momoko's heart immediately sank upon the sight and smell of it. "Something the matter? You like sardines, don't you?"

"No...no I don't, Fujii-sama!" Momoko yelled, slamming her hands against the table. "We can't survive off fish forever! We spent a fortune on numbing agents for that surgery! Even if we do manage to make our own in the future...it won't change the fact that we're in debt!"

Momoko brought her hands to her face as she broke down into tears. She had never cried in front of her mentor before, which made her cry even more. "We work so hard...yet we're barely scraping by! I thought doctors were respected—yet we are given no appreciation at all, not even by those who owe us their lives!"

Doctor Fujii went to her side, and though he smelled of sardines, Momoko pressed her face into his stained kimono and sobbed. She was consumed by a multitude of emotions but was above all ashamed, to show such weakness in front of the one and only man she cared for.

"Now, now, Momoko-chan," he said, patting her head as if she were a kitten. "A doctor is like a samurai, though instead of serving a lord in a castle, we serve each and every patient that comes through our front door. There is much honor in that."

Momoko listened to each and every word between sniffles as she fought to keep fresh tears at bay. In her fragile state, she asked a question she had held deep within her heart for years:

"What is your secret, Fujii-sama? How can you work so hard, for so long? Don't you ever get tired?"

The doctor looked down at his doe-eyed apprentice and smiled. "My secret is a very simple one, Momoko-chan: in serving others, I serve myself. The satisfaction of fixing a limp or a cough, of dressing

a wound or mending a bone...that feeling has never left me, even after all these years. So I don't think I'll ever ret—"

"Fujii-sama!"

The older doctor suffered from an immediate shortness of breath, and motioned to grab for his heart until he noticed Momoko's fearful gaze. He brought the hand to his lips instead, and was onset by a series of coughs each rougher than the last. When he recovered, he played it off like it was nothing, and Momoko was foolish enough to believe him.

"Please don't scare me like that! Now then," Momoko smiled, wiping away her tears, "I'll boil us some tea!"

Even with her medical background, you couldn't blame her for not noticing the signs. Fujii-sama was her personal hero, a man she respected more than any other, who fought death daily at the operating table.

How could she believe that such a man was capable of dying?

■■■■

"Forget you ever saw me, doctor."

The golden-eyed assassin growled, though otherwise made not a sound as the beast in human flesh escaped the operating room. In its wake was a freshly dismembered corpse and a terrified Momoko.

The doctor, laid up against the wall, sat there in silence as the pool of blood from her patient soaked her legs. In truth, there was no quiet—not beneath the beating of her heart, which pumped hard enough to make her chest go sore. With the rest of her numb, this sensation was all she could feel as moments turned into minutes.

Momoko knew she had to be worried, with the death of the yakuza boss on her operating table, but she couldn't bring herself to care. Her heart had been taken by no more than a stare. The intensity behind the assassin's eyes—the passionate sadness she found within them—had awoken something the young doctor didn't understand.

She just knew her heart couldn't stop beating.

"Momo—kah!" Doctor Fujii gasped as he entered the room and fell to his knees. The sight of blood was hardly new to the doctor who worked amid the Golden Era's fiercest battles, but to see Momoko's face and kimono covered in blood was a sight that made his heart stop.

"Fujii-sama! Fujii-sama!" Momoko rushed over to his side. The doctor leaned against her and only then did she realize just how much weight and strength Doctor Fujii had lost. She held her mentor tightly, knowing there was little else she could do if it was as she feared.

"I'umfhine. No needa'too worry'bout me."

Slurred speech was *exactly* what she feared. The look on his face was disturbing: a smile on his left and frown on his right. The paralysis on the latter extended to his right arm and leg. It was as sure a sign as any that Doctor Fujii had just suffered a stroke.

"Lean on me, Fujii-sama," Momoko said, positioning herself on his right side. "Let's walk back to your room. I'll clean up this mess and deal with the yakuza. You just have to get some rest, okay?"

The aged doctor was in no position to argue, and complied as his student helped him walk back to his room. Tucking him into the futon and placing his glasses by his window, Momoko once again assured him that all would be well.

"Everything will be fine, Fujii-sama. I will see to it."

"You're so diligent, you know that? Ah..." Fujii paused, squinting his magnified eyes as he peered into Momoko's face. His expression was one of confusion. "What's...what's your name again?"

■■■■

Momoko spent the rest of that late night and morning getting brutally interrogated over the death of the yakuza leader. Ultimately, the Yamagata-gumi decided to spare her a gruesome death—if only because they were too ashamed of their own failure to claim her as guilty.

As far as Momoko was concerned, it didn't matter either way. The doctor had been in a daze ever since meeting the assassin. Nothing felt real anymore: not Fujii-sama's stroke, his memory loss, or getting battered and beaten by the yakuza. She knew her apathy to the world was likely a mental form of self-preservation, and that it was hardly healthy, but she embraced it all the same to make it through just a few hours more.

"What do you mean you're closin'?! I'm here to refill my medication!"

"Where's Fujii? Bring the real doctor out here!"

"Damn it, I've been in line fer hours! You can't send me away!"

"We're here for that new pain medication on yours! Come on—my back's killin' me!"

Momoko ignored the dozen patients yelling at her all at once. She couldn't bring herself to a fiery anger; she only had energy enough for a cool hatred instead. She remained calm as she repeated that the clinic wasn't opening today, sliding the door closed as she all but pushed an old grandmother out into the street.

"Why would you ever want to wake up to this?" Momoko repeated the assassin's words. Part of her wished she would stop thinking about them, but for one reason or another—the golden-eyed assassin

was always on her mind. And thoughts of them were far more pleasant than the alternatives.

whUMP* *shatter

The sound of beakers breaking came from the back of the lab. Momoko hurried over to find her mentor slumped over his desk.

“Fujii-sama! You’re supposed to be resting!”

The older doctor started struggling for breath as he braced himself against his desk. Pink, foamy mucus came out from his mouth upon a series of coughs. There was nothing else it could be: this was heart failure, and it was fatal.

“Please! You need to lie down!”

“No,” Fujii let out between ragged coughs. He motioned to grab the paper at his desk, but his hand was too numb to hold it. Momoko grabbed it for him and held it close enough for them both to read. She gasped at what she saw. “This is...my will.”

“I don’t—I don’t care about that! You’re in pain, Fujii-sama! Let me get you some opium.”

Momoko motioned to run off, but a gentle squeeze on her shoulder stopped her. Doctor Fujii shook his head and smiled. “Allow me to remain cognizant...in my final moments.”

The tears were already on their way out and streaming down Momoko’s face as she was helpless to do anything but watch her beloved mentor die. She held his hand tightly as he fell back into his chair. It made sense, in a way: a man such as him would never die in bed. It was far more fitting for Matusyo Fujii to spend his final moments here.

“Where is...Momoko?” he asked, his voice raspy and weak. Momoko realized that he was missing his glasses—they were atop his head, as usual—so she slid them back down over his eyes. “Oh, there you are. So diligent...curious, too. My best student...why are you crying?”

Momoko shook away her tears and assured him that she wasn’t. After a series of coughs and chokes and painful breaths, Doctor Fujii inspected the paper once more. “I must apologize. For what little I have to pass—**cough**—on. My savings from the war...please spend it on yourself.”

“I don’t care about the money! I only care about you, Fujii-sama. Your work has saved countless lives. Your research, your knowledge...you have given so much already!”

Momoko squeezed her mentor tighter when he began to convulse. He was struggling to draw breath as foam grew up his windpipe. He peered up into Momoko’s eyes with that meager, wide-eyed look she knew all too well. The look of a dying man.

“What I’ve given...my greatest gift to Hyuga...is you, Momoko.”



Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance—each and every stage of grief had its turn as Momoko fell into a pit of despair. It was a place that she didn't have the luxury of staying in for long; within an hour, she had to face reality and with it, a single truth:

"There is much work to be done."

Though it was against Matusyo Fujii's last wishes, Momoko was determined to spend what savings her mentor had on a large and proper funeral befitting a man of his accomplishments. A celebration of his life with his relatives, friends and colleagues—he deserved no less.

This goal brought with it a burning determination that lit a path guiding Momoko away from otherwise dark places. She quickly gathered the necessary names and addresses from his records. She would also invite many of their patients, too, who so depended on the selfless doctor for their care.

Matsuyo Fujii was a Bhuddist, and though he wasn't particularly religious, Momoko was determined to do everything properly and so she made arrangements with Asakusa Shrine—the largest of its type in Jijinto for the ceremony. Reserving it and making the proper donations to the presiding priests had taken all of the doctor's savings.

It was a price Momoko was willing to pay. The food and accommodations were enough for two hundred people, which was half as many as those she had invited for the funeral. Her hands had gone raw and her fingers blackened with ink stains from all the letters she had sent, across Jijinto but to Yamato and Tonogasha as well.

To those in the city who were illiterate, she visited in person to request their attendance.

After the reservations and invitations were finished, she proceeded to prepare and practice her speech to highlight Fujii's medical achievements: the dissection and study of organs in the human body, the application of turpentine over cauterization for amputations, and the effect of cleanliness during surgeries to avoid infections. Of course, those were only three areas of the many dozens he had contributed to significantly. Limiting herself would be difficult, but Momoko would try her best.

"I can do this," she reassured herself as she looked at the woman staring back at her inside a pool of water backstage at Asakusa Shrine. The woman wore an all-black kimono, and while the deep shadows beneath her eyes were hidden by makeup, she looked exhausted all the same. Momoko's reflection showed her just how frantic and draining the past six days had been.

Even still, Momoko forced them both to smile. To do her beloved mentor justice—a man known for his charming and kind bedside manner—there was no other way she could be. She steeled her resolve as she marched out from behind the curtains and into the open-air hall of Asakusa Shrine, where hundreds awaited to hear her speak.

Or so she thought. The venue was empty.

Momoko couldn't believe her eyes. She called for a monk and asked for the time—it was noon. The guests should've already arrived and been seated. Countless questions assaulted her at once: *"Is something holding them up? Did I give them the wrong date, or a different address? What's going on here?!"*

The truth was like an ever-growing shadow of dread that grew as Momoko gazed upon the many rows of empty seats. Everything had been prepared. She had done everything right: the invitations, the arrangements, the catering—everything was as it was supposed to be.

"...so why isn't anyone here?!" she screamed and it echoed. A motion from the side of her vision caught her attention: a man, a young one, squirming in his chair on one of the back rows. Momoko marched towards him with footsteps that echoed in their wake. The young man was practically petrified by the time she got to him.

"Who are you?" she asked, though not as a question.

"Er, my name is, Kiyoshi. I'm a priest-in-training for a shrine up North. I wanted to observe the ceremony to gain more experience...I was not given a formal invitation, however, so if you would like me to leave I —"

"Stay."

Momoko's face had lost all color beneath her white makeup. She began to tremble and her teeth clattered as she clenched them tightly together. The only guest who had bothered to come...of the hundreds she had invited...was just here for some apprenticeship?!

"My apologies for being so late!" said a voice from behind one of Asakusa's many red columns. It belonged to a middle-aged man, a samurai with greying temples and a generous stomach. For both a gambler and a swordsman, he was exceptional: for he made not a single sign of surprise after seeing the empty shrine hall. Instead, he focused on the hostess.

"You must be Momoko-san! You look tired...please, take a seat with me and Kiyo-kun."

If it were anyone else, and this any other time, she'd had politely refused his offer. But the samurai's kind voice was all that kept the anger and despair at bay. Her legs gave out from beneath her as the three sat together in silence.

For the sake of her sanity, it wasn't quiet for long.

"Kiyo-kun, please accompany the head priest in his chant. Do so loudly, for all those unfortunate spirits who could not attend."

"Y-yes, Father!" the priest-in-training replied, jumping to his feet. Once he was gone, the samurai introduced himself and pulled out a tea set from his pack.

"My name is Ichiro Takeda. I intercepted your invitation while in Tonogasha for business. Matsuo Fujii-sama...I can safely say that I would not be here today were it not for him. You have my sincerest condolences."

Momoko struggled to say 'thank you' but opted to only nod instead, as opening her mouth only risked releasing sobs. She was well and truly defeated, and held her head low in shame. She wanted to close her eyes and keep them closed for the rest of her life. That was until the steam from a hot cup of tea forced them open.

"I know it's a bit unorthodox, to drink tea during a funeral, but I find it easier to speak one's mind between a fresh brew. Please, try some."

The doctor couldn't refuse his offer. Not when it was given so kindly and warmly, as if she were a child given a sweet from her grandfather. She took a sip and—for the first time in ages—put on a genuine smile. "It's sweet..."

"A little honey goes a long way to brightening one's spirits. And you certainly seem in need of that, my dear. I can tell by your face alone how much Fujii-sama meant to you. I can also tell that this isn't the reception you were expecting," Ichiro said, gesturing to the rows of empty seats.

"So many said they would come...I don't understand—he's saved hundreds of lives over the years! He was always so selfless, putting others ahead of himself. Why wouldn't they come?"

"Such men are rare in Hyuga, though that is not by accident," Ichiro said before taking a sip of tea. "My father often told me that the path of the perfect swordsman is one that can only be walked alone. I often wondered what he meant by that. But as I grew older, I realized perfection separates a man from others, as do virtues. In the presence of one so virtuous, men are faced with their own shortcomings. It is why so few monks have friends outside their number."

Momoko took a sip of tea and then another until she realized she had finished the cup. Ichiro was quick to offer a refill. He was a wise man, beyond even his years, she decided. "I think I understand, Ichiro-san. But even still..." Momoko shook her head, trying to shake the anger and resentment building inside her. When she couldn't, she decided to change the subject entirely. "You said you wouldn't be here were it not for Fujii-sama?"

"Indeed! It was back in the Golden Era of Samurai, during one of the many battles against the central clans. My father, Lord Takeda, was a swordmaster without equal. He slayed countless warriors amidst a warlike trance, embracing a bestial state for days on end. Though he single handedly routed entire battalions of samurai, he fell into a deep sleep afterwards. One his retainers feared he would never wake from."

"A coma?" Momoko asked.

"Indeed. No monk, priest nor shugenja could do anything for him. Even his own clan members began to give up hope as the days went on and his condition deteriorated further. Only Doctor Fujii-sama was

able to bring him out of it. My clan...my family owe him a debt I fear we can never repay.”

Doctor Fujii rarely spoke of the Golden Era, at least to Momoko, so every story about him amid that time period was new to her. She and Ichiro continued to talk and reminisce as the ceremony went on, until the body was ready to be burned and cremated. At this time, the gifts and donations would normally be given, but considering that no one had come...

“Excuse me, Momoko-san,” said one of the monks of Asakusa Shrine, “this figurine was left at the offering table. I did not see who placed it there. My apologies.”

Momoko had expected piles of gifts, if not envelopes filled with coins, then at least something she could resell to try and pay off the clinic’s lingering debts. This crude, wooden sculpture was hardly that. She was about to toss it into the pyre out of frustration until Ichiro stopped her.

“Whoever made this item is quite clever,” he remarked. “I am certain you know what the written character for ‘doctor’ is, but allow me to explain.”

Ichiro dabbed his finger with soot from around the fire and wrote across the floor.

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“To the illiterate eye,” he explained, “the symbol for ‘doctor’ appears to be a man inside a box. In contrast, this sculpture depicts a man sitting above an open box, to show that he has escaped. No...that he has transcended to a place above.”

“I...I see,” Momoko gasped, holding the figurine close to her chest. It was a crude memento by an anonymous sculptor, but it made her feel better all the same. She kept it close as they watched Doctor Fujii’s body burn, until he was nothing but cinders and smoke.

It was time for the ceremony to end. But before Ichiro left, a thought came to Momoko that she couldn’t help but voice. “Ichiro-san, if I may ask...”

“Of course you may!” Ichiro said with a warm grin and friendly chuckle. “You needn’t hesitate around me, Momoko-san.”

“The trance, the one you said your father was in during the Golden Era...you described it as a beastial state. Do you recall hearing anything about golden eyes?”

Ichiro’s own eyes flashed as if struck by lightning. His kind demeanor dropped like heavy armor with its clasps undone. This was only for a second, however, after which he recomposed himself back into a jolly, tea-drinking samurai.

“Tell me, dear,” Ichiro ordered, “all that it is you know about golden eyes.”

Momoko was hardly a swordsman, so she didn't notice the change in Ichiro's feet nor the hand that now rested upon his sword hilt. Whatever this matter meant to him—he was deathly serious. Still, Momoko explained every detail she could recall about the assassin that had come into her life just one week before.

The assassin she couldn't keep out of her mind, much less her heart.

Ichiro asked her to repeat herself twice and then a third time before Kiyoshi, the young priest-in-training, interrupted them. The samurai seemed reluctant to go, but proceeded to bow and apologize before giving his farewell.

He was far more curt and less kind than before, Momoko noted, as if something she said had turned his mood foul. Still, Ichiro Takeda had been the only invited guest to show up and pay his respects to Doctor Fujii. For that she was grateful—his presence had been enough to keep her from breaking down altogether.

And also, he made her believe that this funeral hadn't all been for nothing.

"I'll need to find a good spot for you back home," she said to the figurine of the man outside the box. "I hope you'll keep me company...I can't run the clinic alone, you know?"

Momoko's spirits were high, for the first time in a long while, as she made the trek back to her personal corner in the Eastside Slums. Throughout all her ordeals and suffering, the doctor managed to believe that there was still hope to be had. She walked away from her mentor's ashes with both dreams and a renewed faith in a better, brighter future.

But this was Hyuga. She should've known better.

■■■■

Momoko thought she had turned the wrong corner when she came upon the clinic—that was how different and disorderly it looked. Though 'disorderly' didn't do the broken windows and bashed-in door any justice.

Fish-Eye Hospital had been ransacked, picked and looted during the funeral. The realization didn't hit Momoko all at once but step-by-step as she walked through the reception hall—which no longer had chairs for patients—to the operating room now absent of medical tools and devices, to the stockroom that was emptied of everything save for week-old sardines.

Supplies, medication, cleaning materials...all of it was gone. Momoko fell to her knees and brought her hands to her face, smudging her makeup as she let out a single gasp. No tears would come, nor would there be a lengthy cry. When the shock receded, it was anger—not sadness—that consumed her.

There was a single scalpel that had yet to be taken. Momoko secured it in her black kimono sleeve and stood straight and tall, and marched like a woman possessed across Tetsuzan Bridge over to the

yakuza mansion. They had stolen everything from her: her mentor, her future, her happiness.

"I will KILL the ones responsible for this. Forgive me, Fujii-sama, but I hope you aren't looking down upon your student now."

She knew attacking the yakuza would get her killed, and that she was helplessly alone—but that didn't matter any longer. Revenge was all she could think of, and it pushed her through the front door of the mansion, past the guards and into the throne room where above a large set of stairs the lone figure of a woman sat atop a large silk pillow. She looked rather plain beneath her gaudy kimono and jewels.

"My, my, who isss thisss?" she asked with amusement. It was all Momoko could hear before half a dozen yakuza jumped her, grabbing her and slamming her head against the carpeted floor. The doctor squirmed as best she could but was powerless beneath their weight. A feeling she was all too accustomed to as of late.

"Our apologies, Shiroyama-sama! She shouldn't have gotten' in this far!" said one of the tattooed men restraining her. "The guards at the front will be severely punished for their failure!"

"You needn't tell me how poor security isss around here, assss my late husband, my dear Yama-kun, can attest! But thisss one doesn't bear the look of any assassin I've seen," Shiroyama said, fanning herself as she approached down the stairs. "Yes...more akin to a doe, I believe. A frightened one at that. Release her."

The yakuza were reluctant yet followed the order all the same. Momoko knew she should've bowed and thanked the hostess for her mercy, begging and apologizing for her interruption, but she couldn't find it in her to grovel. She was too damn tired of being pathetic.

"Well, what is it?" Shiroyama asked, her patience waning. "Or does the cat have your tongue, assss the sssaying goes?"

Momoko still had her tongue though it had gone numb at the sight of Shiroyama's. The doctor could've sworn she saw it lengthen and twist in ways no human tongue could. It was more frightening than fascinating, as every instinct within her warned of danger, yet she ignored it all and spoke what she had come here to say.

As she went over her dire situation, including the assassination, the funeral, and the looting of Fish-Eye Hospital, Shiroyama kept her face hidden behind her fan. She did so out of politeness, for across her face was a wide, beaming smile. The yakuza heiress took a wicked sort of delight in the suffering of others, *especially* those who were younger and more beautiful than she was.

After the story was told and the grievances aired, Shiroyama was ready to toss Momoko out into the streets as personal amusement waned. That was until another civilian was brought in for her attention, this one with the misfortune of being manhandled by Nishi—one of her ex-husband's favorites.

"Shiroyama...san," Nishi added with reluctance, "caught this old geezer sellin' poppies by the docks."

“And *why* does thisss concern me?” Shiroyama asked.

“Because it’s the highest quality opium we’ve ever seen. Whoever he got this shit from could put us out of business! Damn bastard won’t tell us who he got it from, either!”

Nishi proceeded to kick the old man down to the floor and then once more for good measure. When he dared to lift his head, he came face-to-face with a woman possessed by a demon.

“Akamine...you...”

It wasn’t Shiroyama, but Momoko who stood over him, looking down upon him with eyes twitching with rage. The streaks of makeup across her ghostly face paired with her black kimono made her look like death personified; the sight made the ex-sailor scream in terror.

“Please! It wasn’t just me! The others grabbed more than I did! Just took what I deserved, is all!”

“What you deserve...what you deserve...” Momoko repeated his words like a mantra, rage swelling within her. Doctor Fujii, a man who had dedicated his life to the well-being of his patients, was betrayed during his own funeral by those who owed him their lives!

It was beyond unforgivable.

“I’ll give you what you deserve! DIE, DIE, *DIE!*”

The scalpel was a tool sharper than any katana, used for precision cuts and delicate incisions during surgery. Momoko found that it worked just as well outside the operating table as she plunged it over and over into Akamine’s stomach. She plunged it in and out a dozen times and then a dozen more, coating herself with blood spray until her grip was too loose to hold it any longer.

“This is how you must have felt, Assassin! It feels good...it feels so good!”

A foreign ecstasy came over the doctor as she was finally pulled away from the bloody carcass. Her audience—though well-exposed to violence—stood uneasily at the sight of what was once a man. Only Shiroyama seemed completely unaffected. If anything, she was pleasantly surprised.

“Fufufufu, it appears thisss doe has teeth! Just so you understand, dearest doctor, we have every right to turn you over to the authorities. Thisss carpet will not be cheap to replace...oh, and that cretin’s life too, I suppose,” Shiroyama said as an afterthought. “Your career as a doctor is all but over.”

“I don’t care. I’m done taking care of filth. I’m done living a thankless life!”

Momoko had made peace with death, or at least, she was so exhausted that she didn’t care to live anymore. She expected to be executed, or imprisoned, or to suffer any and every sort of punishment for what she had done. What she got instead...was a job offer.

"I recognize a fellow woman of talent and ambition," Shiroyama said, placing a hand atop Momoko's blood-soaked shoulder. Though she was standing behind the doctor, her neck stretched out and over until the two were face-to-face. "That rabble out there will never appreciate you. But I will. Make opium for me, and you will receive wealth and treasures beyond your wildest dreamsss."

"My...dreams?" Momoko asked as a daze came over her. She could feel her mind numbing and her senses failing. The thoughts running within her head slowed and dwindled, becoming fewer and farther in between until just one remained.

"I'm sorry, Fujii-sama. Your gift to Hyuga...has become a curse."

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

[May 7, 2020](#)

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 (+6)

4%

Borgia, the butler (+3)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+7)

2%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+5)

2%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+29)

9%

Keiko, the maid (+10)

4%

Kohaku, the samurai (+46)

13%

Kuniko, the farmer (+18)

7%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+9)

4%

Momoko, the doctor (+0)

0%

Nishi, the yakuza (+19)

4%

Satsuma, the emperor (+10)

13%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+8)

20%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+3)

16%

Poll ended May 31, 2020 · 45 votes total

[Money, Money, Money](#)

[May 10, 2020](#)

On an average month, how much money do you usually spend on forms of interactive fiction (choicegames, visual novels, rpgs with lots of text/visual novel elements)?

I only pick up one or two of those kinds of games a year.

\$5

\$10

\$20

\$30

\$40

\$50

More than \$50.

105 votes total

[MC #9's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[May 11, 2020](#)

The design for MC #9 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Very feminine, Perverted**

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

Short (+16)

24%

Long (+9)

27%

Ponytail (+0)

9%

Chonmage (+0)

6%

Long bangs (+3)

33%

Poll ended May 15, 2020 · 33 votes total

[MC #9 Face Art](#)

[May 31, 2020](#)

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 Catter ([twitter](#), [pixiv](#), [instagram](#))!

This month's build: **Very feminine, Perverted, Short hair**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[Jun 2, 2020](#)

(Sorry I'm a day late!)

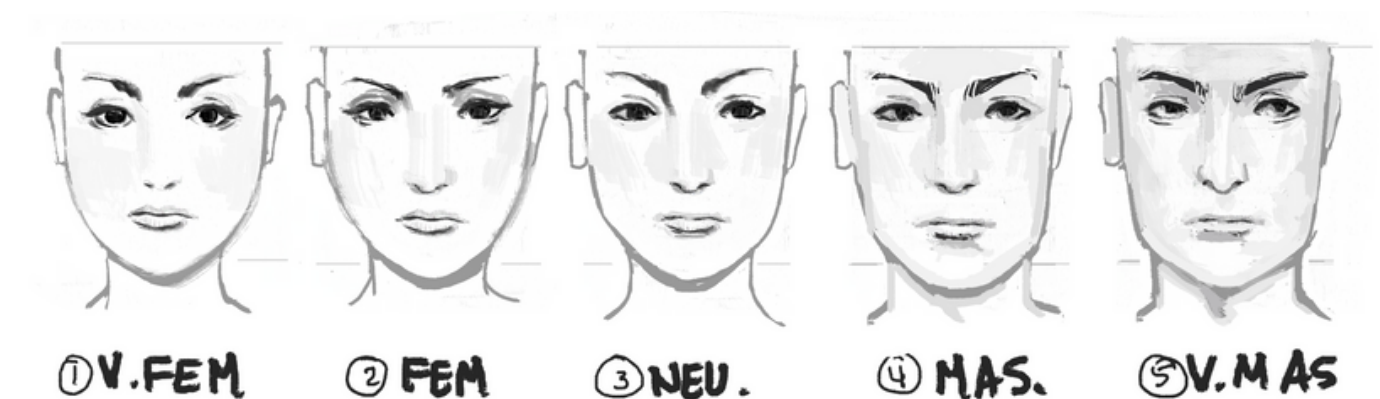
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+0)

7%

Feminine (+11)

37%

Neutral (+1)

0%

Masculine (+3)

23%

Very masculine (+12)

33%

Poll ended Jun 5, 2020 · 43 votes total

[MC #10's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Jun 6, 2020](#)

The design for MC #10 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 (+3)

2%

Calculated (+5)

7%

Perverted (+0)

2%

Chivalrous (+31)

40%

Charming (+21)

17%

Stoic (+1)

0%

Drifter (+9)

24%

Protective (+1)

2%

Brutal (+3)

0%

Finesse (+13)

5%

Poll ended Jun 10, 2020 · 42 votes total

[Side Story #23: Kohaku's Plantation \(Female Version\)](#)

[Jun 7, 2020](#)

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



Side Story 23: Kohaku's Plantation (Female Version)



■■ Western Hyuga ■■

"This just feels like drinkin' downstream from the herd, Koha-chan. It ain't smart...and it's leavin' a bad taste in my mouth, too!"

Sheriff Susumu of the Westlands had done nothing but complain and drag his feet for the past two days—which was quite the accomplishment on horseback. Between his incessant whining and the heat of the summer's sun, the journey to the Cotton King's plantation had been a trial unlike any other.

"We're not leaving until we find my mother's racehorse. I can't return to Lord Shatao in good conscience otherwise," said a samurai who was sweating beneath her armor. Her name was Kohaku Nanbu—and

though she was born in these prairies, her allegiance was on the opposite end of Hyuga. Samurai and ranchers rarely saw eye-to-eye, and having the blood of both had given Kohaku no shortage of trouble.

"I know you're insistent, but I'm sayin' that the long arm of the law don't reach quite this far. We're headin' up towards Kondo territory or close enough to it. The ranches that used to be here had no shortage of trouble, and it was only gettin' worse 'till the Cotton King came. He brought law an' order to this here region, so we lawmen leave him to it."

"Used to be you couldn't pass by these fields without seeing a hundred heads of cattle and twice as many horses. We haven't seen so much as a single steer so far," Kohaku replied, bringing her hand above her eyes as to look out across the overgrown pastures. "Abandoned barns, broken fences...whatever your king has done to this place, it isn't good."

With the lack of livestock around, nature had been busy reclaiming its roads. The tall grass was a feast for Tatsuya—Kohaku's horse—which meant the going was slow and interrupted by constant breaks for snacking. It didn't help that they were burdened with a week's worth of supplies more than they needed. Kohaku's mother hadn't allowed her to leave without stuffing her bags to the brim with all manners of clothing, accessories and knick-knacks.

"Times sure have a'changed out here. No denyin' that," Susumu said, letting out a wistful sigh. "I will admit to being curious about this plantation, though. They say it's like an island amid a sea of white. Can you figure that?"

Kohaku only shrugged as she looked over the remains of a stagecoach by the side of the road. It had been abandoned for at least a couple years, Kohaku wagered, with its red paint chipped and faded. The only real problem it had—as far as Kohaku could see—was a broken axel and a bent wheel. *"What a waste...who would throw it away instead of fixing it up? That's not the rancher way at all."*

And while most everything was in disrepair, a sign up ahead looked as old as the morning's sunrise. It hung from chains beneath the overhanging branch of a large oak. Trees of its size were rare this deep in the Westlands, close to the deserts and canyons the wild Kondos called home. In many ways, this prairie was like an oasis at the last stop of civilization.

That stop introduced itself with large letters painted in white on black canvas.

"You now enter the Kingdom of Cotton," Kohaku said, reading the words from afar. It was a grand sign that marked the start of the lands owned by the Cotton King. Even Kohaku's steed Tatsuya knew they had entered somewhere strange: the road went from near non-existent, to pounded dirt, to gravel and then stone tiles.

"Woo-wee! Look at that there fence—and a tower, too!" said the sheriff before letting out a long whistle. "Enough to make the Emperor jealous, I reckon! Ain't no group of savages gettin' up there. You see those barbed wires?"

Kohaku grunted in reply. She took off her farmer's hat made of straw and replaced it with her helmet made of iron. That gesture alone spoke volumes as to how the samurai felt about the Cotton King's defenses. *"If it comes to a siege..."* she thought to herself, *"...I don't like my chances."*

Tatsuya was a good jumper—especially for a horse his size—but with the barbed wire strung across it, the fence was far too dangerous to put to the test. Any hope of sneaking into the place was dashed, but that was fine by Kohaku: subterfuge and infiltration were the tools of ninja, not samurai. She would employ more direct methods.

"Halt! Stay where you are!" came a shout from the tower above as Kohaku and Susumu neared the front gates. The gates themselves were incredibly large and ornately designed, and opened wide enough for a dozen horsemen to ride abreast. The trick was getting them open in the first place.

The man who shouted walked down a spiral staircase to greet them. He was far from welcoming, however, as he gave Kohaku and her full suit of armor a long stare. "Samurai aren't allowed on the premises. Cotton King's order."

"My name is Kohaku of the Nanbu clan. I'm here to speak to your king. It is a matter of the law—isn't that right, Sheriff?"

"O-oh, yes siree!" Susumu replied, removing his hat and showing off his necklace: a copper wado with a string through it. It was the badge of his office. "Now I know we're barkin' at a knot here, but we've got matters I'd like to settle with His Majesty sooner rather than later."

The guardsman wasn't impressed. He pulled out a necklace of his own. It had the same ancient coin on it that the sheriff had. "Listen here, partner, every worker on the plantation wears one of these. We've got numbers of each of em'—and they're tied to our accounts at the Company Store. So I'll be needing more evidence than that if you really are the sheriff."

"Why...why that's a dag nabbit crock of cowpie and you know it!" Susumu shouted, his face growing red with anger. Being the sheriff was his greatest and only pride. "Everyone knows who I am—even out this far! You go tell your king that the Law is waitin' for him, you hear?!"

Kohaku was thankful, on some level, that a much-needed fire had been lit beneath her usually docile companion. That said, the guardsman wouldn't budge nor open the gates unless Susumu had official papers with the Imperial Seal on them. Which he did, however...

"Left 'em back at the jailhouse," he groaned in defeat. "Come on, Kohaku—we're wastin' daylight talkin to this mouthy son of a snake."

Just as the two were about to leave, a large figure emerged from the road down the way they came. Though it was blurred from the heat at a distance, as it got closer it revealed itself to be a stagecoach pulled by two black mares prodding along at a gentle pace. The coach was painted white and had an older driver who smoked a pipe as he drove by.

Inside was a woman—perhaps the most peculiar one Kohaku had ever seen. She wore a bonnet on her head to shield her face from the sun and wore a dress made of cloth and in a fashion that was hardly Hyugan.

She didn't step foot out from the carriage, but instead pulled aside a curtain from behind the door frame to see what was the matter. She didn't like what she saw judging from her face, which contorted to one of disgust. She raised her head and looked down upon Susumu and Kohaku—no easy task, with the two of them on horseback.

"Out of my way, subjects. My dear future husband is waiting for me! Oh, I do hope the humidity hasn't spoiled my makeup! I knew I should've brought my mirror..." the woman who fashioned herself as some sort of lady trailed off. Apparently she was here for a wedding interview with the Cotton King, and she was hardly the only dame contesting for him.

"That makes you the third one today," said the guard, who didn't bother to check her papers or identity. He hailed the other guards at the gate to open it up, and with a long creak—it did. "Come on in, milady. May His Majesty find you the most graceful and beautiful of his admirers."

The gates shut loudly after the stagecoach passed through. The sound was one of failure and dejection which echoed throughout Kohaku's head as the two were turned away. Both Nanbu Ranch and the legacy of her father seemed destined to wither and die. Susumu had already uncorked his saké bottle and passed it to Kohaku to help drown her sorrows.

But saké tasted better after a job well done. And Kohaku had work to do.

"Well if this ain't a sour wad of tobacco in your teeth...I sure am sorry, Koha-chan. Looks as if this is where our little journey ends."

"Not quite, Sheriff," said Kohaku as she rummaged through the packs on the back of Tatsuya. Knowing her mother, she *must've* packed it. "I'm getting into that plantation—one way or another. If not with steel..."

...then with silk," Kohaku grinned, holding up her birthday gift: a beautiful green kimono.

■■■■

It had taken a half hour to recover the stagecoach from the ditch, a full one to repair it into working order, and then two to clean it and make it otherwise presentable. It was hard work under the sweltering summer sun, but the result was respectable.

"Have to hand it to you, Koha-chan. You dang well just have done it!" the sheriff shouted, slapping the stage coach and causing one of its doors to fall off its hinges. "Oops! I'll be gentler, I swear!"

Kohaku gave her companion a glare. "You better be. Now get dressed and hitch up the horses—we need to be as convincing as possible if we're going to make it through those gates."

The samurai let out a long sigh as she packed up everything that *made* her one: her helmet, chest piece, pauldrons, armguards, and leggings. She had to hide away her katana, too, which was nearly as painful as separating a limb. *“Even without this...I am still a samurai. But for now I must pretend otherwise.”*

Kohaku slipped into the silk kimono like a glove...on a hand that was covered in blisters, that is. The fit wasn't the issue—though it was a tad short and the chest was a bit tight. The problem laid in its wearer: anything lighter than armor made the samurai feel naked. And silk was as light a material as they came.

“Now if you just ain't prettier than a peach! You might well swoon the Cotton King where he stands, I reckon!”

The samurai blushed at the sheriff's compliment, but the only way Kohaku intended to knock the Cotton King down was with her sword—if it came down to it. But if everything went according to plan, there'd be no need for violence. The two of them would be in and out of the plantation with the racehorse in tow.

The thing about the Westlands, though, is that things never went according to plan.

Susumu took a creaky seat at the front of the stagecoach. The reins holding his horse and Tatsuya in were flimsy to say the least, and any sudden jerk risked breaking apart the whole front of the carriage. Luckily, the horses were docile after feasting all morning and walked up to the gates without so much as a hitch.

“Halt,” said the same guardsman from earlier. This was unlucky—Kohaku had been hoping for a change in shifts. While this man hadn't seen her face, he had seen the sheriff's. All that was keeping them from being discovered was Susumu's disguise—a mud moustache—as well as his impromptu acting skills.

“I say, I say, what a swelterin' day this do be good sir!” said Susumu, in a clearly fake accent meant to mimic those of the lady earlier. “The lady is here to win the hand of the King, now if you be excusin' us —”

“You're a bit late for the interviews, but considerin' the condition of this carriage,” the guard said, scrutinizing the wobbly front wheel, “it's a miracle you made it at all. Who's inside?”

“Why, that do be Lady Ko—”

“Lady Ko,” Kohaku said, poking her head from out of the door. “Just...Lady Ko. I apologize for our tardiness. I hope our delay doesn't inconvenience His Majesty. Now—please let us pass promptly so that we don't leave him waiting any longer.”

The guard was a skeptic at first, though after seeing the kimono Kohaku was wearing, with its elaborate design of butterflies and flowers, he was convinced. “The old style has its charms, that much is true. But to wear silk in this place...you're braver than most! Open the gates, boys!”

Only the loud creak of the gates could mask the breath Kohaku released inside the stagecoach. They entered what could only be described as a different world: the plains were flat, enough to see for miles, and each one of those were nothing but white. Rows and rows of cotton—like miniature clouds, puffed from out of the ground.

“The Sea of White,” Susumu gasped. Kohaku left the inside of the carriage to sit beside the sheriff to get a better view. “Well, Koha-chan, we’re neck deep in it now. This has to be the biggest farm the Westlands—hell, all of Hyuga, has ever known!”

Kohaku nodded, “It’s impressive...but looks aren’t everything.” She pulled on Tatsuya’s reins to stop him as they neared a field hand. The older man’s back was bent and was in pain, too, judging from the grimace on his face. He had a large sack draped over his shoulder and the same necklace the guardsman at the front gate wore.

He spared the two of them a glance but quickly darted his eyes down in shame. Though before he continued his cotton picking, he spotted Tatsuya—and the sight gave him pause. He stood straighter as his smile wide grew to reach his ears.

“Heck of a horse you’ve got there—Nanbu stock, fit for war I’d say! And look at that shine on his coat...he’s well groomed, too,” the field hand said as if he was reminiscing. In many ways he was, as he was once a rancher on the very lands he now toiled.

His name was Denji, though that was about as much as Kohaku could gather before he had to continue his work. If he didn’t meet his quota, he said, he was going to bed hungry. Yet there was something Kohaku couldn’t ignore.

“Your hands,” she said, grabbing the cotton picker’s arms, “what happened to them? You’ve got sores all over—almost like a leper’s.”

“It’s the chemicals,” Denji replied, pulling away and continuing his work. “Keeps the bugs off the cotton. You get used to ‘em after awhile.”

“Used to them?! Look at your copper wado—it’s damn near eroded!” Kohaku yelled. “You’re poisoning yourself, working in these fields! You have to—”

“My, my, how unbecoming,” said a lady’s voice from afar. It was the same one from inside the carriage earlier. She was fanning herself off while carrying an umbrella. “It would seem my newest competitor is even more uncouth than the others, fufufufu! And that kimono of yours...dear, what daring you have to wear something so gaudy!”

As much as Kohaku wanted to ignore the woman—who introduced herself as Suzuki—she was forced into something resembling polite conversation with her on the carriage ride to the mansion. Pretending to cordial and withstanding the series of poorly-hidden insults was a trial in mental fortitude. The samurai had gained a new respect for the Emperor, who had a court filled of ‘socialites’ just like this one.

The samurai all but flung herself out of the carriage when they arrived. It was mistaken for eagerness. The staff—which consisted mostly of women wearing white, frilly uniforms—bowed and escorted Kohaku to the tearoom in the east wing.

The fact that the mansion had an east wing in the first place was a testament to its size. While it was in the Hyugan style, it was only structurally so: not a single tile of tatami could be seen on the floor. That was because every inch of it was covered in carpet—of various designs and colors. The walls, too, were not immune as elaborate tapestries hung down from them. Combined with the curtains and the furniture, too, Kohaku began to feel as if she had been rolled up inside a rug.

“Quiet, ladies, for I have fetched our most fearsome suitor yet!” said Suzuki with a giggle. The other women present responded in kind. “May I introduce Lady Ko—whose sense of fashion may resemble your grandmother’s!”

Kohaku bit her tongue while enduring the laughter of hens. She would’ve likened herself to a wolf, but in truth, without her katana at her side she was forced to be subjected to their rude remarks. They came in the form of backhanded compliments, too: like the broadness of her shoulders or the muscles in her arms. The physique of a samurai was hardly that of a delicate lady’s.

That was fine by her. ‘Delicate’ was the last thing she wanted to be, but even so...she couldn’t help but feel shame. It was a relief, then, when the Cotton King made his appearance.

And what an appearance it was. He wore a white foreign suit, unfortunately form-fitting to the large curves of his protruding stomach. Atop his head was a matching hat with a short brim and whose height made the king look half-again as tall as he was. He had several rolls of fat beneath his chin and his complexion was a constant shade of red. His moustache was in a style unlike any Kohaku had seen: it stretched out from both sides and connected to his sideburns.

He was so peculiar that Kohaku had nearly forgotten to bow in his presence.

“Well, well, well,” he started, his voice heavy with a drawl, “you ladies sure are a sight for these old, tired eyes. I would apologize for leavin’ you all waiting this morning, but that there was the first test. Patience is a virtue, you see, and one of a woman’s many charms!”

It seemed that Kohaku had arrived just in time, and that these marriage interviews were to be done all at once, in a competitive style. This was both an advantage and disadvantage for the misplaced samurai—she wouldn’t be scrutinized as much, but her lack of ‘refinement’ would be more evident in comparison.

The group—there were five of them, including the king, sat around a circular table as tea was served. There were tiny cakes made of mochi, too, but it sat untouched by the other ladies as if that, too, was a challenge. Kohaku was famished from all the work she did on the carriage so she ignored their gazes and proceeded to chomp down a handful.

“A true lady has a healthy appetite,” the Cotton King remarked as Kohaku downed her third cake. That would be the last she’d get to eat before the other ladies took to them like crows on carrion. Kohaku

took a sip of tea to help clear her throat but it would never get there; it was so sickeningly sweet she spat it out, nearly getting it on the king.

The others gasped as if she had killed him.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," Kohaku stood up and bowed. "But that tea...it is horrendously sweet. How anyone could drink it is beyond me."

The Cotton King merely chuckled as he pulled out a handkerchief to clean himself off. "Lady Ko, you said your name was? I do believe you have passed the second test. This 'tea' is more sugar than water, and any honest woman would tell you as much. Truth-tellin' is a virtue that must come before all others, you see."

Kohaku nodded even if she didn't fully understand. Still, the spiteful gazes from her competitors was all the evidence she needed to know she had done well. The group then proceeded to take turns asking questions to the Cotton King, each more inane and trivial than the last.

The samurai had learned that the king had three brothers, all younger, with the youngest named Anzai—who was a prolific shogi player in Tonogasha. The king had a childhood dog named Tamotsu, his favorite dessert was manju made from chestnut-flavored bean paste, and his favorite color was alabaster white.

"How many workers do you employ, and among them, how many were ranchers local to this region?" Kohaku asked when it was finally her turn. The serious question caused the tearoom chatter to quiet. "The fencing at the front gate is impressive, but there's not enough wood in the Westlands to span the acreage of the entire plantation. How is it then that you've managed to defend yourself against the wild Kondo tribes?"

The Cotton King chuckled though he didn't give an immediate response. Instead he wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief and gestured to an ornament on the wall. It was an old coin within a golden frame.

"See that there, Lady Ko? That coin to you may be worth less than a paperweight. But to me—to a collector of such things, who can appraise its true value...it is worth as much as all the cotton picked in the world! It's centuries old, bears a language unknown to any, and made from a copper not like any found in Hyuga. It is indeed a mystery of our past—no mere paperweight, you see!"

The Cotton King laughed and Kohaku's competitors laughed with him. "Just like that coin, those savage dirtskins don't know the true value of my cotton. They only care about horses and cattle—bah!"

There was something akin to wisdom in the Cotton King's words, Kohaku thought, but common sense made her a skeptic. This land was still the most fertile and flat for miles, and even if it wasn't a proper ranch—it housed over two hundred people, including workers, their wives and children. They had to be self-sufficient if they were going to survive so far from civilization.

"They have to be growing their own food. Otherwise they'd all starve," the samurai concluded. "I need to see more of this plantation to figure out what's going on."

"Excuse me," Kohaku said, interrupting a rival in the middle of a personal story. "But I was wondering if we could look around the plantation. It's bound to be more interesting than drinking tea all day."

"A tour of the grounds! What a splendid idea," the Cotton King praised. Suzuki—the socialite Kohaku had suffered through earlier—nodded and agreed. She wore a smile that hardly reached her eyes as she gave Kohaku a sneer. It wasn't the samurai's fault that the lady's smalltalk was so boring.

The tour began on the cotton fields closest to the mansion, where the Cotton King proceeded to go into detail on how the seeds were sown, how often the plants were watered, and then the act of picking itself. As a sort of tour group activity, each lady got to pick some. The nearby workers smiled and gave their greetings, and continued their labor with a jolly humming and a pep in their step—at least when their king was around.

"This coating around the cotton," Kohaku said, rubbing her fingers together, "what is it exactly? Some sort of chemical?"

"Why, no need to tell you," the Cotton King chuckled, "when I can show you instead! Let's get a move on to the warehouse!"

The second stop was indeed the warehouse—the largest Kohaku had ever seen. It had originally been the barn of a rancher though had since been expanded out several times its size in either direction. It was where the wives of the cotton pickers worked, Kohaku realized, as she spotted a group of three dozen on benches surrounded by piles of cotton stacked high enough to shadow the workers beneath them.

"These lovely ladies are responsible for keepin' them leaves and stems out of our yarn. They comb out the tangled fibers, too, then weave them together to make 'em nice and ready for tailorin'!"

"Why are some of them isolated from the others?" Kohaku asked.

"Oh, that there's a motivational technique. Gals who don't meet their quotas are separated: less chitchattin' on the job means they can focus on gettin' their numbers back up! Ain't I thought of everything?"

The rest of the tour group agreed with him, showering him with praises for his ingenuity. Kohaku thought it was cruel—but not so bad as the sores all on their fingers. She reminded the king about the chemicals and the tour continued to a room with giant vats that smelled like the spray of a wet skunk.

The ladies each held handkerchiefs to their noses as the Cotton King proceeded to explain. "This here's my ole secret weapon against fleas! It's a pesticide—a fancy way of sayin' that it keeps my cotton safe from bugs and other critters, too. The recipe's a family secret: if you're anxious to know it, then you better win my favor! Ho-ho!"

“Coating your crops with some kind of acid...wouldn't that harm your workers, Your Majesty?”

“Hmph!” Suzuki replied, giving Kohaku a scowl. “I declare, what a foolish supposition! His Kingship is as wise as he is charming—if I may be so bold. Now, dear king, let us move on towards a more...pleasant part of the tour.”

And with that, the group moved on to the Company Store. It was the largest general store Kohaku had seen, fastened with stalls that seemed to stretch on forever. They were filled with a remarkable amount of meat, produce, essentials and sundries. Everything from blankets to booze was stocked on the shelves.

As for the employees, there was a butcher on staff as well as a blacksmith and a tailor, too, along with a team of clerks working the counters. It was like a miniature town complete with a bar, a medical ward, and even a barber shop. It was an impressive establishment and the king's flatters certainly let him know it.

But as they were singing his praises, Kohaku was more concerned with the prices. “This box of nails is priced at two. Two ryō is awfully expensive, don't you think?”

“Hoho! An eye for prices—quite a quality for a wife to have, if'n I'm hoping to stay wealthy!” the Cotton King said with a chuckle. “But that there price ain't in ryō. We use wado here—the currency the rest of Hyuga has forgot! Considerin' the average wage of one of my workers, at or about ten wado a day, the prices here are more than reasonable!”

“If you pay them in wado instead of ryō...then their money is useless everywhere else. What if they need to buy something this store doesn't have?”

“Why, but they can always convert to ryō, of course! Ain't that right, Beppu-kun?” the Cotton King asked a young clerk, slapping the fellow on the back. The clerk held back a grimace and smiled.

“T-that's exactly right, Your Majesty.”

The tour was to move to the mansion's gardens though Kohaku lingered behind. She had a question to ask the clerk but couldn't do so in the Cotton King's presence.

“What's the conversion rate between ryō and wado?”

“Er, I, uh...that is...” the clerk hesitated, looking around for any and every excuse to be elsewhere. Before he found one, however, Kohaku grabbed him by the collar and pulled him halfway over the counter.

“Gold to copper! Tell me how much they're really making!”

“A...a thousand!” the clerk gasped out. “A thousand wado, to one ryō. That's the conversion rate. Nobody actually exchanges their currency, though.”

Kohaku released the young man and brought her hand to her forehead. She had a growing headache from calculating just how little these people were earning. Ten wado a day meant one hundredth of a ryō, which made for less than four a year. That was practically poverty—making it no surprise that no one opted to convert.

Which meant the Cotton King had a monopoly over every product they bought and every service they used. *“This is slavery, though with a few extra steps involved,”* Kohaku thought to herself. *“I need to free these ranchers from this prison, but how?”*

That thought occupied Kohaku all through the gardens where the other ladies were busy admiring the Cotton King’s collection of irises, roses, morning glories and lavenders. They were pretty, the samurai supposed, but she personally preferred wildflowers: those not grown by human hands, that sparkled their bright colors across the golden fields of the Westlands. The thought was more romantic than it had any right to be, but it was fitting considering the Cotton King’s next test.

“The art of flower arrangin’ was one of my late mother’s dearest passions,” the king said, wiping a tear that threatened to fall from his eye. “And so shall it be among my future wife’s. Each of you are tasked with fixin’ up a display to depict our eternal love. You have free range of the grounds for the next hour—then the judgements will be held!”

Kohaku resisted the urge to roll her eyes. While the other competitors rushed to the flowers like dew to grass, the samurai couldn’t care less. She snuck out at the first opportunity with the excuse of ‘seeking inspiration’ from within the Cotton King’s mansion.

She passed through a ballroom, a music room, several large halls and libraries, too. These were all grand displays of wealth—a hundred times so, considering that luxuries were so rare in the Westlands. It was impressive but less so knowing it was made off the backs of ranchers, paid in coins that didn’t have a real value.

“Speaking of coins,” Kohaku speculated, *“I need to find where he’s keeping all the wado. To make it the local currency, he must’ve collected them from all over Hyuga.”*

The samurai expected the vault to be difficult to find and near impossible to enter without taking down a squad of guardsmen. But she found it within the Cotton King’s coin museum—and the only one else present was, well, something of a friend.

“Susumu!” Kohaku shouted in a whisper. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, it’s you!” the sheriff said, much louder, seemingly jolly and definitely drunk. “Me ‘an the other drivers have been shootin’ the breeze with a bit of—*hiccup—*booze. Did a lot of reminiscin’ on their ole ranching days—you know it is. They’re full time riders, now, makin’ all manner of deliveries to keep this here mansion afloat!”

“I’m sure that’s interesting, but I need your help right now. Where’s Tatsuya-kun and the stagecoach?”

With more than a little hassle, Kohaku was able to rope Susumu into bringing the horses around the back of the mansion and help her load up barrels filled with the ancient, copper coins. They were incredibly heavy but there weren't as many as Kohaku expected; it seemed that the workers rarely saved their earnings, which meant the coins were in constant circulation.

But more surprising was the lack of security. If the samurai had to guess, it was because of the accounts each worker had at the Company Store. Knowing the earnings of each of his employees, it would be a simple matter for the Cotton King to detect if someone was spending above their means. His security force was nothing more than diligent paperwork.

"The Cotton King is the sort of foe these ranchers could never have prepared for," Kohaku said to the sheriff, both of them driving the half-broken stagecoach to the warehouse. It was nearly fully broken by the time they got there—what with the weight from all the coins in the carriage—but it had done its job. "He exploited good and honest folk...sold them the very dreams he stole. I have no regrets in doing this!"

'This' being the destruction of thousands of wado coins. They were collector's items: a part of Hyugan history, and it was with no small amount of grief that Kohaku resigned herself to their destruction. What she was doing was dangerous and foolish, and her companion said as much though with many more Western idioms and slang.

"Your balderdash is diggin' us into a right hole—one deep enough to be our graves, I reckon! I do think you're a right lassie, Koha-chan, but I ain't a-plannin' on gettin' buried with ya. The Cotton King may be belying through the brush, but that don't mean I want to get my neck sized up for a noose! Reckon this is where we part ways."

"...I understand," Kohaku said, unhitching the sheriff's horse. She pretended not to be affected by the loss of her companion—though in truth, it hit her like a blow to gut she hadn't seen coming. Susumu was a self-serving coward and the opposite of what a sheriff should be, yet he offered nice company and good conversation. Speaking to him had been like a glimpse into Kohaku's past, and that included her father.

Alone but undaunted, the samurai unloaded the barrels of coins and rolled them over to the vats where the pesticides fermented. The acid that the Cotton King was spraying on his fields was strong enough to erode copper; Kohaku recalled as much from when she had spoken to the ex-rancher in the fields earlier.

"Hyeeeeeh!" the samurai grunted, heaving the first barrel into the acid. The liquid burned when it splashed against her skin, and the silk kimono she was wearing was certain to be ruined. *"Mother will never forgive me for this,"* Kohaku thought, as she continued to dump one barrel in after another.

Her eyes began to burn along with her throat and lungs, too, as a gas shot out from a chemical reaction. Difficult as it was to see, she didn't notice the cotton picker until he was right behind her.

“What in tarnation are you doin’?!” he yelled. Kohaku turned right into a punch and earned a busted lip to show for it. The worker was familiar: he was Denji, the ex-rancher who had complimented her horse earlier. He proceeded to stuff his kimono with coins, grabbing them by the fistfuls. “This here’s enough to feed me for a lifetime! You’re a damn fool for tossin’ it away!”

“This money ain’t real, Denji!” Kohaku yelled, her anger bringing out her local accent. “You’ll never get rich using these coins. You’re a slave for the Cotton King—you’re just too damn stupid to see it!”

The two collided like a pair of bucks butting heads. Kohaku was a woman but a tall and sturdy one at that, and many times more fit than the cotton picker. That said, she was missing her katana and stripped of her armor. She also didn’t want to hurt Denji—though the same couldn’t be said the other way around. Though he wasn’t a rancher anymore, Denji still fought like one, using every underhanded trick possible to get an edge.

“Aaah!” Kohaku shouted in pain as her opponent stomped on her foot. It was enough of an opening for Denji to push Kohaku back—and with her back turned against the vat of pesticides, it was a dangerous spot to be in.

Kohaku could feel the chemical burns at the tips of her hair, now partially dunked inside the acid. Denji lunged forward to grab at her throat and then to lift the samurai up, trying to push her up and over. Embracing the rancher within her, Kohaku jammed up a knee in between Denji’s legs, sending him howling in pain.

Denji retreated, though not for long: he picked up a rake that was leaning against the wall and proceeded to swing it wildly. Kohaku’s long sleeves made for a tempting target and were shredded as she tried to defend herself. She shouted at the rancher to listen to reason, but Denji was out for blood.

Years of pent up frustration and humiliation from cotton picking on the very fields he once owned were all released in an untamed fury. He swung the rake down upon Kohaku’s head with rage in his eyes. All the samurai could do was hold up her arms and pray the rake’s teeth didn’t become nails in her skull.

THRACK

The blow landed—but it wasn’t the rake and the target wasn’t Kohaku’s head. It was a jitte: an iron club used by lawmen, and it had struck across the broadside of Denji’s neck.

“S-Susumu!” Kohaku gasped, before coughing from all the gas in the air. She nearly tripped over the floor as it was now littered with copper coins. Denji tripped as well—though he wasn’t so lucky, and the rake he held in his hands latched onto the top of the vat he was under. When he fell, it did, too, and the screams he gave would haunt Kohaku for the rest of her days.

“No! No!” the samurai yelled, trying to go back into the gas-filled chamber to save the man who had just tried to kill her. But she was pulled back—not just by a sheriff, but by a king as well.

The Cotton King was there, a look of disbelief on his face. The guards arrived shortly thereafter, trying and failing to put out the smoke and recover as many coins as possible. Only a handful of wado had survived at best. The job was done...but Kohaku was dead.

She closed her eyes and resigned herself to her fate.

“Lady Ko,” the king said, his heavy accent now absent, “arigato gozaimasu. Thank you for stopping this villain in the middle of his heinous scheme! The sheriff alerted me as to what was going on...but I fear we got here too late. I had spent two decades of my life gathering these wado from every corner of Hyuga, and now...they’re nothing but smoke and ash.”

It was Kohaku’s turn to be amazed. “I...that is, I only did what any lady would do.”

“Don’t sell yourself short!” said the Cotton King, who then turned to the other competitors—each of which held bouquets in their hands. “To fight and place oneself in danger for the sake of me and this plantation...*that* is the quality of a woman I wish to be my wife! Lady Ko has won my hand, as well as any gift she asks of me.”

“Anything at all?” Kohaku asked, not at all interested in marriage. “Then I would like a racehorse—the fastest in the Westlands. I want to win the ‘Westland Races’ next week at Nanbu Ranch.”

The Cotton King let out an audible gulp. His fake accent had made its return, too. “Well, see now that puts me in a right pickle. I did own such a horse, not but a few days ago, but I sold it away.”

“To who?” Kohaku demanded.

“To, er...well, a Kondo,” the king said, with more than a little reluctance. “The chieftain of the Stranded Stars, to be precise.”

Kohaku said nothing but nodded before letting out a whistle. Tatsuya came running to his master, who hopped on him and reared him up high. The horse let out a powerful neigh—he was eager to get a move on. “*That makes two of us, Tatsu-kun.*”

“W-wait just a cotton-pickin’ minute! Going into the savage lands will get you killed! As your future husband, I demand you—*WAAH!*” the Cotton King cried out as Tatsuya knocked him aside during his charge. His rider secured her katana at her hip and ventured forth.

“Come, Sheriff! We’ve got a chieftain to find!”

[Side Story #23: Kohaku’s Plantation \(Male Version\)](#)

[Jun 7, 2020](#)

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

Side Story 23: Kohaku's Plantation (Male Version)

■■ Western Hyuga ■■

"This just feels like drinkin' downstream from the herd, Koha-kun. It ain't smart...and it's leavin' a bad taste in my mouth, too!"

Sheriff Susumu of the Westlands had done nothing but complain and drag his feet for the past two days—which was quite the accomplishment on horseback. Between his incessant whining and the heat of the summer's sun, the journey to the Cotton King's plantation had been a trial unlike any other.

"We're not leaving until we find my mother's racehorse. I can't return to Lord Shatao in good conscience otherwise," said a samurai who was sweating beneath his armor. His name was Kohaku Nanbu—and though he was born in these prairies, his allegiance was on the opposite end of Hyuga. Samurai and ranchers rarely saw eye-to-eye, and having the blood of both had given Kohaku no shortage of trouble.

"I know you're insistent, but I'm sayin' that the long arm of the law don't reach quite this far. We're headin' up towards Kondo territory or close enough to it. The ranches that used to be here had no shortage of trouble, and it was only gettin' worse 'till the Cotton King came. He brought law an' order to this here region, so we lawmen leave him to it."

"Used to be you couldn't pass by these fields without seeing a hundred heads of cattle and twice as many horses. We haven't seen so much as a single steer so far," Kohaku replied, bringing his hand above his eyes as to look out across the overgrown pastures. "Abandoned barns, broken fences...whatever your king has done to this place, it isn't good."

With the lack of livestock around, nature had been busy reclaiming its roads. The tall grass was a feast for Tatsuya—Kohaku's horse—which meant the going was slow and interrupted by constant breaks for snacking. It didn't help that they were burdened with a week's worth of supplies more than they needed. Kohaku's mother hadn't allowed him to leave without stuffing his bags to the brim with all manners of clothing, accessories and knick-knacks.

"Times sure have a'changed out here. No denyin' that," Susumu said, letting out a wistful sigh. "I will admit to being curious about this plantation, though. They say it's like an island amid a sea of white. Can you figure that?"

Kohaku only shrugged as he looked over the remains of a stagecoach by the side of the road. It had been abandoned for at least a couple years, Kohaku wagered, with its red paint chipped and faded. The only real problem it had—as far as Kohaku could see—was a broken axel and a bent wheel. *“What a waste...who would throw it away instead of fixing it up? That’s not the rancher way at all.”*

And while most everything was in disrepair, a sign up ahead looked as old as the morning’s sunrise. It hung from chains beneath the overhanging branch of a large oak. Trees of its size were rare this deep in the Westlands, close to the deserts and canyons the wild Kondos called home. In many ways, this prairie was like an oasis at the last stop of civilization.

That stop introduced itself with large letters painted in white on black canvas.

“You now enter the Kingdom of Cotton,” Kohaku said, reading the words from afar. It was a grand sign that marked the start of the lands owned by the Cotton King. Even Kohaku’s steed Tatsuya knew they had entered somewhere strange: the road went from near non-existent, to pounded dirt, to gravel and then stone tiles.

“Woo-wee! Look at that there fence—and a tower, too!” said the sheriff before letting out a long whistle. “Enough to make the Emperor jealous, I reckon! Ain’t no group of savages gettin’ up there. You see those barbed wires?”

Kohaku grunted in reply. He took off his farmer’s hat made of straw and replaced it with his helmet made of iron. That gesture alone spoke volumes as to how the samurai felt about the Cotton King’s defenses. *“If it comes to a siege...”* he thought to himself, *“...I don’t like my chances.”*

Tatsuya was a good jumper—especially for a horse his size—but with the barbed wire strung across it, the fence was far too dangerous to put to the test. Any hope of sneaking into the place was dashed, but that was fine by Kohaku: subterfuge and infiltration were the tools of ninja, not samurai. He would employ more direct methods.

“Halt! Stay where you are!” came a shout from the tower above as Kohaku and Susumu neared the front gates. The gates themselves were incredibly large and ornately designed, and opened wide enough for a dozen horsemen to ride abreast. The trick was getting them open in the first place.

The man who shouted walked down a spiral staircase to greet them. He was far from welcoming, however, as he gave Kohaku and his full suit of armor a long stare. “Samurai aren’t allowed on the premises. Cotton King’s order.”

“My name is Kohaku of the Nanbu clan. I’m here to speak to your king. It is a matter of the law—isn’t that right, Sheriff?”

“O-oh, yes siree!” Susumu replied, removing his hat and showing off his necklace: a copper wado with a string through it. It was the badge of his office. “Now I know we’re barkin’ at a knot here, but we’ve got matters I’d like to settle with His Majesty sooner rather than later.”

The guardsman wasn't impressed. He pulled out a necklace of his own. It had the same ancient coin on it that the sheriff had. "Listen here, partner, every worker on the plantation wears one of these. We've got numbers of each of em'—and they're tied to our accounts at the Company Store. So I'll be needing more evidence than that if you really are the sheriff."

"Why...why that's a dag nabbit crock of cowpie and you know it!" Susumu shouted, his face growing red with anger. Being the sheriff was his greatest and only pride. "Everyone knows who I am—even out this far! You go tell your king that the Law is waitin' for him, you hear?!"

Kohaku was thankful, on some level, that a much-needed fire had been lit beneath his usually docile companion. That said, the guardsman wouldn't budge nor open the gates unless Susumu had official papers with the Imperial Seal on them. Which he did, however...

"Left 'em back at the jailhouse," he groaned in defeat. "Come on, Kohaku—we're wastin' daylight talkin to this mouthy son of a snake."

Just as the two were about to leave, a large figure emerged from the road down the way they came. Though it was blurred from the heat at a distance, as it got closer it revealed itself to be a stagecoach pulled by two black mares prodding along at a gentle pace. The coach was painted white and had an older driver who smoked a pipe as he drove by.

Inside was a man—perhaps the most peculiar one Kohaku had ever seen. He wore makeup, for starters, and what little hair he had on his chin was oiled and pointed. He wore a hat with a short brim and a tall top along with a buttoned tunic made of cloth in a fashion that was hardly Hyugan.

He didn't step foot out from the carriage, but instead pulled aside a curtain from behind the door frame to see what was the matter. He didn't like what he saw judging from his face, which contorted to one of disgust. He raised his head and looked down upon Susumu and Kohaku—no easy task, with the two of them on horseback.

"Out of my way, subjects. My dear future wife is waiting for me! Oh, I do hope the humidity hasn't spoiled my makeup! I knew I should've brought my mirror..." the man who fashioned himself as some sort of gentleman trailed off. Apparently he was here for a wedding interview with the Cotton King's only daughter, and he was hardly the only suitor contesting for her.

"That makes you the third one today," said the guard, who didn't bother to check his papers or identity. He hailed the other guards at the gate to open it up, and with a long creak—it did. "Come on in, sir. May His Majesty's daughter find you the most charming and refined of her admirers."

The gates shut loudly after the stagecoach passed through. The sound was one of failure and dejection which echoed throughout Kohaku's head as the two were turned away. Both Nanbu Ranch and the legacy of his father seemed destined to wither and die. Susumu had already uncorked his saké bottle and passed it to Kohaku to help drown his sorrows.

But saké tasted better after a job well done. And Kohaku had work to do.

"Well if this ain't a sour wad of tobacco in your teeth...I sure am sorry, Koha-kun. Looks as if this is where our little journey ends."

"Not quite, Sheriff," said Kohaku as he rummaged through the packs on the back of Tatsuya. Knowing his mother, he *must've* packed it. "I'm getting into that plantation—one way or another. If not with steel...

...then with silk," Kohaku grinned, holding up his birthday gift: a handsome green kimono.

■■■■

It had taken a half hour to recover the stagecoach from the ditch, a full one to repair it into working order, and then two to clean it and make it otherwise presentable. It was hard work under the sweltering summer sun, but the result was respectable.

"Have to hand it to you, Koha-kun. You dang well just have done it!" the sheriff shouted, slapping the stage coach and causing one of its doors to fall off its hinges. "Oops! I'll be gentler, I swear!"

Kohaku gave his companion a glare. "You better be. Now get dressed and hitch up the horses—we need to be as convincing as possible if we're going to make it through those gates."

The samurai let out a long sigh as he packed up everything that *made* his one: his helmet, chest piece, pauldrons, armguards, and leggings. He had to hide away his katana, too, which was nearly as painful as separating a limb. *"Even without this...I am still a samurai. But for now I must pretend otherwise."*

Kohaku slipped into the silk kimono like a glove...on a hand that was covered in blisters, that is. The fit wasn't the issue—although it ran tight around his developed shoulders and chest. The problem laid in its wearer: anything lighter than armor made the samurai feel naked. And silk was as light a material as they came.

"Now if you just ain't the most handsome feller this side of the Suijin Mountains! You might well swoon the Cotton King's daughter where she stands, I reckon!"

The samurai blushed at the sheriff's compliment, but seduction was far and away outside his area of expertise. He was more familiar with violence, but if all went according to plan, neither would be needed. Kohaku and Susumu would be in and out of the plantation with the racehorse in tow.

The thing about the Westlands, though, is that things never went according to plan.

Susumu took a creaky seat at the front of the stagecoach. The reigns holding his horse and Tatsuya in were flimsy to say the least, and any sudden jerk risked breaking apart the whole front of the carriage. Luckily, the horses were docile after feasting all morning and walked up to the gates without so much as a hitch.

"Halt," said the same guardsman from earlier. This was unlucky—Kohaku had been hoping for a change in shifts. While this man hadn't seen his face, he had seen the sheriff's. All that was keeping them from

being discovered was Susumu's disguise—a mud moustache—as well as his impromptu acting skills.

"I say, I say, what a swelterin' day this do be good sir!" said Susumu, in a clearly fake accent meant to mimic those of the gentleman earlier. "The gentleman is here to win the hand of the King's daughter, now if you be excusin' us—"

"You're a bit late for the interviews, but considerin' the condition of this carriage," the guard said, scrutinizing the wobbly front wheel, "it's a miracle you made it at all. Who's inside?"

"Why, that do be Lord Ko—"

"Lord Ko," Kohaku said, poking his head from out of the door. "Just...Lord Ko. I apologize for our tardiness. I hope our delay doesn't inconvenience His Majesty. Now—please let us pass promptly so that we don't leave him waiting any longer."

The guard was a skeptic at first, though after seeing the kimono Kohaku was wearing, with its elaborate design of butterflies and flowers, he was convinced. "The old style has its charms, that much is true. But to wear silk in this place...you're braver than most! Open the gates, boys!"

Only the loud creak of the gates could mask the breath Kohaku released inside the stagecoach. They entered what could only be described as a different world: the plains were flat, enough to see for miles, and each one of those were nothing but white. Rows and rows of cotton—like miniature clouds, puffed from out of the ground.

"The Sea of White," Susumu gasped. Kohaku left the inside of the carriage to sit beside the sheriff to get a better view. "Well, Koha-kun, we're neck deep in it now. This has to be the biggest farm the Westlands—hell, all of Hyuga, has ever known!"

Kohaku nodded, "It's impressive...but looks aren't everything." He pulled on Tatsuya's reins to stop him as they neared a field hand. The older man's back was bent and was in pain, too, judging from the grimace on his face. He had a large sack draped over his shoulder and the same necklace the guardsman at the front gate wore.

He spared the two of them a glance but quickly darted his eyes down in shame. Though before he continued his cotton picking, he spotted Tatsuya—and the sight gave him pause. He stood straighter as his smile wide grew to reach his ears.

"Heck of a horse you've got there—Nanbu stock, fit for war I'd say! And look at that shine on his coat...he's well groomed, too," the field hand said as if he was reminiscing. In many ways he was, as he was once a rancher on the very lands he now toiled.

His name was Denji, though that was about as much as Kohaku could gather before he had to continue his work. If he didn't meet his quota, he said, he was going to bed hungry. Yet there was something Kohaku couldn't ignore.

"Your hands," he said, grabbing the cotton picker's arms, "what happened to them? You've got sores all over—almost like a leper's."

"It's the chemicals," Denji replied, pulling away and continuing his work. "Keeps the bugs off the cotton. You get used to 'em after awhile."

"Used to them?! Look at your copper wado—it's damn near eroded!" Kohaku yelled. "You're poisoning yourself, working in these fields! You have to—"

"My, my, how unbecoming," said a man's voice from afar. It was the same one from inside the carriage earlier. He was fanning himself off with one hand and combing through his chin hairs with the other. "It would seem my newest competitor is even more uncouth than the others, hohoho! And that kimono of yours...my good man, what daring you have to wear something so gaudy!"

As much as Kohaku wanted to ignore the man—who introduced himself as Suzuki—he was forced into something resembling polite conversation with him on the carriage ride to the mansion. Pretending to cordial and withstanding the series of poorly-hidden insults was a trial in mental fortitude. The samurai had gained a new respect for the Emperor, who had a court filled of 'socialites' just like this one.

The samurai all but flung himself out of the carriage when they arrived. It was mistaken for eagerness. The staff—which consisted mostly of women wearing white, frilly uniforms—bowed and escorted Kohaku to the tearoom in the east wing.

The fact that the mansion had an east wing in the first place was a testament to its size. While it was in the Hyugan style, it was only structurally so: not a single tile of tatami could be seen on the floor. That was because every inch of it was covered in carpet—of various designs and colors. The walls, too, were not immune as elaborate tapestries hung down from them. Combined with the curtains and the furniture, too, Kohaku began to feel as if he had been rolled up inside a rug.

"Quiet, gentlemen, for I have fetched our most fearsome suitor yet!" said Suzuki with a chuckle. The other men present responded in kind. "May I introduce Lord Ko—whose sense of fashion may resemble your grandfather's!"

Kohaku bit his tongue while enduring the laughter of hyenas. He would've likened himself to a lion, but in truth, he was de-fanged without his katana at his side. The rude remarks mostly came in the form of backhanded compliments: the scars on his face, the muscles on his arms, the broadness of his shoulders—traits that any samurai would value were looked down upon and ridiculed.

"*These men are hardly such*," Kohaku concluded, yet he still couldn't help but grow self-conscious among them. It was a relief when the Cotton King made his appearance.

And what an appearance it was. He wore a white foreign suit, unfortunately form-fitting to the large curves of his protruding stomach. Atop his head was a matching hat with a short brim and whose height made the king look half-again as tall as he was. He had several rolls of fat beneath his chin and his

complexion was a constant shade of red. His moustache was in a style unlike any Kohaku had seen: it stretched out from both sides and connected to his sideburns.

He was so peculiar that Kohaku had nearly forgotten to bow in his presence.

“Well, well, well,” he started, his voice heavy with a drawl, “you gents are lookin’ mighty dapper down here. I would apologize for leavin’ you all waiting this morning, but that there was the first test. Patience and fortitude—these are virtues of any man who wishes to wed my darling Hanami-chan!”

It seemed that Kohaku had arrived just in time, and that these marriage interviews were to be done all at once, in a competitive style. This was both an advantage and disadvantage for the misplaced samurai—he wouldn’t be scrutinized as much, but his lack of ‘refinement’ would be more evident in comparison.

The group—there were five of them, including the king, sat around a circular table as tea was served. His daughter Hanami wouldn’t be joining them, it seemed, as the king had to personally confirm each man’s quality before they were allowed in her company. With no desire for marriage, Kohaku focused on what was in front of him—namely, a plate of mochi cakes.

“A true gentleman has a healthy appetite,” the Cotton King remarked as Kohaku downed his third cake. That would be the last he’d get to eat before the other gentlemen took to them like crows on carrion. Kohaku took a sip of tea to help clear his throat but it would never get there; it was so sickeningly sweet he spat it out, nearly getting it on the king.

The others gasped as if he had killed him.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” Kohaku stood up and bowed. “But that tea...it is horrendously sweet. How anyone could drink it is beyond me.”

The Cotton King merely chuckled as he pulled out a handkerchief to clean himself off. “Lord Ko, you said your name was? I do believe you have passed the second test. This ‘tea’ is more sugar than water, and any honest man would tell you as much. Truth-tellin’ is a virtue that must come before all others, you see.”

Kohaku nodded even if he didn’t fully understand. Still, the spiteful gazes from his competitors was all the evidence he needed to know he had done well. The group then proceeded to take turns asking questions to the Cotton King, each more inane and trivial than the last.

The samurai had learned that the king had three brothers, all younger, with the youngest named Anzai—who was a prolific shogi player in Tonogasha. The king had a childhood dog named Tamotsu, his favorite dessert was manju made from chestnut-flavored bean paste, and his favorite color was alabaster white.

“How many workers do you employ, and among them, how many were ranchers local to this region?” Kohaku asked when it was finally his turn. The serious question caused the tearoom chatter to quiet. “The fencing at the front gate is impressive, but there’s not enough wood in the Westlands to span the

acreage of the entire plantation. How is it then that you've managed to defend yourself against the wild Kondo tribes?"

The Cotton King chuckled though he didn't give an immediate response. Instead he wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief and gestured to an ornament on the wall. It was an old coin within a golden frame.

"See that there, Lord Ko? That coin to you may be worth less than a paperweight. But to me—to a collector of such things, who can appraise its true value...it is worth as much as all the cotton picked in the world! It's centuries old, bears a language unknown to any, and made from a copper not like any found in Hyuga. It is indeed a mystery of our past—no mere paperweight, you see!"

The Cotton King laughed and Kohaku's competitors laughed with him. "Just like that coin, those savage dirtskins don't know the true value of my cotton. They only care about horses and cattle—bah!"

There was something akin to wisdom in the Cotton King's words, Kohaku thought, but common sense made him a skeptic. This land was still the most fertile and flat for miles, and even if it wasn't a proper ranch—it housed over two hundred people, including workers, their wives and children. They had to be self-sufficient if they were going to survive so far from civilization.

"They have to be growing their own food. Otherwise they'd all starve," the samurai concluded. *"I need to see more of this plantation to figure out what's going on."*

"Excuse me," Kohaku said, interrupting a rival in the middle of a personal story. "But I was wondering if we could look around the plantation. It's bound to be more interesting than drinking tea all day."

"A tour of the grounds! What a splendid idea," the Cotton King praised. Suzuki—the socialite Kohaku had suffered through earlier—nodded and agreed. He wore a smile that hardly reached his eyes as he gave Kohaku a sneer. It wasn't the samurai's fault that the gentleman's smalltalk was so boring.

The tour began on the cotton fields closest to the mansion, where the Cotton King proceeded to go into detail on how the seeds were sown, how often the plants were watered, and then the act of picking itself. As a sort of tour group activity, each man got to pick some. The nearby workers smiled and gave their greetings, and continued their labor with a jolly humming and a pep in their step—at least when their king was around.

"This coating around the cotton," Kohaku said, rubbing his fingers together, "what is it exactly? Some sort of chemical?"

"Why, no need to tell you," the Cotton King chuckled, "when I can show you instead! Let's get a move on to the warehouse!"

The second stop was indeed the warehouse—the largest Kohaku had ever seen. It had originally been the barn of a rancher though had since been expanded out several times its size in either direction. It was where the wives of the cotton pickers worked, Kohaku realized, as he spotted a group of three

dozen on benches surrounded by piles of cotton stacked high enough to shadow the workers beneath them.

"These lovely ladies are responsible for keepin' them leaves and stems out of our yarn. They comb out the tangled fibers, too, then weave them together to make 'em nice and ready for tailorin'!"

"Why are some of them isolated from the others?" Kohaku asked.

"Oh, that there's a motivational technique. Gals who don't meet their quotas are separated: less chitchattin' on the job means they can focus on gettin' their numbers back up! Ain't I thought of everything?"

The rest of the tour group agreed with him, showering him with praises for his ingenuity. Kohaku thought it was cruel—but not so bad as the sores all on their fingers. He reminded the king about the chemicals and the tour continued to a room with giant vats that smelled like the spray of a wet skunk.

The gentlemen each held handkerchiefs to their noses as the Cotton King proceeded to explain. "This here's my ole secret weapon against fleas! It's a pesticide—a fancy way of sayin' that it keeps my cotton safe from bugs and other critters, too. The recipe's a family secret: if you're anxious to know it, then you better win my girl's favor!"

"Coating your crops with some kind of acid...wouldn't that harm your workers, Your Majesty?"

"Hmph!" Suzuki replied, giving Kohaku a scowl. "I declare, what a foolish supposition! His Kingship is as wise as his heart is kind—a truly refined man we all look up upon. Now, dear king, let us move on towards a more...pleasant part of the tour."

And with that, the group moved on to the Company Store. It was the largest general store Kohaku had seen, fastened with stalls that seemed to stretch on forever. They were filled with a remarkable amount of meat, produce, essentials and sundries. Everything from blankets to booze was stocked on the shelves.

As for the employees, there was a butcher on staff as well as a blacksmith and a tailor, too, along with a team of clerks working the counters. It was like a miniature town complete with a bar, a medical ward, and even a barber shop. It was an impressive establishment and the king's flatters certainly let him know it.

But as they were singing his praises, Kohaku was more concerned with the prices. "This box of nails is priced at two. Two ryō is awfully expensive, don't you think?"

"Hoho! An eye for prices—a shrewd businessman is always a welcome addition to the family!" the Cotton King said with a chuckle. "But that there price ain't in ryō. We use wado here—the currency the rest of Hyuga has forgot! Considerin' the average wage of one of my workers, at or about ten wado a day, the prices here are more than reasonable!"

"If you pay them in wado instead of ryō...then their money is useless everywhere else. What if they need to buy something this store doesn't have?"

"Why, but they can always convert to ryō, of course! Ain't that right, Beppu-kun?" the Cotton King asked a young clerk, slapping the fellow on the back. The clerk held back a grimace and smiled.

"T-that's exactly right, Your Majesty."

The tour was to move to the mansion's gardens though Kohaku lingered behind. He had a question to ask the clerk but couldn't do so in the Cotton King's presence.

"What's the conversion rate between ryō and wado?"

"Er, I, uh...that is..." the clerk hesitated, looking around for any and every excuse to be elsewhere. Before he found one, however, Kohaku grabbed him by the collar and pulled him halfway over the counter.

"Gold to copper! Tell me how much they're really making!"

"A...a thousand!" the clerk gasped out. "A thousand wado, to one ryō. That's the conversion rate. Nobody actually exchanges their currency, though."

Kohaku released the young man and brought his hand to his forehead. He had a growing headache from calculating just how little these people were earning. Ten wado a day meant one hundredth of a ryō, which made for less than four a year. That was practically poverty—making it no surprise that no one opted to convert.

Which meant the Cotton King had a monopoly over every product they bought and every service they used. *"This is slavery, though with a few extra steps involved,"* Kohaku thought to himself. *"I need to free these ranchers from this prison, but how?"*

That thought occupied Kohaku all through the gardens where the other gentlemen were busy admiring the Cotton King's collection of irises, roses, morning glories and lavenders. They were pretty, the samurai supposed, but he personally preferred wildflowers: those not grown by human hands, that sparkled their bright colors across the golden fields of the Westlands. The thought was more romantic than it had any right to be, but it was fitting considering the Cotton King's next test.

"The art of flower arrangin' was one of my late mother's dearest passions," the king said, wiping a tear that threatened to fall from his eye. "My daughter Hanami-chan always looked forward to receiving her gifts. So too, then, will you gentlemen give her yours. You are tasked with fixin' up a display that shows just what sort of man you are. You have free range of the grounds for the next hour—then the judgements will be held!"

Kohaku resisted the urge to roll his eyes. While the other competitors rushed to the flowers like dew to grass, the samurai couldn't care less. He snuck out at the first opportunity with the excuse of 'seeking

inspiration' from within the Cotton King's mansion.

He passed through a ballroom, a music room, several large halls and libraries, too. These were all grand displays of wealth—a hundred times so, considering that luxuries were so rare in the Westlands. It was impressive but less so knowing it was made off the backs of ranchers, paid in coins that didn't have a real value.

"Speaking of coins," Kohaku speculated, "I need to find where he's keeping all the wado. To make it the local currency, he must've collected them from all over Hyuga."

The samurai expected the vault to be difficult to find and near impossible to enter without taking down a squad of guardsmen. But he found it within the Cotton King's coin museum—and the only one else present was, well, something of a friend.

"Susumu!" Kohaku shouted in a whisper. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, it's you!" the sheriff said, much louder, seemingly jolly and definitely drunk. "Me 'an the other drivers have been shootin' the breeze with a bit of—*hiccup—*booze. Did a lot of reminiscin' on their ole ranching days—you know it is. They're full time riders, now, makin' all manner of deliveries to keep this here mansion afloat!"

"I'm sure that's interesting, but I need your help right now. Where's Tatsuya-kun and the stagecoach?"

With more than a little hassle, Kohaku was able to rope Susumu into bringing the horses around the back of the mansion and help him load up barrels filled with the ancient, copper coins. They were incredibly heavy but there weren't as many as Kohaku expected; it seemed that the workers rarely saved their earnings, which meant the coins were in constant circulation.

But more surprising was the lack of security. If the samurai had to guess, it was because of the accounts each worker had at the Company Store. Knowing the earnings of each of his employees, it would be a simple matter for the Cotton King to detect if someone was spending above their means. His security force was nothing more than diligent paperwork.

"The Cotton King is the sort of foe these ranchers could never have prepared for," Kohaku said to the sheriff, both of them driving the half-broken stagecoach to the warehouse. It was nearly fully broken by the time they got there—what with the weight from all the coins in the carriage—but it had done its job. "He exploited good and honest folk...sold them the very dreams he stole. I have no regrets in doing this!"

'This' being the destruction of thousands of wado coins. They were collector's items: a part of Hyugan history, and it was with no small amount of grief that Kohaku resigned himself to their destruction. What he was doing was dangerous and foolish, and his companion said as much though with many more Western idioms and slang.

"Your balderdash is diggin' us into a right hole—one deep enough to be our graves, I reckon! I do think you're a right feller, Koha-kun, but I ain't a-plannin' on gettin' buried with ya. The Cotton King may be bellying through the brush, but that don't mean I want to get my neck sized up for a noose! Reckon this is where we part ways."

"...I understand," Kohaku said, unhitching the sheriff's horse. He pretended not to be affected by the loss of his companion—though in truth, it hit him like a blow to gut he hadn't seen coming. Susumu was a self-serving coward and the opposite of what a sheriff should be, yet he offered nice company and good conversation. Speaking to him had been like a glimpse into Kohaku's past, and that included his father.

Alone but undaunted, the samurai unloaded the barrels of coins and rolled them over to the vats where the pesticides fermented. The acid that the Cotton King was spraying on his fields was strong enough to erode copper; Kohaku recalled as much from when he had spoken to the ex-rancher in the fields earlier.

"Hyeeeeeh!" the samurai grunted, heaving the first barrel into the acid. The liquid burned when it splashed against his skin, and the silk kimono he was wearing was certain to be ruined. *"Mother will never forgive me for this,"* Kohaku thought, as he continued to dump one barrel in after another.

His eyes began to burn along with his throat and lungs, too, as a gas shot out from a chemical reaction. Difficult as it was to see, he didn't notice the cotton picker until he was right behind him.

"What in tarnation are you doin'?!" he yelled. Kohaku turned right into a punch and earned a busted lip to show for it. The worker was familiar: he was Denji, the ex-rancher who had complimented his horse earlier. He proceeded to stuff his kimono with coins, grabbing them by the fistfuls. "This here's enough to feed me for a lifetime! You're a damn fool for tossin' it away!"

"This money ain't real, Denji!" Kohaku yelled, his anger bringing out his local accent. "You'll never get rich using these coins. You're a slave for the Cotton King—you're just too damn stupid to see it!"

The two collided like a pair of bucks butting heads. Kohaku was the younger man and certainly fitter, but he was without his katana and his armor as well. He also didn't want to hurt Denji—though the same couldn't be said the other way around. Though he wasn't a rancher anymore, Denji still fought like one, using every underhanded trick possible to get an edge.

"Aaah!" Kohaku shouted in pain as his opponent stomped on his foot. It was enough of an opening for Denji to push Kohaku back—and with his back turned against the vat of pesticides, it was a dangerous spot to be in.

Kohaku could feel the chemical burns at the tips of his hair, now partially dunked inside the acid. Denji lunged forward to grab at his throat and then to lift the samurai up, trying to push him up and over. Embracing the rancher within him, Kohaku jammed up a knee in between Denji's legs, sending him howling in pain.

Denji retreated, though not for long: he picked up a rake that was leaning against the wall and proceeded to swing it wildly. Kohaku's long sleeves made for a tempting target and were shredded as

he tried to defend himself. He shouted at the rancher to listen to reason, but Denji was out for blood.

Years of pent up frustration and humiliation from cotton picking on the very fields he once owned were all released in an untamed fury. He swung the rake down upon Kohaku's head with rage in his eyes. All the samurai could do was hold up his arms and pray the rake's teeth didn't become nails in his skull.

THRACK

The blow landed—but it wasn't the rake and the target wasn't Kohaku's head. It was a jitte: an iron club used by lawmen, and it had struck across the broadside of Denji's neck.

"S-Susumu!" Kohaku gasped, before coughing from all the gas in the air. He nearly tripped over the floor as it was now littered with copper coins. Denji tripped as well—though he wasn't so lucky, and the rake he held in his hands latched onto the top of the vat he was under. When he fell, it did, too, and the screams he gave would haunt Kohaku for the rest of his days.

"No! No!" the samurai yelled, trying to go back into the gas-filled chamber to save the man who had just tried to kill him. But he was pulled back—not just by a sheriff, but by a king as well.

The Cotton King was there, a look of disbelief on his face. The guards arrived shortly thereafter, trying and failing to put out the smoke and recover as many coins as possible. Only a handful of wado had survived at best. The job was done...but Kohaku was dead.

He closed his eyes and resigned himself to his fate.

"Lord Ko," the king said, his heavy accent now absent, "arigato gozaimasu. Thank you for stopping this villain in the middle of his heinous scheme! The sheriff alerted me as to what was going on...but I fear we got here too late. I had spent two decades of my life gathering these wado from every corner of Hyuga, and now...they're nothing but smoke and ash."

It was Kohaku's turn to be amazed. "I...that is, I only did what any gentleman would do."

"Don't sell yourself short!" said the Cotton King, who then turned to the other competitors—each of which held bouquets in their hands. "To fight and place oneself in danger for the sake of me and this plantation...*that* is the quality of a man I wish to marry my daughter! Lord Ko has won the hand of my Hanami-chan, as well as any dowry he asks of me."

"Anything at all?" Kohaku asked, not at all interested in marriage. "Then I would like a racehorse—the fastest in the Westlands. I want to win the 'Westland Races' next week at Nanbu Ranch."

The Cotton King let out an audible gulp. His fake accent had made its return, too. "Well, see now that puts me in a right pickle. I did own such a horse, not but a few days ago, but I sold it away."

"To who?" Kohaku demanded.

"To, er...well, a Kondo," the king said, with more than a little reluctance. "The chieftain of the Stranded Stars, to be precise."

Kohaku said nothing but nodded before letting out a whistle. Tatsuya came running to his master, who hopped on him and reared him up high. The horse let out a powerful neigh—he was eager to get a move on. *"That makes two of us, Tatsu-kun."*

"W-wait just a cotton-pickin' minute! Going into the savage lands will get you killed! As your future father-in-law, I demand you—*WAAH!*" the Cotton King cried out as Tatsuya knocked him aside during his charge. His rider secured his katana at his hip and ventured forth.

"Come, Sheriff! We've got a chieftain to find!"

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

[Jun 7, 2020](#)

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 (+8)

4%

Borgia, the butler (+3)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+8)

0%

Gensai, the swordmaster (+0)

24%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+6)

0%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+33)

10%

Keiko, the maid (+12)

2%

Kohaku, the samurai (+0)

2%

Kuniko, the farmer (+21)

4%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+11)

14%

Momoko, the doctor (+0)

2%

Nishi, the yakuza (+21)

6%

Satsuma, the emperor (+16)

10%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+17)

22%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+10)

2%

Poll ended Jun 30, 2020 · 51 votes total

[Stats & Stuff](#)

[Jun 10, 2020](#)

In choicegames, there's a 'stats screen' detailing information about your character. In Samurai of Hyuga, it's a single page with your attunement and personality stats. Some choicegames have submenus with glossaries, relationship stats, journal entries and so on.

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%



What sort of setup do you prefer?

I prefer the minimalistic, single-page setup!

I don't really have a favorite method, whatever the author uses is fine.

I prefer navigating through menus and submenus!

112 votes total

[MC #10's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Jun 11, 2020](#)

The design for MC #10 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Feminine, Chivalrous**

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

Short (+0)

3%

Long (+18)

53%

Ponytail (+3)

19%

Chonmage (+2)

8%

Long bangs (+14)

17%

Poll ended Jun 15, 2020 · 36 votes total

[MC #10 Face Art](#)

[Jun 30, 2020](#)

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 Huan Lim ([twitter](#), [artstation](#))!

This month's build: **Feminine, Chivalrous, Long hair**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



Also, a heads-up: starting in July (next month) Patreon is being forced to add a sales tax to all tiers. I've tried to minimize it as much as possible on my end, but depending on your country, the tiers may be a bit more expensive going forward.

[MC #11's Face Poll: 1/3](#)

[Jul 1, 2020](#)

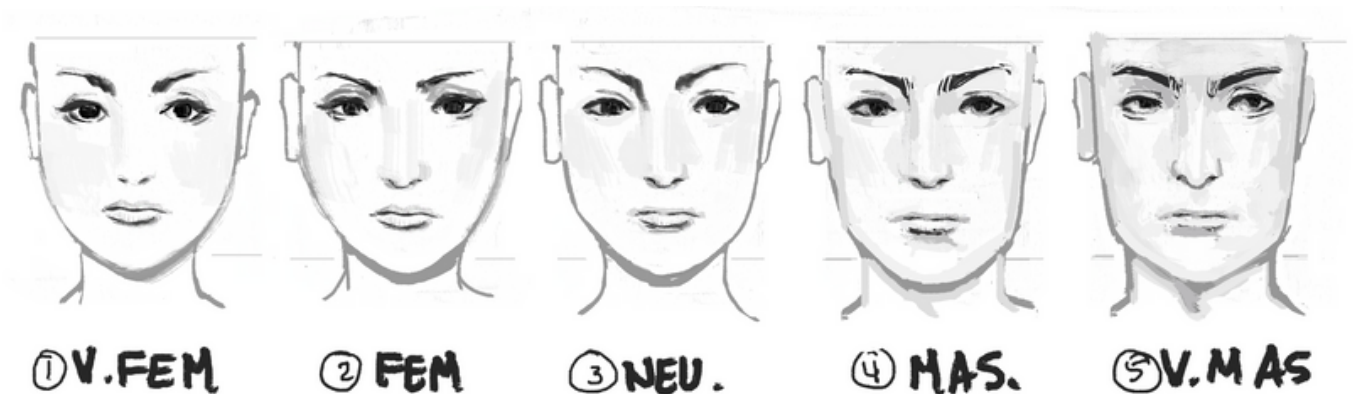
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+3)

3%

Feminine (+0)

14%

Neutral (+1)

11%

Masculine (+13)

25%

Very masculine (+26)

47%

Poll ended Jul 5, 2020 · 36 votes total

[MC #11's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Jul 6, 2020](#)

The design for MC #11 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 masculine**

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

Impulsive (+4)

0%

Calculated (+8)

0%

Perverted (+1)

10%

Chivalrous (+0)

0%

Charming (+28)

41%

Stoic (+1)

3%

Drifter (+19)

26%

Protective (+2)

5%

Brutal (+3)

8%

Finesse (+15)

8%

Poll ended Jul 10, 2020 · 39 votes total

[Side Story #24: Ige's Apprenticeship](#)

[Jul 7, 2020](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place during the events of Book 2.>



Side Story 24: Ige's Apprenticeship



■■ Tonogasha ■■

"For spirits' sake! Does *anybody* around here know how to *swing* a sword?!"

Tryouts for the upcoming production at the White Peach kabuki theater were going poorly. The Headmistress vented her frustrations by way of an oversized paper fan, smacking it across the faces of the would-be replacements. None of those faces were half as handsome as Hanshirō the Third's—the theater's leading man—who had been put out of commission due to...extraneous circumstances.

That was the official reason, anyway. The real one had to do with multiple geisha and a venereal disease.

Ige, a stagehand, ignored the commotion as he busied himself with a paint brush and a paper panel several times his size. This was to be a backdrop depicting a midnight bridge scene. *The Legend of the Heike Warrior Crab* would be the White Peach's most ambitious performance yet, but morale among the staff was low without Hanshirō's presence. Still, Ige kept himself busy to keep his mind from wandering as it often did these days.

His idle thoughts always seemed to be centered around a certain someone.

"Oh Ige-kun, you've got a letter!" yelled the choreography instructor from backstage. "To think you're already getting love letters from fans...they grow up so fast!" he teased. Of course, stagehands like Ige didn't have fans: they were out of sight and out of mind, working behind the scenes to make sure everything ran smoothly.

So it was exceptionally odd for anyone to send a letter addressed to him to the White Peach. The oddity was enough to draw several crew members until they learned the letter was from Keiko—then the group grew to two dozen. Keiko had been a sweetheart among the staff, her natural ditziness making for great comedy both onstage and off.

Everyone was heartbroken over her sudden departure—Ige most of all. Embarrassing as it was, he was pressured to read the message aloud. Keiko wrote about her current employment, how she missed everyone, and when she was visiting next.

"Serving as a maid to a foreign lord on a private island? It's like a fantasy!" an actress remarked. "That mansion sounds like paradise...we'll be lucky if she ever comes back!"

"The Gion Float Festival is only a few weeks away," said the choreographer. "Ige! That'll be your chance. You *must* convince her to return to us! Oh, damn that foul Anzai character—harassing our girl and causing her to run off like that!"

The rest of the group nodded in unison. Word of Anzai's behavior and propositioning towards Keiko had spread throughout the White Peach. The silk merchant had been banned, shunned and shamed, yet no recourse was enough to bring their darling actress back.

"Ah, I'll try," Ige said, his cheeks going red as he put away the letter inside his kimono. To his relief, the Headmistress began yelling and ordering everyone to get back to work. Ige did likewise, of course, but thoughts of Keiko were even more constant than before.

"Can I really convince her to come back? Whoever this 'Roderico' is...do I really have a chance against him? I'm just a wimpy stagehand, after all..." Ige thought, his internal monologue not doing his mood any favors. He was well and truly depressed by the time his shift was over.

In no hurry to head back home, he took the scenic route through the gardens and streets around the outskirts of town. Tonogasha was most beautiful after midnight, when the wisterias were in bloom and all was quiet save for the buzzing of distant cicadas.

At least that was the case on most nights. This one was different: a group of men armed with katanas and clothed in light-blue kimonos shouted and ran beneath the moonlight. They were the Shinsengumi—the Emperor’s most elite samurai—and they were in search of someone. Not daring to get in their way, Ige ducked into an alley in hopes of hiding.

“Ah!” he yelled as he collided with someone doing just the same. Before he could apologize, the stranger he bumped into placed his hand across Ige’s mouth. His palm was sweaty and dirty along with the rest of him, Ige noticed. The man was in his mid-twenties and remarkably handsome despite his unsettled appearance.

His eyes were wide in fear, his breathing was ragged and his kimono was ripped in a hundred places. Odder still, his robes were the same shade of light-blue with white mountain trim that his pursuers wore. He had a katana, too—as if Ige needed any more evidence. *“He’s a member of the Shinsengumi...so why’s he hiding from them?”*

All Ige could do was speculate as the group of samurai ran past them. Him and his disheveled companion let out a collective breath when it was safe to do so. The stagehand was about to exit stage left when the Shinsengumi runaway grabbed him and brought him close.

“Onegai...please, you must help me. They’ve been chasing me all the way from Yamato. I haven’t slept in days and I haven’t eaten in weeks—please, I need a place to stay!” he begged, falling to his knees. Whether he did so out of respect or exhaustion, Ige couldn’t say. He just knew this was trouble.

“Ah, well I, I don’t want to get involved,” Ige stuttered out, already midway into bowing and offering his apologies. When he did so, the letter from Keiko fell out.

The samurai was quick to snatch it up and inspect it, his bloodshot eyes beaming at the address. “The White Peach! The most underrated kabuki troupe of the past decade! Their performances of *The Shugenja and the White Snake* and *The Vengeance of Inugami* are modern day classics!”

“Ah, I assume you’re a fan of Hanshirō the Third, then?”

“I think he’s got continuity issues,” the samurai said, bringing his hand to his chin. His desperation was all but forgotten. “He gets tired easily, and in performances with early swordfights, his mie poses suffer tremendously in later acts. That and...he is difficult to take seriously as a swordsman, with his stances and sword grip being so inconsistent. Still, I imagine his family name alone brings in quite the audience.”

Ige caught himself nodding. These were insights beyond a mere amateur kabuki-goer. This odd samurai seemed to be quite a fan, but it was what he said next that won the stagehand over.

"More so than its onstage talent, what impresses me most about the White Peach is it's production. It's independent of the Yamato guilds and so its funds are limited, yet its backdrops, music and lighting are top quality! *Imperial* quality, even: I was blessed to be in attendance alongside the Emperor himself!"

Ige gasped and all but jumped out of his sandals. "You're lying—you must be! His Imperial Majesty has never been a patron to one of our plays. Though the Headmistress has certainly sent him plenty of invitations...he's never once accepted."

The alleyway samurai chuckled. "It was done in secrecy for his protection. I sat in the row behind him, and overheard how amused he was at how you were able to give a sound to snow falling. If my uniform is not evidence enough, I can prove my position by showing you my katana."

"T-that won't be necessary!" Ige said, waving his hands earnestly. The young standhand was overwhelmed—creating a sound for snow by beating a large drum with a stick wrapped in cloth has been *his* idea. For His Imperial Majesty to approve of it was...

"A dream come true! That's what this must be," the samurai said, clutching Ige's hands in his. "I have always dreamed of being a kabuki actor. Help me join the White Peach, and I will be forever in your debt! I'll take any role they offer—just get me on stage!"

Ige was overwhelmed by the man's passion, and—coupled with his natural empathy—couldn't abandon him in the streets. He agreed to help the samurai, but on one condition. "I'll need to know your name."

"From this point onward, I am...Saburo Honda!"

■■■■

To say that Saburo's presence at the White Peach the next morning caused a stir was an understatement. The samurai had cleaned up nicely: nice enough to draw the attention of the entire crew, the women and those otherwise attracted to beautiful men in particular. He had a natural presence that commanded both respect and attention.

"My goodness, Ige-kun, where *did* you find this thespian?" the choreographer asked, whispering to the stagehand as the two watched Saburo's audition. The samurai was performing Hanshirō's monologue during the final act of *The Shugenja and the White Snake*, and was doing so from memory. "Are you sure he's not acted before? We usually only get guild dropouts around here!"

Ige could only smile and shrug. Saburo had asked him not to reveal anything to the others: namely, that he was a member of the Shinsengumi on the run from that very same group. If anything, his mysterious origins only made him more appealing to his audience—an audience that was currently shouting accolades and giving him a standing ovation.

"Bravo, bravo! A flawless performance!"

"Oh, he's absolutely wondrous! A sensation in the making!"

“Please, Headmistress-sama, you must sign him at once!”

Every woman in the theater flocked to him after his performance—save for one. The Headmistress wore a scowl that only grew as the girls insisted that Saburo was a gift from the heavens. She scribbled a few notes on her pad of parchment and turned to Ige, who jumped at the sound of his name.

“Ige! Tell this ‘Subaru Hyundai’ what he did wrong.”

The stagehand let out a quick gasp as all eyes were suddenly on him. The ladies praising the new actor shielded him with their bodies as if to physically protect him from criticism.

“Ah, well,” Ige gulped, before speaking his mind, “your pacing could use some work, Saburo-san. Your lines had great emotion to them, but dialogue in kabuki requires many pauses throughout for musical accompaniment. Notations for string, wind and percussion instruments are—”

The stagehand was interrupted and verbally assaulted by Saburo’s newest group of fans. That Ige’s own coworkers—some of which he had known for years—turned against him so quickly was surprising. Unnerving, too.

“Ladies, please,” Saburo said, quieting them down. “Criticism is far and away more useful to me than flattery. What other changes would you recommend, Ige-senpai?”

Saburo’s humility drew even more approval from his admirers, of which the samurai-turned-actor all but ignored. Though Ige was only a stagehand, he tried his best to give all the pointers he could in the hours that followed. Saburo was a quick learner, eager to make changes to refine his craft. On that measure, he had already surpassed his predecessor.

The Headmistress noticed it too, and even admitted as much—but only to Ige later that evening in the privacy of her own office. She was idly picking at one of her warts while the stagehand fidgeted in the chair across from her desk.

“He’s got everything we could want: looks, poise, presence. Not to mention he can swing a katana like an Emperor’s bodyguard! But even with all that, there’s something he doesn’t have. Do you know what that is?” she asked, to which Ige could only shrug. “A name. He’s a nobody, Ige, and we don’t have the finances to float us until he gets popular. Anzai was one of our largest patrons. That Keiko girl of yours cost us—”

“This isn’t Keiko-chan’s fault!” Ige yelled, before realizing who he was speaking to. His eyes went wide with fear. Such a display of disrespect would earn him a hundred slaps from a wooden fan.

And though he braced for it, no such assault came. That was how serious the matter was.

“An unfortunate time to grow a backbone,” the Headmistress groaned. “This isn’t charity work, Ige. It’s business, and our merchandise sales are at an all-time low. If we can’t improve it and drive up ticket sales for this next performance...it’s going to be the White Peach’s last.”

Ige was shell-shocked; the Headmistress had never mentioned financial issues to him or any of the staff before. She preferred to handle that side of the theater all by herself. For her to confide in Ige must've meant the situation was dire.

The stagehand left the office with his head filled with newfound concerns. He was so preoccupied that he didn't even notice Saburo was standing there listening.

"Keiko-chan, huh..." Saburo smiled, before wrapping his arm around his new coworker. "I think I've figured out a way to repay you, Ige. Let's go get some tea."

■■■■

The Cloudreach Teahouse was named after its height: it was four stories tall with an open center for patrons to look down upon a beautifully-maintained garden of bonsai trees. The kabuki actor and stagehand sat at the top floor, overlooking the tables below.

Ige was anxious—but it wasn't from a fear of heights.

"See those two girls, there?" Saburo gestured. "They're sitting together but their eyes are wandering off. They're not here for conversation or tea. They're looking for a man to come over and approach them. Go ahead—it'll be good practice."

"Ah, ah, I couldn't!" Ige stammered out, nearly spitting out his beverage. He gulped it down and shook his head violently. "B-besides, there's already someone I...I have feelings for."

"Right, your Keiko-chan. The others told me about her," Saburo said, sipping his tea. "A creepy patron made advances on her and so she left...but I wonder. What if this 'Anzai' was more attractive, easier on the eyes and more charming? Would she have fled? Or would she have..."

"S-she's not that kind of person!" Ige replied, his cheeks growing red. "You don't know her, so please don't make such assumptions, Saburo-san!"

The samurai could only grin as he refilled his cup with tea. "You're right. But I do know women. Have you told her your feelings yet? No—the look on your face tells me everything. If you really want to win her over, then you have to audition for her the same as any role. So let me see your performance: talk to those girls down there."

Ige was beyond embarrassed; he felt naked with his secret feelings towards Keiko so exposed. He was upset at Saburo not just for insulting her but for reading him like a screenplay. The older man was many times more experienced with women than he was, and his advice made a strange sort of sense.

In a hurry to get this ordeal over with, the stagehand chugged down his cup and made his way down a set of stairs and across the other side of the teahouse. He felt Saburo's stare from across the venue as well as butterflies from inside his stomach. It was as if he was performing in front of a packed theater.

"That's all this is—a kabuki performance," Ige said, trying to reassure himself. "I'll just ask them how they're doing and tell them about the upcoming play."

That was the plan, anyway. Though he had his line prepared and memorized, by the time he reached their table and caught their attention, he had forgotten everything. Even how to breathe.

"Ah, um, well I," he stuttered out, the two girls looking at him as if he were some sort of rodent. The disgust on their faces was all too evident. "There's a kabuki performance...at the White Peach, *T-The Legend of the Heike Warrior Crab*, if you two are interested..."

"Yeah...no thanks. We already have boyfriends," one said, before the other giggled and they both proceeded with a fresh conversation. Ige was completely ignored, and hung his head in shame as he made his march back to Saburo. The samurai offered him a cup after he took his seat.

It wasn't tea, but something much stiffer that burned on the way down.

"I don't think you're going to get a callback with that sort of performance. Still, at least you made the attempt...even if you did everything wrong."

"You couldn't even hear us, though. How do you know what happened?"

Saburo made a series of mie poses with his hands, depicting shock, joy and then anger. "Most communication is not given through words, but physical presence. This was among the first lessons I learned as a swordsman, and that knowledge carries through to kabuki and women as well. Your back was slouched, your hands were in your pockets, and you scarcely looked them in the eyes. It didn't matter what you said: your body was screaming out to them. It told them that you are weak, pathetic, and very much a virgin."

Ige all but crumpled in his seat as Saburo continued with his lecture.

"Women are a hundred times more observant than us men are, Ige. It's not a skill they've trained; it's in their very nature: detecting the qualities of a potential mate is inherent within each of them. They're animals acting on instinct. That's all they are, and yet you're treating them like goddesses—like they're worthy of devotion and respect! The truth is...women don't want either."

"I don't...I don't want to worship anyone," Ige said in defeat. "I just want to treat them as equals."

Saburo slammed his fist into the table. "Urusai! You work as a stagehand to one of the greatest kabuki productions Hyuga has ever known! Even at your age, you're among the most important on the payroll! The Headmistress relies on you above everyone else to keep the production profitable...and yet you *dare* claim that these whores are your equal?!"

"But...that's not, they're not prostitutes," Ige said in a whisper. "They already have boyfriends, besides."

The new leading man of the White Peach took his leave with a confident swagger that only grew more so as he approached the pair of girls. He took a seat without invitation, and proceeded to chat as if they were already close friends. Ige couldn't hear anything, of course, but he could certainly see the night-and-day difference between his exchange and Saburo's.

For starters, the girls were in a gigglish uproar from the start. In just a few moments they began to cling to his arms, their eyes fixated on his. He took one's hair and ran it through his fingers, causing that one to blush and the other to grow green with envy. They chatted for a while more, during which time he drank from one of their cups and ate their last rice cake.

Instead of being outraged, they clung to him even more. He had to all but fight them off to make his exit. They looked after him longfully well after he was gone.

Ige couldn't believe it. What had just occurred was so different than his experience that he might as well have been a disfigured leper. Saburo's confidence and the girls' immediate intimacy with him...it was as undeniable as it was depressing.

The samurai returned to his seat, though instead of being pleased at himself for a successful flirt, he looked quite the opposite—cold and unamused, like he had just endured the company of maggots instead of two beautiful young ladies.

He pulled out two slips of paper from his sleeves and put them down in front of Ige. They were house addresses. One even had the imprint of a kiss on it. "Do you understand now, Ige? This is the value of a woman's love."

His words were filled with contempt and venom. The stagehand wondered what had happened to the samurai to turn him into such a spiteful person. Had been hurt in the past, damaged and twisted to become this jaded? It didn't make any sense to Ige, but his skill with women seemed to be tied with his distaste for them.

"Ah, well, thank you for taking me out, Saburo-san. It's been very...enlightening," the stagehand said, his shoulders slumped. He wasn't sure if he could ever be like Saburo was around women...or if he even wanted to.

"It hurts, doesn't it? To glimpse behind the mask they wear. Behind the makeup, the perfume and silk kimonos...is something ugly. Something manipulative and wicked. I've been a victim to their cruel game, and so I've learned how to play it and play it well," Saburo said, clutching his forehead into his hands. "Kanae-chan...how I wish I never saw beneath the mask you wore."

Ige didn't know who Kanae-chan was, only that her name was enough to prompt Saburo's shoulders to shake and his eyes to well with water. The stagehand knew he had to change the subject—luckily, the jaded samurai had just given him an idea.

"Masks! We can use masks as merchandise, or bundle it with ticket sales! The audience will love being part of the performance!" Ige shouted, his mind flowing with ideas. "What better way to advertise the

White Peach than with an accessory that patrons can wear and keep as mementos? We could even charge for autographs, too!”

Saburo looked at his companion with a long, blank stare. Then he erupted into laughter.

■■■■

The entire production crew at the White Peach sat about in a rare silence with their sleeves rolled up and their hands covered in plaster. Shaping each and every mask was a laborious task and a nigh impossible one were it not for the resourcefulness of the crew. Everything from the custom-made casting molds to the faux bronze paint and supply of plaster was scavenged or created in-house.

“Ew! This will take weeks to get out from under my nails!” the choreographer complained. The others had their reservations, too, but Saburo’s personal conviction drove them forward well into the night.

Between the stagehand’s ideas and the actor’s charisma, Ige and Saburo were an extremely effective pair. They pushed each other to new limits—not like rivals but as fellow craftsmen whose craft was kabuki. The two were the only ones remaining after the night shift was over, and the sun was already rising that morning before they finished.

“Ah, I think that should do it,” Ige said, wiping the sweat from his brow and getting it covered in plaster. “I’m worried about how sturdy they’ll be...but they’ll certainly hold up for one performance, at least.”

“One performance is all we need to gain a lifetime fan,” Saburo replied, picking up several masks and trying them on one at a time. “Which one do you think fits me best, Ige? The oni, kitsune, or the old man?”

Ige could only chuckle and shrug. The kitsune represented charm and deceit, of which the samurai had more than displayed back at the teahouse. It was a natural fit, but so was the oni: the long-nosed demon who represented anger and the darkness within. Ige had observed concerning hints of both from the fledgling actor.

“You’d make for a handsome old man,” Ige finally answered with a laugh. He was reluctant to address Saburo about the samurai’s mood swings or nightmares—the latter of which happened at least once every night. On more than one occasion Ige was woken up by Saburo arguing against an imaginary ‘Kanae-chan’ in his sleep. It was clear that he was haunted by something...though the stagehand wasn’t sure he could help.

The two exchanged yawns as they closed up the theater. The morning sun blinded them as they left, but once their eyes adjusted, they went wide. Across from the street was a gigantic mural painted in red and black calligraphy. It was an advertisement for an upcoming Shogi tournament hosted by the Kiseru Tobacco Corporation.

That alone wasn’t interesting. The other taglines, however, were:

"Win an island getaway vacation! Forget your memories and start anew! The Demon of Shogi welcomes you!"

The 'Demon of Shogi' had become recent folklore as of late: though accounts of his appearance ranged from a kitten to a giant wooden tile, a growing number of Tonogashans were convinced he was responsible for the cases of memory loss across town. Odder still, those afflicted only seemed to forget painful memories: the loss of a loved one, for example.

"Ige. Do you know how to play shogi?" Saburo asked, his voice serious and his face frozen like plaster.

The stagehand nodded in reply, a growing determination building within him. The only island nearby that Ige knew about was the one Keiko was on. A trip to see her...and to ask her to return back with him, as more than just a friend...it was all he ever wanted and more.

But still, obvious doubts surfaced. "Kishi from all over Hyuga will come for this tournament, Saburo-san. Unless you're some sort of master...we don't have a chance against this level of competition."

"Now, now, my apprentice, what did I mention before about reading opponents?" Saburo asked with a grin, pulling out a ring from his kimono and wearing it. He closed his eyes and twirled his fingers. When he reopened them, his grin grew even wider.

"Well, well! I didn't know you wanted Keiko-chan to serve you *that* way. And with a whip? My goodness!"

Ige's cheeks went crimson. He choked on his own breath, shocked and awed by Saburo's apparent insight into his innermost thoughts.

"How did he know what I was thinking?!"

■■■■

In the days that followed, Saburo and Ige played close to a hundred shogi matches between rehearsals for the upcoming play. They were average players at a similar skill level—at least until the samurai put on his ring. When he did, the odds turned starkly in his favor: he knew every move Ige made before he made it, and any strategy the stagehand attempted was quickly thwarted.

"I yield," Ige said, embracing yet another inevitable defeat. He wasn't dispirited by the loss: on the contrary, Saburo seemed unbeatable and was already growing a reputation as the 'Kishi With Beautiful Fingers'. Even the Headmistress didn't mind him playing so long as it served to advertise the theater. By the time the first day of the tournament came along, he was the second favored player to win it all.

The most favored was a familiar name: Anzai. It was the very same silk merchant who drove Keiko away, who anointed himself as the 'Gold General'. Ige couldn't allow such a creep to win, and sat in the audience that morning cursing him quietly amidst the crowd.

He was up against an odd opponent, to put it mildly: a ronin, unkempt and unrefined, who wore a conical helmet indoors and smelled of soy sauce. They sat uncomfortably on their silk pillow and proceeded to place down their tiles like they had never played before. Yet they must've: the ronin gave their opponent a huge handicap from the start.

"Ka-ku-i-chi! Ka-ku-i-chi!" chanted the crowd as excitement surged from the sudden turn of events. Playing without a bishop was unheard of at this level, and even Ige found himself captivated as the match unfolded. This mysterious ronin proved to be far more skilled than their lowly rank of 15th kyū would indicate, and before long Anzai's king was facing one check after another.

His defeat was inevitable. This was the upset of the century.

"This battle isn't over! I won't be made to yield—not to you!" Anzai screamed, tearing at his hair as everyone looked on in astonishment, pointing and laughing at the one who once claimed to be the Gold General. The only metal he had to his name now was iron, as he pulled out a knife from his kimono sleeve and pointed it towards his stomach.

Ige blinked and it was over. That was how quick the ronin lunged forward and disarmed Anzai, before grabbing his neck and slamming his bulky frame against the ground with a single hand. The silk merchant had intended to commit seppuku—to take his own life out of shame—but the ronin denied him even that.

"Urusai! You want an honorable death? Over a stupid game?!"

That was all the ronin said before standing up and walking out into the pouring rain.

■■■■

The rain had taken a momentary pause by the time Ige reported back to Saburo. The samurai took an immediate interest in the ronin and the two set out across Tonogasha to find them. They didn't have much luck, however, as Tonogasha had swollen in size due to both the shogi tournament as well as the Gion Float Festival.

"Don't be in such despair, Ige," said Saburo as he wagged his finger—the one with the ring on it. "Even if your Keiko-chan doesn't show up for the festival, you'll see her soon enough once I win the tournament!"

Ige nodded, not even noticing that his mind had been read once again. The two took to one of the quieter streets towards the marketplace to escape the tourists and rethink their plans. That's when a couple carrying groceries passed them by.

They were an odd pair: the man was only several years older than Ige, but over a foot taller and very... well, he wore a martial artist's uniform and a red headband. He was far from a monk, however, with a full head of hair and both the swagger and speech of a Jijinto slum-dweller.

The woman beside him was the sort the theater could use on a poster but never as extra—her beauty drew that much attention. From her generous figure to her fair skin and doe-like eyes, she had a refinement and class that was only emphasized beside the man accompanying her.

“They look like a cute couple, don’t they?” Ige asked, letting out a sigh as he imagined himself and Keiko in their place. The woman was smiling as the man boasted and told jokes, shaking his fist energetically in the air.

“Not quite,” Saburo said, pulling off his ring. His stare lingered on the streetfighter even after his attention turned over to Ige. “One doesn’t need to be a mind reader to understand attraction, my dear apprentice. This sight before us is a tragic one...one that breaks my heart more than any kabuki act could. Only a man’s love can be so pure. And so foolish.”

Ige squinted his eyes to inspect the pair further but couldn’t find anything amiss.

“For starters, notice how her body is oriented compared to his. They’re having a conversation while waiting in line, yet her feet are pointed away,” Saburo explained. “A woman who’s attracted to you won’t just maintain eye contact—she’ll play with her hair and mirror your actions without even realizing it. And if she goes out of her way to expose her neck to you...well, then she’s already yours. Flaunting one’s vulnerability is as feminine as it gets.”

Ige nodded though that didn’t mean he understood. He tried to recall whether or not Keiko had shown him her neckline before, before realizing just how silly it was and refocusing on the matter at hand. Speaking of which, Saburo had shogi to play and excused himself. His first match wouldn’t start for over an hour, but he claimed even waiting was more bearable than watching this scene unfold any further.

And it did unfold, Ige noticed, as a person—a drunk—staggered by and snatched the woman’s umbrella while the streetfighter was busy arguing over noodle prices with a merchant. That drunk turned out to be the ronin—the master shogi player from earlier.

“You surprised me, though I am glad to see you,” the woman said, smiling and all but jumping with excitement. Ige noticed that her feet and body were pointed squarely at the ronin. “I wanted to ask about how your shogi match went. Hatch-san and I are nearly done gathering ingredients for supper.”

“Let’s just say my opponent retired. But right now I need you to lend me your umbrella.”

The woman in the purple kimono began to giggle. Her posture changed ever so slightly: Ige noticed her back bend to emphasize her chest while her head tilted to the side—showing the ronin every inch of her neck from her chin to her shoulders.

“You’re never afraid to take what you want. Not an undesirable quality,” she replied, handing over the umbrella and watching the ronin go. She continued to stare long after they left amidst the crowd.

Ige let out a sigh. Then he let out a yelp as he suddenly felt the cold sting of steel plant itself behind his neck. His mouth was covered before he could scream; his legs were kicked out from under him before

he could run. He was dragged into the depths of an alley by an attacker he couldn't even see.

An attacker who wanted answers. "Who do you work for?! Why are you stalking these two?"

"Ah, ah, the White Peach! T-that's where I work!" Ige cried out, his attacker's firm grip across his neck making it difficult to speak. "And I, ah, I was just watching! I didn't mean anything by it, I swear!"

His attacker then released him—by shoving him against a wall and smashing his face across a wooden column. Ige could taste his own blood as his lips began bleeding. He crumpled to the ground and into a large puddle.

"For the sake of your longevity: stay away from them. The ronin in particular."

The rain began pouring down all at once, now, as if there had been a sudden scene change. Ige looked up to see who his attacker was, but saw nothing and no one. They had already vanished. The stagehand did, however, catch a glimpse of them just moments before, reflected on the pool of water beneath him.

"Was that a...a Kondo?" he asked, his question drowned out by the rain.

■■■■

Ige hadn't mentioned the incident to anyone—not that there was anyone to hear. The White Peach was a madhouse of half-dressed actors and actresses putting on makeup and going over last minute rehearsals for their lines. Everyone was frantic, and rightfully so: the performance of *The Legend of the Heike Warrior Crab* was about to begin.

Only one man seemed immune to the panic—the one who should've been the most anxious of them all. Saburo Honda sat unconcerned and undaunted in his chair even amidst the noise and chaos. His mind seemed to be somewhere else.

In fact, it definitely was: as Ige approached him, he heard the samurai-turned-actor mumbling to himself, over and over. "Kanae-chan...Kanae-chan..."

"Ah, is everything okay, Saburo-san? It's a packed house...an unheard of accomplishment for a new actor!" Ige smiled, hoping to shake Saburo from his daze. "In case the audience distracts your chain of thought, I'll be on the lower deck with cue cards ready to—"

"The key to handling an audience is the same as handling a woman, Ige. Do whatever you want with them—but don't you dare respect them. Don't give them an ounce of control—they don't want it. They want to be led by the nose on a beautiful, magical journey, away from what's real and what matters. It's our job to take their minds and hearts away, and if we do it well, if we do it properly...then they'll love us forever," Saburo said, his voice cold and distant.

Ige nodded and agreed. Whether he *actually* agreed didn't matter: one of the most vital jobs of a stagehand was to make sure the actors were healthy enough to perform. Physically and...mentally, in this case.

"You think I've gone crazy, don't you?" Saburo asked, pulling up his hand and twisting the ring across his finger. "Maybe I have. I made the mistake of loving a woman, Ige, and she made me pay for it. In more ways than you could possibly imagine. What she did to me...and what she made me do to her...it will haunt me until the day I die—unless I can erase it from my mind. I have to meet the Demon of Shogi."

"I have no doubt that you will, Saburo-san!" Ige said and bowed, desperately trying not to think of anything negative or otherwise disturbing. "I, ah, also had an idea about your entrance. For your final shogi match, I mean..."

Saburo jumped from his chair and grinned. "Say no more! I already love it!"

■■■■

PON

PON *PON* *PON*

Ige beat the drums as the other stagehands lowered Saburo from the ceiling of the shogi hall. The leading man had just completed a brilliant performance—the best the White Peach had ever produced, according to both fans and critics alike. Everything went flawlessly save for a mishap at the very end of the show.

A patron had jumped on to the stage. Ige had expected them to be a rabid fan of Saburo's, but this one was out for something much more than an autograph: his blood. The ronin who he was about to face in shogi had presented himself early, prompting a swordfight unlike any the White Peach had hosted before.

"That's because they were trying to kill each other...be careful, Saburo-san! This one is dangerous!"

In a battle of presentation, Saburo had already won: along with his kabuki makeup, he wore white silk robes paired with a red sash across his waist. He held a rose between his teeth, too, that he tossed into the audience of his many admirers. Those who couldn't appreciate him for his skill in shogi adored him for other reasons—his charm and handsome brought in hundreds who had never set foot into the shogi hall before.

"Welcome, one and all!" yelled Saburo to the captivated crowd. "I am a tenshi, an angel sent down from The Plain of High Heaven! I have but one message to give." A dramatic pause followed. All were eager to hear this message: one that was simple enough for all to understand.

Saburo stripped off the top of his kimono, revealing the symbols painted red across his chest and back. “Victory!” is what they meant and what he yelled, prompting the word to be chanted across the shogi hall. “*The ronin ought to be well and truly intimidated by now,*” Ige thought, though from this distance he couldn’t see much at all.

As crowded as the shogi hall was, Ige opted to retain his bird’s eye view from above. He couldn’t make out the board nor could he see the ronin’s face—they were still wearing that helmet that smelled of soy sauce from before. All he had to rely on was Saburo’s expressions and gestures, of which there were many.

Joking and jovial at first, but increasingly frustrated as the shogi battle waged on.

“You come across borderline brutish, which contrasts what can only be described as an elegant shogi. Odd and odder still,” Saburo pondered aloud, before wagging his finger around just as he had done to Ige countless times before. “Why don’t you think over your next moves carefully. Imagine your opening, picture it in your mind. What strategy are you employing?”

“My strategy is the one where you shut the hell up.”

One move came after another, and Saburo’s frustrations grew more apparent in his voice. He was no longer playful; he began yelling in a way that contrasted his elegant appearance. “Is this the classical kakugawari? A bougin—no, a hayakuri gin? Is Silver climbing, rushing or reclining? What are you thinking?!”

“Have some composure, Saburo. Take your defeat gracefully.”

The samurai, kabuki star and shogi master panicked all at once, and moved a pawn that—to Ige, anyway—meant nothing. But to the shogi players in the audience, it meant everything. Saburo had just made a mistake.

“I—it’s not a mistake! That kid, talking—where are they?!” Saburo yelled, jumping to his feet and looking around him frantically. He looked deranged because he was; when he couldn’t find the child he quickly resorted to desperation, clutching the ronin and begging them to surrender.

“The Demon of Shogi. I know he’s real, and I need to see him at any cost! I beg you, my true name is—”

“Sadao Hamasaki. You are under arrest for crimes against His Imperial Majesty,” said a samurai soaked in rain. He wore a light-blue kimono with white mountain trim, and when he unsheathed his katana his companions did the same. They were the Shinsengumi, and encircled Saburo like wolves surrounding their prey. “For desertion the penalty is immediate execution. Anyone who stands in our way will be eliminated.”

Saburo—or Sadao, or whoever he was—ran. He ran through his crowd of adoring fans, pushing them aside and in the way of his pursuers. Once he escaped the shogi hall he sprinted down the streets of

Tonogasha, splashing puddles of water in his wake. Watching him flee from above the shogi hall was the last sight Ige would ever see of him.

The last memory he would have of the man who had been his teacher, coworker, and friend.

■■■■

Ige's walk back home was a long and difficult one. It was well past midnight and the rain was pouring down, yet he was in no rush to return. He was wet beyond the point of being drenched; his skin was beginning to prune as he trudged along in waterlogged kimono.

"I'll never see them again...Keiko or Saburo," Ige thought. His feet took a detour without him realizing it, marching him over to the White Peach which was closed and empty. It was a mess, too: him and the rest of the crew would have plenty to keep them busy before the next show. *"A show without Saburo...will feel very empty."*

Ige waddled backstage, careful not to get any water on the stage itself out of concern for warping the wood. It was a silly concern, at a time like this, but the stagehand couldn't help it. Being concerned for others was in his very nature. Even if that meant losing out on what he wanted most.

"It's why I'll never have any luck with women, isn't it?" Ige asked himself, wondering what Saburo would say in reply. The kabuki star had called him his apprentice...and though they had different views, Saburo had certainly given him insights the stagehand had never considered before.

Love was just a game to Saburo—one that wasn't so different from shogi.

But he had lost his queen and had never been able to recover from it. It was an offstage tragedy with more questions than answers, which left Ige dismayed and disheartened as he moped over towards Saburo's dressing room. The sight of his coworker's name on the door was enough to make his eyes water.

Ige had decided that the least he could do was clean up the room, at least until he found something inside that wasn't a costume or makeup. Saburo's katana rested atop his chair with a note tied to the hilt. It was addressed to Ige.

The stagehand raised it up to the light of a lantern and read it aloud. He spoke with heavy, heaving words.

"To my dear apprentice, Ige. If you are reading this message, then the worst has come to pass. I've given you no shortage of trouble in this life—yet I must burden you with one final request: take care of my katana, which upon my death I pass onto you. For I have no heirs...through all fault of my own. If karma is true, then the price I pay is long overdue. Sayonara, goodbye...and thank you. Thank you for making both Saburo Honda and Sadao Hamasaki's dream come true."

Ige wiped his sleeves across his face to clear up his eyes, only for them to go blurry immediately after. He sniffled and gulped a dozen times over until he noticed that there was one more line scribbled below.

“You are a good man, Ige. I couldn’t change you...and on that note, I’m glad.”

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

[Jul 7, 2020](#)

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 (+10)

4%

Borgia, the butler (+3)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+8)

0%

Gensai, the swordmaster (+12)

33%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+6)

0%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+0)

0%

Keiko, the maid (+13)

4%

Kohaku, the samurai (+1)

6%

Kuniko, the farmer (+23)

0%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+18)

16%

Momoko, the doctor (+1)

0%

Nishi, the yakuza (+24)

8%

Satsuma, the emperor (+21)

2%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+28)

24%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+11)

2%

Poll ended Jul 31, 2020 · 49 votes total

[Erotic Interactive Fiction?! :blush:](#)

[Jul 10, 2020](#)

Have you played any erotic interactive fiction games before? (Corruption of Champions, Trials in Tainted Space, etc.) For this question, don't include visual novels. They should be predominantly text-based.

Yep! I've even bought/supported that degenerate stuff!

Yes. Haven't spent any money on them, though.

I've tried them but they weren't my thing.

No...but I think I might now!

Not interested. <Chivalrous has increased.>

145 votes total

[MC #11's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Jul 11, 2020](#)

The design for MC #11 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Very masculine, Charming**

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

Short (+1)

26%

Long (+0)

0%

Ponytail (+10)

26%

Chonmage (+5)

10%

Long bangs (+20)

38%

Poll ended Jul 15, 2020 · 39 votes total

MC #11 Face Art

Jul 31, 2020

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 Ishiyan ([twitter](#))!

This month's build: **Very masculine, Charming, Long bangs**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[Aug 2, 2020](#)

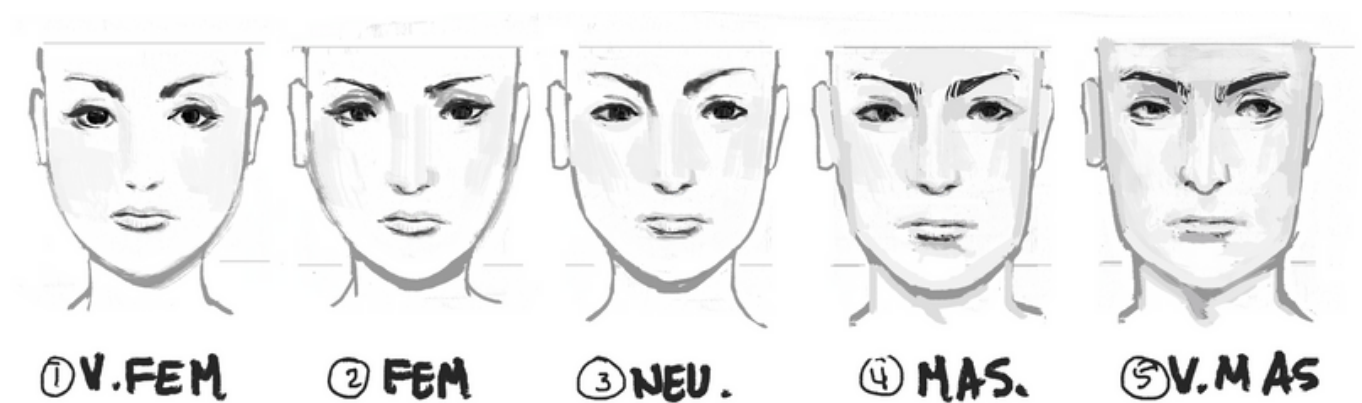
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+4)

27%

Feminine (+5)

12%

Neutral (+5)

15%

Masculine (+22)

33%

Very masculine (+0)

12%

Poll ended Aug 5, 2020 · 33 votes total

[MC #12's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Aug 7, 2020](#)

The design for MC #12 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 (+4)

0%

Calculated (+8)

3%

Perverted (+5)

9%

Chivalrous (+0)

3%

Charming (+0)

9%

Stoic (+2)

3%

Drifter (+29)

50%

Protective (+4)

3%

Brutal (+6)

3%

Finesse (+18)

18%

Poll ended Aug 10, 2020 · 34 votes total

[Side Story #25: Toshie's Trial](#)

[Aug 7, 2020](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place during the events of Book 2 and Book 3.>



Side Story 25: Toshie's Trial



■■ *The Baron's Island* ■■

"The kid says the swan is your spirit animal. Is that why you couldn't eat it? Hope you don't hold it against me if I had seconds."

The ronin spoke with a sort of lighthearted humor that Toshie once detested. But here, sitting with their backs pressed against each other on the beach of an island that shouldn't exist, it was just what Toshie needed. It was the ronin's way of showing concern—and the gesture didn't go unnoticed.

"I hold nothing against you," Toshie replied, though her voice wavered. "It was not the meal that ruined my appetite. Instead...a trial I find myself unprepared for."

The welcoming feast laid out before the guests of the 'Demon of Shogi' had been grand and included a dish of three birds in one: those being a pheasant, a duck, and a swan. They were perfectly crisped and

coated in a honey glaze. The only issue was the chef who cooked them.

“Toshiaki Mukai...the Kondo Butcher,” Toshie thought to herself. “The one who genocided and tortured my people during the Kondo Wars...he shouldn’t be alive. Nor should he be allowed to go on living.”

There were a hundred questions the ninja wanted to ask her companion but she settled with one. “How does a man become qualified—no, justified to take another man’s life? At what point...does one deserve to die?”

It was a question Toshie never thought she would ask. Though she had been trained in martial arts almost all of her life, she had never once had to kill someone before. The fact she hadn’t made her a measure of shame, considering the one who’s back she was now pressing against.

“Killing good men or bad—it’s never justified. Doesn’t mean it’s never right. Justice is like a fog men and women hide behind so they needn’t face the true color of their actions. Samurai protect farmers from one province while pillaging and raping those in another,” the ronin spat, their mood growing darker.

“Worst of all, they’d be justified in doing so. No—I don’t need to hide behind justice to know what’s right and wrong!”

The ronin’s words were thoughtful and true, spoken with a sort of conviction that Toshie found captivating. In truth, there was little about the ronin that *didn’t* captivate her these days. She didn’t understand why, only that she hated seeing them upset like this.

“Arigato, and gomenasai. I knew I was right about you, the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens. You never fail to bring clarity to my spirit.”

The two spoke for a while longer as the evening grew later. Beneath the moonlight and amidst its shimmering reflection on the waves, it would seem true darkness would never reach the isle. Alone with the ronin and among such beautiful scenery, Toshie made a selfish wish that things could stay this way—forever.

It was a silly, girlish wish that could never come true. Little did she know that in just one day later, it would. Her wish would be granted...and become a curse unlike any other.

“If the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens dulls, my life will be the whetstone to sharpen it once more. If my actions are not just, may they at least be right.”

■■■■

“Uah-whua...WHAAAAAA!”

Toshie awoke to the sound of a shriek from downstairs. It was most likely from Borgia given it’s pitch and from the kitchens given it’s echo. She cursed at herself for falling asleep; judging from the sun’s position, she had nodded off for two hours.

It had been a late night and busy one as well: untrusting of the Baron's motives towards the ronin—especially with how oddly they had been acting as of late—the diligent kunoichi had stood watch on their balcony as they slept. Hatch's attempt at skulking down the corridor woke the ronin up, prompting them to follow the streetfighter downstairs to the music room.

Toshie knew this because she had followed them both as well. She had also seen the display on the wall after Hatch put on the Baron's magical helmet. Regardless of his motive, the memory on the giant canvas wasn't his own: but the ronin's, involving them and Momoko in a...suggestive situation.

A situation that involved panting, moans, and other lewd cries that Toshie tried her best to forget. Though she had all but encouraged the ronin to pursue Momoko—for the sake of leaving Junko and their dark past behind—watching the two's passion unfold caused an unfamiliar jealousy to grow within the ninja. She was too ashamed to admit it and much less confront it, though her frustration had been nothing compared to Hachirobei's.

After witnessing the scene, the streetfighter fell to his knees with his fists shaking and his voice cracking. "No! How—how could you?! You know I loved her!" Hatch yelled, hurling a chair into the canvas, tearing it apart and breaking the mechanical device. He ripped the helmet off his head, crunched it within his grip and threw it away. "I thought you were my friend!"

The ronin spent the remainder of that night in Masami's room which meant Toshie spent it in the room across with the door ajar ready to intercept any and every threat that came their way. Unfortunately, the ninja hadn't slept since their arrival on the island several days prior, and the fatigue was finally catching up to her.

But any thought of sleep was quickly dashed upon the sight waiting for her down in the kitchen.

<Observation>

Toshiaki Mukai had become a bulge of flesh atop a pool of blood. He was a bruised corpse, cut with two giant gashes in an 'X' shape across his torso. He was tied up in ropes across his wrists and ankles, and wore on his head the same helmet—now dented—that Hatch used last night. There was a message written in blood beside the victim's hands. It bore the streetfighter's name: ハッチ.

"No!" Hatch cried out, tears welling up in his eyes, "I didn't do this! I didn't want this!"

The Baron raised a hand as a gesture to calm his frightened guests. The host then closed his eyes before summarizing the obvious. He did so in a resounding tone. "Toshiaki Mukai has been murdered. **A person on this island killed him**.* As evidence stands, Hachirobei is the killer."

<Deduction>

"This is an obvious setup, and not even a good one," Toshie said, approaching the corpse and kneeling beside it and into a pool of blood. The others recoiled at her concern—or lack thereof. "We are being made to believe that, after getting slashed open, Mukai wrote the name of his killer in the final moments

of his life. But we can see that only his index fingers are bloodied. Held as they are, his hands would never have been able to bend in a way such that the rest of his fingers would remain unbloodied.

“What also warrants attention,” Toshie continued, “is the matter of his hands being tied to begin with. Why would the murderer bother to tie up Mukai in the first place? We can tell by the angles of the two slashes that the victim was on his back when he died, but what interests me more is the particular knot used to restrain him. This is,” Toshie said, after cutting the bonds on Mukai’s wrists free with a kunai, “a Jijinto sailor’s knot. This would implicate the Jijinto native—”

“Or yourself!” Borgia cried, wiping his tears away with his handkerchief. “Does zhis not seem strange to anyone else, that zhis ninja appears so familiar with zhe murder?! Give us a moment to grieve—spirits save us!”

“The butler’s right,” Hatch said, crossing his arms and grimacing in pain. “It’s all so gruesome...and you seem damn near excited about it, Toshie.”

Excited was one way of putting it, especially as the streetfighter had just revealed another clue. Toshie re-adopted the persona of the Heartless Hound and all but leapt upon the streetfighter to get a look at his hands. Before Hatch could recover from the surprise, his secret was revealed.

“Slash marks across the palms. This explains why there are bruises all over Mukai’s body: you two got into a fight. Explain why you did it and why you tied him up afterwards.”

“I...I,” Hatch stuttered, unwilling to talk. Toshie’s interrogative instincts kicked in, and like a dog with its teeth, the ninja wrapped her arm around the streetfighter’s neck and locked him into a chokehold. She then twisted one of Hatch’s arms backwards and rammed a knee into his lower back.

The most likely culprit was restrained. When the ronin arrived, Toshie expected them to aid her or even thank her for their assertive detective work. The last thing she expected was a punch to the face.

wham

“Get the hell off him, Tosh! What’s gotten into you?!” they yelled, causing the ninja to freeze up in surprise. “Hatch is our friend—or at least he’s mine!”

“Even after what you saw last night?” Toshie asked as she nursed her cheek. A profound silence then followed with only Masami’s sobs to break it as the ronin’s eyes took a golden glow. This was the Jigoku: the unholy sword style and source of the ronin’s most fearsome power. It was also a sign that the kunoichi had made a mistake. Amidst her eagerness to solve the mystery, she had turned the Sword against her.

And now a physical one was pressed against her stomach. “Go! Leave! You’re not welcomed here!”

The sentiment was repeated by Borgia, Daisuke and Hachirobei, too. The Baron said nothing though looked particularly amused, while Masami was too rattled to have an opinion either way. Like a beaten

dog, the Heartless Hound got up and staggered away, not entirely sure of what had happened. The only certainty was that the murderer was getting away.

"That and...I've managed to sabotage whatever friendships I had. But I've always been this way, haven't I, Satsu-kun?" Toshie reflected as she walked down the large, carpeted hallways alone. Though the kunoichi had made an effort to be more sociable, the reality could no longer be ignored. *"I was never one for making friends. Not even you nor Fuji-sama could teach me that."*

Toshie hung her head low and raised her shozoku's mask above her mouth and nose—as if to hide herself from the rest of the world. The ronin's Jigoku was a dissociative persona of some sort, Toshie surmised, and a hellish one at that judging from their massacre back at Shiroyama's mansion in Jijinto. She would do likewise, then, becoming the Heartless Hound even if it meant turning everyone against her.

It was with this grave determination that she entered the cellar where the one remaining suspect was held: Sadao Hamasaki. That the cellar wasn't locked as it should've been was Toshie's first clue that something was amiss. The indentation beside the door suggesting it was forced open was another. The third was the drunken and unkempt appearance of Sadao, moaning and wincing from the light of the hall.

"Hamasaki. Get up," Toshie barked, taking a step inside. She was about to kick the Shinsengumi-turned-kabuki star until she saw the glint of metal half-hidden beneath his robes. He was holding a knife...and his drunken groans were far from genuine. Toshie had long since learned the difference—having traveled with the ronin for as long as she had.

Pulling out her own kunai, she approached the body like a falcon eyeing its prey. Like a mouse, Sadao's moans became more akin to squeaks as Toshie pounced upon him, quickly disarming the disgraced samurai and resting the knife against his throat.

"Don't kill me! Spirits, anyone, I don't want to die!" he pleaded. That, at least, sounded genuine.

Toshie didn't release her grapple but she did pull aside the knife from Sadao's throat—if only to inspect it closer. "A butcher's knife—with blood seeped into the top of the handle. It's fresh," the ninja said after giving it a lick.

"I...I didn't do it! I just needed something to defend myself with!" Sadao cried out once more, though in doing so he revealed quite a bit of information. This interrogation was going to be among the Heartless Hound's easiest.

"You 'didn't do it'...so you've seen the corpse already. I hope you realize what sort of position you're in, being found with the murder weapon. Now tell me who took your ropes off you. I want to know your accomplice."

"They're trying to frame me! They undid my ropes, just like they unlocked the door. I'm innocent, I swear!" he squirmed beneath Toshie, who tightened her hold and pulled back his arm until he got more

specific. “You know his name. We came to this island together. He spared me from the Shinsengumi, only to have me killed here instead!”

“If Hatch wanted you dead, he wouldn’t have bothered untying your ropes. Yet you marked his name down on the murder scene to frame him. Didn’t you? *Didn’t you?!*”

Upon the sound of Toshie’s yell, a group of footsteps echoed from the hall. The ronin, Masami, Hatch and Borgia arrived. Sadao cried out, claiming that the ninja was trying to kill him and that was enough for the streetfighter to pull Toshie off and put an early end to the interrogation.

“This is the second time we’ve seen such brutality from your Kondo companion!” the butler said, scowling before addressing Toshie directly. “You forced yourself into this locked cellar to coerce a false confession from Mister Sadao, didn’t you? How reprehensible!”

“He’s lying—don’t fall for it!” Toshie yelled, her frustration coming out in her voice. “The door was unlocked when I got here. Sadao was untied and carrying the murder weapon. Either he’s the murderer or has been made to look like one. What we need to find out next is who unlocked the door. The only one among us with a key is—”

“This is madness! How dare you claim me a liar, after making up such an outlandish tale! This Kondo’s behavior alone arouses suspicion! Do the rest of you not agree with me?” asked the butler, who was fidgeting and showing obvious signs of stress. That the others couldn’t tell he was bluffing made Toshie even angrier—which only made Borgia’s case even stronger.

“Please, Toshie-san...” Masami said with a whimper, “...there’s no need to hurt anyone. I am certain if we simply talk this out then all will be made clear!”

“The kid’s right—mostly,” said the ronin, who walked over and pulled up Sadao by the collar. “Except that this bastard deserves everything that’s comin’ to him. We all saw what he did to his pregnant wife. He was due to be executed today. Didn’t have much to lose...but the chef? Wouldn’t be my first choice.”

Sadao clung to the ronin in a short-lived embrace until the latter tossed the former away and onto the floor. The disgraced samurai landed face-first into a half-eaten bowl of lentil soup, which he desperately coughed out and rubbed cleaned as if it was poison.

Probably because it was. “He—he tried to poison me!” Sadao screamed, pointing a finger towards Hatch and Borgia. The streetfighter hung his head in shame, while the butler visibly flinched. Wasn’t hard to tell that both were involved.

“I didn’t know there was poison in it!” Hatch said, clenching his fists and shaking them. “When I saw you choking, I ran off to find the cook. We got into a...well, we got into a fight.”

Everything was making sense to Toshie now: Hatch had untied the ropes on Sadao to tie up Mukai after knocking the chef out during a brawl. His intent wasn’t to kill him, but to keep him from escaping before

the rest of them awoke the next morning. Sadao, thinking it was Hatch who had tried to poison him, attempted to escape until he saw the corpse in the kitchen.

“...realizing he would be the most likely suspect, Sadao framed his would-be killer by writing his name down on the murder scene. This still doesn’t answer who spiked the soup or unlocked the cellar door to begin with, though.”

“Gah! Get zhe hands off me at once! You barbarian!” Borgia yelled as Toshie tightened her hold over the dwarf’s wrist. The ninja could tell that the butler had been one moment away from bolting out of there—though to the others, it looked quite differently.

“Toshie-san! Stop it!” Masami yelled, jumping in to intervene. It was hard to say no to such a cute face, though Toshie was about to when the ronin walked forth with a hand idling at the handle of their katana. One look into those fierce and unrelenting eyes was enough for the ninja to let go and comply.

“I’ve always thought of you as the most reasonable person in our gang, Tosh. Not much of an honor, if I’m honest, but the way you’ve been acting...I think you’ve lost it. Hell, I think you’ve been losing it ever since we got on this island. Go get some sleep: consider it a request, this time.”

Toshie wanted to protest, as close as she was to solving the mystery, but the look in the ronin’s eyes left little room for protest. She supposed she *had* been acting strange, but considering that there was both a demon and a murderer among them—on an island that shouldn’t even exist—Toshie thought she had been acting quite sane.

Fatigue did hit her, then, and so to keep herself awake and away from the others she decided to explore other portions of the mansion. She made her way to the Baron’s gallery, unsure of what she was looking for but settling upon a giant oil painting depicting a naked, foreign man being clawed and eaten by a large eagle.

“Pietro Paolo Rubens,” the Baron spoke in his foreign tongue. His presence surprised Toshie—not easy to do, even as sleep-deprived as she was. “Prometheus Bound. In punishment for stealing fire from the heavens, the titan Prometheus was nailed to a boulder and tormented each and every day as an eagle devoured his liver. Quite a gruesome punishment in return for aiding mankind, don’t you think?”

“Without a liver, he’d die in a matter of hours,” Toshie replied curtly. “He wasn’t tormented long.”

“Oh, on the contrary,” the Baron chuckled, stroking his goatee. “For a titan regenerates its body each day, and so Prometheus could never die. What was once considered a blessing had become, for him, the ultimate curse. Quite fascinating!”

The ninja gave no reply. It would seem this painting depicted some foreign myth—one that held little practical application to the matter at hand. And Toshie wasn’t referring to the murder of Toshiaki Mukai.

“Our boat passed through a toori—a spiritual gate—before we arrived here. It was well disguised and embedded up high between two giant oaks, but now I’m certain that’s how your servant Bashō brought

us here. This realm is not part of Hyuga, but of a demon's machinations. And only a foreigner could imagine works such as these," Toshie said, gesturing across the room with one hand while holding tight her kunai with the other.

"Why, I believe you've grrrown delusional, Miss Toshie! You seem so very tired...why don't you rrest your eyes for a while longer? Your companions are certain to uncover the culprit before the trial this evening," the Baron said in an odd accent that almost sounded like a purr.

That was the last exchange the two would have before the ninja excused herself and continued her investigation alone. As the afternoon dragged on, she searched the victim's quarters as well as Daisuke's and Borgia's. Aside from Mukai's horrific manual on how to torture Kondos, Toshie found little of interest. The butler's office was locked—and the deceptive dwarf had already embedded himself into the others' confidence.

dring* *dong* *dring* *dong

The bells signaled that the trial was to begin. It's venue was nothing short of outlandish: it was to take place inside a giant reflecting pool that rippled beneath the drizzling rain. It was lit by a hundred paper lanterns, floating around a circle of raised pedestals for each member of the jury to stand.

They would stand beneath the statue of Lady Justice: the giantess in white marble who wielded a sword in one hand and a weighing scale in the other. She was blindfolded, too, unable to see the outrageous sight beneath her. A sight that included Hachirobei held inside a wooden contraption called a guillotine—which included a raised axe blade over his neck and a basket beside.

As to what that basket was supposed to catch...well, that didn't require much of an imagination.

The Baron cleared his throat. "We gather here this night to seek justice done to the murderer of Toshiaki Mukai. We come here as equals under the almighty law. Our fates are bound to it."

"Our fates are bound to it," Borgia and Daisuke replied in unison.

"Let these lanterns embody our spirits," the Baron said in priestly fashion, "so that they may guide us through the dark depths of our mortal bounds."

Toshie had a bad feeling that only grew worse as the proceedings went underway. Everything seemed too practiced and too refined to be anything short of a prepared trap. The kunoichi would have to risk springing it to get Hatch free—and to put the demon in his place.

Unfortunately, she only made it halfway. A key witness in the murder, Sadao Hamasaki, wasn't present. Apparently he had escaped on a raft, potentially taking any chance of solving this mystery along with him. That was bad, but what was worse were the conclusions the others were making.

Mukai's book on torture techniques during the Kondo Wars was brought into evidence for a potential motivation for the killer. It didn't take much reasoning to figure out who it implicated. The ronin had

discovered that the chef was indeed the Kondo Butcher, and one look at their troubled features confirmed Toshie's worst fears.

"Tosh...you asked me back on that night about taking another man's life...and at what point one deserves to die. I think we can both agree that Mukai got what was comin' to him. And I..."

"Zhe motivation is clear, is what zhey are saying!" Borgia spoke up and interrupted the ronin. But instead of getting upset, the one who was to be Hyuga's savior hung their head low in shame. That was when Toshie knew it was over.

A foul magic froze the ninja in place, then, as Toshie was carried off by the lumbering giant Daisuke to take the place of Hatch beneath the guillotine. She couldn't even speak to protest or plead her innocence. At the moment, she envied Lady Justice: for to see the looks on her companion's faces was more than she could bear.

They looked at her as if she was a headless corpse—because that was exactly what she was about to be.

The vote was held, and though it came reluctantly, it was unanimous. Only Masami failed to comply in the voting, weeping as she was. The magic bounding Toshie to silence lifted just after the Baron asked for her final words. She stared the ronin in the eyes, grit her teeth and spoke:

"Gomenasai! I have failed you. And in doing so, I have failed Satsuma and all of Hyuga as well!"

The last sight Toshie saw was an unforgettable one: while everyone was focused on her, the Baron was changing form. His skin began to pale and grow a dense, thick layer of white fur while his eyes and ears slanted upwards and his nose—now a snout—pushed outwards. An aura of blue flames danced around him as six giant tails grew from behind.

"A kitsune?!"

Lightning struck the moment the axe blade was released from above. It came down with a lurch and a whistle, and before Toshie knew it, it was over. Her lifetime of service...had come to an end.

■■■■

"Uah-whua...**WHAAAAAA!**"

Toshie awoke to the sound of a shriek from downstairs. She jumped from her futon and clutched at her neck to find that it was still attached to her shoulders. The ninja tried to process all that had happened and earned herself a terrible migraine for doing so.

"A dream...a more lucid one that I've ever recalled. That must be it!" Toshie assured herself as she made her way downstairs. That assurance quickly faded upon the horrific-yet-familiar sight waiting for her in the kitchen.

Toshiaki Mukai's corpse was splayed open no differently than it had been in her dream. When the others arrived they reacted just as they had before down to the very number of gasps and sobs.

"What's going on here?!" Toshie asked, though her meaning was misinterpreted.

"Toshiaki Mukai has been murdered," the Baron replied in a resounding tone. "***A person on this island killed him.*** As evidence stands, Hachirobei is the killer."

"No!" both Toshie and Hatch yelled in unison. The ninja fell to her knees and clutched her head trying to make sense of it all. She bit her tongue, pulled at her hair and even cut herself with her kunai to make certain she wasn't dreaming. It made for a disturbing enough sight that the ronin intervened.

"Hey, Tosh," they said, bringing the ninja in close. "Keep it together, would you? Can't be your first time seein' a corpse. We both know Hatch wouldn't hurt a fly, so—"

"I've seen this already!" Toshie yelled, grabbing the ronin and pulling her towards the chef's body. "I've investigated this before: look, two gashes from a butcher's knife! We'll find that weapon in the hands of Sadao in the wine cellar. Those ropes—they were tied by Hachirobei, who knocked out the chef after Sadao was nearly poisoned. Everything is the same as it was!"

Though the ronin didn't reply with a curse, the blank look on their face was far more damning. They looked as if they were watching a crazy person amidst a manic fit. Toshie turned to each of the others to see that their faces mimicked the same. This only frustrated her further and made her seem even crazier.

"What I say is the truth! We've had this investigation and trial before! I was executed beneath a guillotine while the true murderer—the demon of this island—remained free! And that kitsune demon...he stands before us right *here!*"

Toshie pointed at the Baron who didn't so much as raise an eyebrow in surprise. He didn't have to: compared to his dignified composure, Toshie was a tattered mess, screaming and making wild claims that no one could believe. The others muttered among themselves until the consensus was clear: the ninja was to hand over her kunai and excuse herself.

"You're playing into the demon's hands!" Toshie warned the ronin as she handed over her weapon. "Please tell me you believe me."

"Maybe I do. But I also know this island tends to play tricks on people. Did a number on me yesterday, remember? Seeing as you're actin' insane and all...might be best if you lay down and get some sleep."

Toshie gritted her teeth but nodded. She was tired, and stumbled around as she walked—even being so clumsy as to collide into Borgia on her way out of the kitchen. After promptly apologizing, she left the murder scene. She took the paper she had just pickpocketed from the butler's jacket along with her.

"If my theory is correct, Borgia was the one to unlock the cellar and poison the soup Hatch delivered last night to Sadao. But what I'm missing is a motive," Toshie mused, before opening the parchment and letting out a gasp. The written words brought forth a series of emotions ranging from surprise to outright rage.

Reborn son, beware,

the Lion whose reign must end,

sends one in his stead.

Test of devotion,

and for your family's health—

KILL HIS SAMURAI.

It was a pair of haiku, but more than that, it was a threat—not just to the Emperor but to Borgia as well. Whoever wrote this was a member of the rebellion, and their target had been none other than the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens.

"Except that the Sword is...not quite as refined as many assume an Imperial samurai would be. When Sadao Hamasaki—a member of the Shinsengumi—arrived on the island, Borgia must've mistook him as the intended target instead. That's why he poisoned the soup."

The timeline of events revolving around the murder was all coming together yet the murderer remained unknown. Toshie was almost certain that demonic magic was at play here—especially given what had happened at the trial last time.

Recalling that trial spurred her over to Mukai's room to pick up the book of torture techniques and dispose it, considering that it had doomed her before. Unfortunately, Masami was already there when she arrived, thumbing through the letters that Toshie had ignored last time.

Turns out she shouldn't have.

"Oh, g-greetings, Toshie-san!" Masami said, obviously spooked. Apparently the ninja's outburst earlier had done her no favors. "This is, erm, a very interesting correspondence between Mukai-san and his wife, Sakiko-san. They...certainly spared no details," the shugenja blushed.

"Sakiko...I've heard that name before," Toshie thought aloud, recalling the memories of her youth. Then she recalled something that should've been obvious: Sakiko was the name of Satsuma's aunt and Seijirō's sister. Called the Lioness, in life she had been the greatest threat to Satsuma's well-being. "She was married off to a hero from the Kondo Wars, to live away from the Capital somewhere near Tonogasha."

"Do you mean...could this estate have been there's, Toshie-san?" Masami asked, exceptionally insightful as usual. "But it's all rather strange...I could've sworn that the Baron mentioned his wife was also Sakiko. That Baka said he had a portrait of her in his bedchambers, too."

'That Baka' was of course the ronin. Toshie didn't wish to speculate what they were doing in the Baron's bedchambers, only that she was going to pay a visit there as well. The ninja had never seen Sakiko before, though she was very familiar with the Emperor's facial features. She would be able to tell at a glance if it was indeed his late aunt.

"What is this? Why is the Sword's face up there?" Toshie thought aloud as she gazed upon the portrait. The paint used for the face was much fresher than the rest of it, as if it had been covered over recently. With a desire both to remove the ronin's face and to find the one beneath, the ninja grabbed a cloth from the Baron's easel, dipped it in turpentine, and proceeded to wipe away the face.

What she saw beneath it wasn't Sakiko's. Or anyone's at all: it was a spiral of flesh, impossibly twisted and blurred. The sight of it drew Toshie into madness—as if she wasn't already there. Her very spirit cried out as her vision began to tunnel around her. The sound of the chamber door creaking open made her turn to see who it was.

Though the figure was twisted, turned sideways and distorted. Or maybe it wasn't.

"My, my, how unforrrrtunate. You don't look so well, Miss Toshie," the Baron said with a purr. He approached with heavy footsteps that made a painful echo throughout Toshie's skull, compelling her to claw off her skin and tear away her hair. When the Baron made it to the ninja's collapsed form, he kneeled beside her and brought his face next to hers.

Except that it wasn't his face, but Toshie's own.

"I hope you're enjoying this game as much as I am!"

■■■■

"Uah-whua...**WHAAAAAA!**"

Toshie awoke to the sound of a shriek from downstairs. She jumped from her futon and clutched at her face to make sure it was still there. After ensuring it was, she clutched at her heart as it pounded out of her chest.

"The face-stealing magic of the kitsune...just a glimpse of it was enough to drive me mad! What hope do I have against this?"

The ninja didn't have an answer, and found herself reluctant to go downstairs once more. The Baron pronounced Toshiaki Mukai's death as he always did, and declared Hatch as the presumptive murderer just as before. Toshie kept her eyes on the foreigner throughout it all, with a gaze heavy enough for the ronin to notice.

“Hey, Tosh,” they said, bringing Toshie aside and snapping their fingers in her face. “You in there? I’m askin’ because you’ve been out of it for the past five minutes. We need your expertise here if we’re going to clear Hatch’s name. We both know he wouldn’t hurt a fly, so—”

“The helmet,” Toshie said, looking over the murder scene once more. It was the one item of interest she had yet to explore. Could the answers all be found there? Was it really that easy? “The magical helmet that reflects one’s memories outward...we can use it to determine what each of us were doing last night.”

“Zhat is true!” Borgia shouted. “Zhe device in zhe music room shall prove our guilt or innocence promptly!”

The rest of the group was enthusiastic as well, with two exceptions: Hachirobei and the ronin. No doubt the former felt guilty over beating up the chef and turning him into a helpless victim for the murderer. As for the latter...

“I don’t think this is such a good idea, Tosh,” the ronin said, grabbing ahold of the kunoichi while the rest of the group went inside the wooden theater. “I can’t speak on behalf of the others, but I’ve got some memories I’d rather not relive. And as for last night...”

“I understand your reluctance. More than you may know,” Toshie replied, referring to what the two had witnessed in this theater before. “But I need to understand the truth behind this magic—and it’s limitations.”

The ronin grimaced and was about to say something more when Masami yelled at them to hurry on in. They shook their head but complied, and the group took front row seats just as they had with Sadao Hamasaki’s murder of his wife. Toshie found it hard to imagine that anyone’s memories would be half as horrific as that.

Boy, was she wrong.

At first was Borgia who had no distinct memories of last night—aside from mixing in an odd powder into the chef’s soup and accepting Hatch’s offer to deliver it to Sadao for a late-night meal. When asked what he had spiked the lentils with, the butler assured them it was a mixture of cumin and coriander.

“More like hemlock and nightshade,” Toshie mused, though kept the thought to herself.

The ronin was up next, though was in no hurry to step onto the stage nor get strapped into the chair. She only agreed to do so after tasking Hatch with fetching them some wine—which the streetfighter was more than happy to do so. With him gone, the ronin was ready to get started.

Though the scene that appeared on the giant canvas before them was not of last night nor of any night before, but of a godforsaken afternoon at an orphanage during a hot summer in Genfu. To describe the scene in a single word...it was gruesome. Unbelievably so, with half-torn and half-chewed bodies of

children splayed about in various stages of death and dying. Among them was a child coated in blood, gulping shreds of flesh and gnawing bones to get at their marrow.

That child was none other than the savior of Hyuga. The Sword Who Cuts the Heavens faced their younger self and in doing so, let out a roar that echoed down Toshie's spine. Brilliant, golden light burst forth from out of the ronin's eyes as they broke their leather bounds and unsheathed their katana.

Enveloped in rage and consumed by the Jigoku, the ronin went berserk. Daisuke—large as he was, was cut like a stick of butter beneath the summer sun. Borgia was no different, gurgling blood in his last breath as the ronin sent their sword through his mouth. Toshie rushed to grab Masami in an attempt to spare her, and she did—if only for a moment.

The one whom Toshie was meant to serve plunged their katana across her back, severing her spine and sending waves of agony throughout the parts of her that withheld any feeling at all. Masami weeped into Toshie's chest, the ninja's blue shozoku turning a shade of purple. It took all the strength Toshie had to turn over and watch the ronin cut Hachirobei and the barrel he was holding in half—sending blood and wine spraying in the aftermath.

It was after then that the ronin collapsed and broke from their demented fury. They took in large, heaping breaths as they gazed upon the carnage they had wrought. Though Toshie's vision was darkening, she saw clearly enough to bear witness as the savior of Hyuga plunged their sword into their chest.

As all hope was lost, the Baron—now the kitsune—approached the ninja once more. Even as animal-like as he was, there was no mistaking the grin on his face.

“What an amusing turrn of events! Will you be able to see your beloved champion the same way again? I suppose we'll find out in our next game!”

Toshie spat out a wad of blood. “I'm not...I'm not playing your game...demon!”

“Oh, trrrust me, *that* can be arranged!”

■■■■■

“Uah-whua...**WHAAAAAA!**”

Toshie awoke to the sound of a shriek from downstairs. This made for the fourth time this had happened already. She needed a plan. She had nearly all the pieces required to solve the case—she just had to present them in a way that didn't implicate her as the killer.

She had a good idea of what to do as she made her way to the kitchen. The others gasped and cried as they usually did, though this time they seemed to be more emotional than usual. Toshie thought she might have just been imagining it until the ronin fell to their knees looking absolutely dejected.

"Is something the matter?" Toshie asked. "Why is the chef's death affecting you so deeply?"

"T...Tosh, I...I..." the ronin trailed off into half-withheld sobs, cupping their hands against their face. In contrast, Masami weeping openly while Hatch punched the walls, countertops and even himself.

Looking closer at the corpse, Toshie realized the reason for the inconsistencies. Her green eyes went wide—as wide as those on the body lying dead on the ground before her. For the corpse wasn't Mukai's...but her own.

"I'm not dead! That isn't me!" Toshie insisted, yelling at her friends to cease their mourning. She reached out to grab the ronin and stretched right through them as they were made of air. But they weren't—*she* was, and she confirmed as much by looking down at her hands and seeing the blood-stained floor right through them.

"Miss Toshie has been murdered," the Baron replied in a resounding tone. "***A person on this island killed her.*** As evidence stands, our shogi finalist is the killer."

Toshie did a double-take before glancing at the bloody symbols written on the floor beneath her own corpse. It was the ronin's name, and it was as if she had wrote them just before she died.

"I didn't do this!" they yelled, their eyes flickering from black to gold. "But whoever the hell did—I'm gonna make them pay!"

There was some selfish happiness to be had, Toshie found, in seeing the ronin get so upset on the account of her death. The happiness quickly faded, however, when she saw the ronin's keen mind and instincts succumb to rage. What unfolded wasn't an investigation so much as an inquisition, with them threatening any and everyone at swordpoint—with Masami as the sole exception.

As the day went on, Toshie witnessed Hatch and Sadao working on a raft to escape the island. It was an interesting alternative to taking part in the trial, but the streetfighter's good nature was taken advantage of in the end, and Sadao set off without him. Knowing how the ex-Shinsengumi member escaped in the first place was good information, but useless in Toshie's incorporeal state.

When the trial commenced that night, with the ronin beneath the guillotine, a lightning storm unlike any other erupted from out of the sky. Though Toshie was not a shugenja, she had been around enough of them to gain an understanding of how their magic worked. Almost always, they required written talismans to bring forth their will from another plane of existence.

The only exception was with the most powerful of shugenja during their most intense, life-or-death moments. To draw forth such untamed power was regarded as myth by most scholars and yet—after this night—Toshie knew it was much more.

Masami, harnessing everything it was to be human—the ultimate feelings of anger, fear, sadness and love—brought forth from the heavens a ball of lightning that sparked out and was accompanied by a

deafening thunder. The mansion before them was torn asunder, while Lady Justice disintegrated above them.

A brilliant, blinding white light was the last Toshie would see. At least before it was time to play again.

■■■■

“Uah-whua...**WHAAAAAA!**”

Toshie woke up but didn't bother rising from her futon this time. She had long since lost count of how many days had passed and how many games her and the kitsune had played. The demon's delight at her pain was limitless; she had died a hundred times and watched her friends die many more.

From gunpowder explosions in the cellar to a mystical shogi board channeling messages from Sakiko herself, the kitsune had no end of tortuous scenarios for Toshie to endure. The ninja had long since examined and explored every inch of the mansion: obtaining a rudimentary understanding of foreign script and mastery over several musical instruments. By taking on these pursuits and ignoring everything else, Toshie had been called everything from a simple 'baka' to a complete psychopath.

The simple fact was that she had given up caring long ago. This indifference coupled with the removal of any and all consequences prompted her to do things she'd otherwise never consider. She had grown a penchant for wine, for example, and the boldness it offered. She had even...offered herself to the ronin on more than one occasion.

Toshie shook her head out of shame. The ronin had been tempted every time though never indulged her—for multiple reasons, but above all due to how oddly she was acting. Though Toshie understood this, it was hard to be normal when you had to relive the same day countless times over. She had long since forgotten what 'normal' even was anymore.

“I've tried everything to break this hellish cycle...Satsu-kun...why didn't you warn me of this?!”

She didn't have the energy in her to be frustrated nor did she have the patience to go through the motions in the kitchen once again. She knew every line they would say and every reaction they would give. So instead, she picked up a flask of wine on her way outside to watch the sunrise on the pier.

Toshie sat at the edge of it, watching the same sight she had beheld dozens of times before. To her surprise, it remained beautiful even as the rest of the world had long since grown drab and boring. She liked to imagine what life was like beyond the ocean...though she knew there was nothing to be found there. Many iterations ago she had taken a raft and found the edge of it.

“Nothing but a blank canvas,” Toshie spoke to herself. She had said that before, too, and took down a chug of wine. She'd stay like this for a moment more, until finally...

“There you are! We need your help here, Tosh! The cook's been murdered—and they're blamin' it on Hatch. We both know he—”

“—wouldn’t hurt a fly. Indeed,” Toshie said, interrupting the ronin and taking another gulp of wine.

The ronin was confused by the ninja’s behavior, though proceeded to step forth and sit beside her on the edge of the pier, dangling her feet just an inch above the waters below. Toshie handed over the flask just as the ronin was about to ask for it, and a bit of silence grew between them—at least until Toshie broke into laughter.

“What’s so funny?” the ronin asked.

“You were about to make a pun about drinking wine and making...*pour* decisions. Never fails to make me smile.”

The ronin stared at Toshie for a long while before taking another chug of wine. Then she got an idea—and not a bad one. Just not accurate in this case.

“Right, Sadao’s mind-reading ring. The one he used to cheat himself into the finals of the shogi tournament,” Toshie interrupted before they could start. “No, I’m not wearing it. And no, it wouldn’t help us in the investigation—we’ve already tried. Though we could read each other’s minds, we can’t read the Baron’s without him knowing. Since he’s the demon of manipulation, he’d only use it to drive a wedge against us.”

The ronin stared at Toshie for even longer while after that, before chugging the remainder of the flask. She braced a hand against her head and tried to make sense of it all. Her insight was sharp—especially for someone who was no longer sober.

“Since you seem to know everything I’m gonna say, I take it we’ve had this conversation a few times before. Can’t imagine how boring that must be...it’s amazing you haven’t gone insane yet, Tosh.”

“I’m long past that point, my dear, but it does make me happy to hear you say it,” Toshie said though couldn’t do so without a hint of embarrassment—not even after the tenth time of saying it. Confessing her feelings like this when nothing mattered was cheating, Toshie knew, but she had to voice them to keep what sanity she had left intact.

It was incredibly selfish to play with the ronin’s feelings this way, and she apologized as she had every time before. They wouldn’t accept it so easily.

“Don’t apologize for me. Hell—makes me happy that you haven’t gotten sick and tired of me yet after all these repeats. Have we, uh...?”

“You ask that every time,” Toshie grinned. “No, we haven’t.”

“Then how about we make this the last time. Seems like this demon wants us to solve a murder mystery,” the ronin said, standing up to their feet and pulling Toshie up beside them. “So how about we play their game. We’ll figure out what’s going on and—”

“That won’t work. I already know every aspect of the murder: from the weapon that killed him, to the motivation and timeline of events before and after Mukai’s death. I’ve solved this case a hundred times, but it never matters in the end...I am either discredited, disbelieved, or otherwise deposed by the kitsune’s magic. It’s hopeless—even though you’ll tell me it isn’t.”

The ronin grabbed Toshie and shook her. In doing so, the winds around them picked up and the cry of swallows could be heard in the distance. The ninja was in such awe that she nearly missed what they were saying.

“...come on, don’t tell me you’ve given up! I’ll spare you the motivational speech seein’ as you’ve probably already heard it, but I sure didn’t lose to this demon a hundred times for no reason! Hey—you listening?”

Toshie was stunned at the sight overhead. A flock of blue-backed and golden-bellied barn swallows circled above them. These were the ronin’s spirit animal, but more than that, it was a deviation Toshie had never witnessed before.

“Y-yes, I’m listening! What should I do? I will do anything to break this curse!”

The ronin cracked her neck before cracking her knuckles and then finally a smile, too. “You say you’ve done everything to solve this mystery, but I got a guess as to somethin’ you haven’t tried yet. Knowing you, Tosh, you’ve been handling this mystery all on your own—carrying it all on your shoulders so no one else has to.”

“What do you mean...what should I do?”

“Start believing in me, for starters. I might just be a dumb ronin from Genfu, but I’m a sharp enough swordsman so long as I’m pointed the right way. Help me figure out what’s going on and maybe...maybe I can be somethin’ more. I know we can do this if we work together, you and I.”

Toshie recalled a phrase she had spoken before, so long ago on the beach during their first night on the island: *“If the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens dulls, my life will be the whetstone to sharpen it once more. If my actions are not just, may they at least be right.”*

She realized what she had been doing wrong all this time. Her mistake was obvious to her now: instead of being at the Sword’s side and making them stronger, she had stepped out in front and blocked their path. Her own ego and pride as a detective had gotten in the way of helping the one who was to save them all.

“I say somethin’ wrong, Tosh? Not like you to get teary-eyed.”

Toshie leaped into the ronin and embraced them, pulling them in tightly and refusing to let go. Masami and Hatch arrived at the most inopportune time, and yet the ninja couldn’t release the one she loved. The one who had given her hope when she needed it most.

The one she wanted to spend the rest of her life with—*after* they got off this damn island.

■■■■

“Uah-whua...**WHAAAAAA!**”

Toshie awoke to the sound of a shriek from downstairs. Borgia’s scream would be imprinted on her mind forever, she knew, yet she smiled all the same. For the first time in countless iterations, Toshie was determined to do things properly. The ronin’s words were fresh in her mind.

“I have to act as if I wear a fresh pair of ears and eyes...I can do this, for you,” she said to herself as she rushed downstairs along with the others. She looked upon the murdered Toshiaki Mukai in surprise—or at least feigned it—and waited patiently for the others to get over their initial shock.

“Looks like we’ve got another game to play, kid. I have a feeling this one will be more dangerous than shogi,” the ronin said to Masami though their words might as well have been spoken to Toshie instead. She had been acting as a spoiled child—she realized—throwing tantrums and being a sore loser all because she never tried to learn the rules and play properly.

But all that was about to change.

With a newfound boldness, Toshie approached the ronin without their noticing—at least until she placed both of her hands upon their shoulders. She clamped down her grip as if to prevent them from running away. “Be sure of yourself. And no one else.”

Borgia coughed and interrupted their moment. “Z-zhe murderer is clear! Mister Mukai wrote it, in his own blood!”

“I swear I didn’t do it! So stop pointin’ fingers, you halfman!” Hatch yelled in reply, declaring his innocence for the thousandth time.

The butler was relentless, continuing to goad the streetfighter with accusations. It wasn’t especially wise: in the variations where a fight broke between them, Borgia had a perfectly losing record. “You’re a brute, an unwelcomed guest, and a murderer besides!”

The Baron restrained his employee while Masami grappled Hatch around the waist to stop them from fighting. The ronin was anxious to get between them, too, but that would take precious time they didn’t have.

“Forget the distraction,” Toshie said, “we both know there’s more here than what at first appears. In our time together I have observed what goes on behind your eyes. And I do not speak of your golden ones. You have with you a weapon sharper than the steel by your side, if only you wielded it properly. Do you know what it is?”

The ronin didn't know and gave no reply, and so Toshie would have to be less subtle. She had to prove to them that they weren't some 'dumb ronin from Genfu' but something infinitely greater. No one in their life had ever encouraged their intellect and wit—both of which Toshie knew was far more vast than they themselves realized.

And so she lifted her hands from the ronin's shoulders and brought them up to their forehead. "Your mind. You are a genius, and yet you refuse to realize it."

The investigation began in earnest, then, and Toshie found herself truly excited about it for the first time since the very beginning. Unlike before, it wasn't a personal excitement for patching together the clues but a vicarious one through the ronin: watching them puzzle out what had long since been routine for her was incredibly rewarding.

"There are five elements of this corpse worth investigating. A single word for each is all we need. I'm not telling you to make a choice—I am asking you to think," Toshie said, holding back a grin. Her glee only grew as the ronin deduced one clue after another, in some ways performing an even more thorough investigation than she had during the first iteration.

"If only I would've let you help me from the very start...how much torment would that have spared me?"

After everything from the murder scene was observed and deduced, the Baron clapped his hands. "What a display of detective work! Who knew we had such a pair of sleuths among us?" he asked aloud, giving Toshie a smile that grew from ear to ear. "The tribunal will be tonight, and I grant you free reign around the mansion until then."

The ninja glared at her eternal enemy until the ronin tapped her shoulder and brought her back to reality—such as it was. It prompted Toshie to ask them a question she'd been meaning to ask for many iterations now. "I would have you be honest with me. This game—as you first put it—do you enjoy playing? And is it wrong if I...if I..."

"Doesn't matter if you like the game, because we have to win."

Toshie nodded and grinned. "We can only win if we find the truth, and our opponent is a demon of manipulation. I can think of no better challenge, no higher stakes, and no greater purpose than this!"

And so the investigation went on: from interrogating Sadao to chasing down Borgia, to breaking apart and ensuring the ronin had possession of the magical ring for the trial, Toshie played her role to a tee. She risked everything on a gambit that the kitsune had never seen before: giving a false confession. Controlling her thoughts amidst it all so that the ronin could read them accurately—and not think she had gone insane—was the most difficult bit of all.

But it was all worth it in the end, as the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens proved themselves worthy of their title, embracing and manifesting their spirit—and in doing so, shining a light straight through the kitsune's lies. The demon of manipulation contradicted himself, and with the authority above all others, the Sword sentenced him to death.

Truth was contagious, and in the heat of the moment Toshie found herself admitting the words she had only dared speak before—back when such confessions didn't matter. That this would be their last and final day on this island meant every word spoken now meant everything.

"I am ashamed," she whispered with a heat rising in her voice, "for these feelings I hold for you. I have been ashamed of them since the moment you sat by my side, in the teahouse where we first met."

The ronin gazed upon her eyes, bringing their lips ever closer to hers. This was all Toshie ever wanted and more. To be free from this hellish cycle...and to move forth beside the one she loved. Their lips would seal that future together.

"Yo! Look at you!" Hatch slammed a pat against the ronin's back, destroying their kiss as well as the atmosphere. "When those birds came down, I was afraid you'd be in white—if you know what I mean! But this has got to be the sharpest kimono I've ever seen! The color really works well on you."

The kiss may have been over but the battle wasn't. The kitsune went berserk, screaming about injustice until the very end—with the trial concluded, so too did his magic. Watching his head get chopped off from beneath the guillotine...it was a sight Toshie would never forget.

And yet, though the island—the illusion—was collapsing around them, the demon was not yet vanquished. The ronin and the ninja climbed the steps up to the mansion, until it was time for them to part.

"I know what you intend," Toshie stopped at the top of the stairs. She didn't want to turn around and risk revealing the emotions raging inside her. "You intend to fight this demon alone. Hashimoto-san is too gentle, and Hachirobei-san is too kind. They would not abandon you. You should be glad," her voice wavered, "that I am so heartless and cruel."

"They may be too gentle and too kind, but you're too reserved."

"I only wish you were correct." Toshie turned to face the ronin, bringing their hand to her chest. "It beats as if to break out from its cage. My only purpose in this life is to insure that you complete yours," she whispered, "so why does my heart beg me to stop you?"

Throughout all the iterations and amidst the countless pain and suffering Toshie had endured, no torture was greater than being helpless: to be unable to save her friends and the ronin most of all. Yet as the two shared their final kiss on this forsaken island and as Toshie watched the ronin go, one truth became evident above all others.

"Endless pain and countless trials...with you at my side, there is nothing I can't overcome!"

[Aug 7, 2020](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place during the events of Book 2 and Book 3.>

Side Story 25: Toshio's Trial

■ ■ The Baron's Island ■ ■

"The kid says the swan is your spirit animal. Is that why you couldn't eat it? Hope you don't hold it against me if I had seconds."

The ronin spoke with a sort of lighthearted humor that Toshio once detested. But here, sitting with their backs pressed against each other on the beach of an island that shouldn't exist, it was just what Toshio needed. It was the ronin's way of showing concern—and the gesture didn't go unnoticed.

"I hold nothing against you," Toshio replied, though his voice wavered. "It was not the meal that ruined my appetite. Instead...a trial I find myself unprepared for."

The welcoming feast laid out before the guests of the 'Demon of Shogi' had been grand and included a dish of three birds in one: those being a pheasant, a duck, and a swan. They were perfectly crisped and coated in a honey glaze. The only issue was the chef who cooked them.

"Toshiaki Mukai...the Kondo Butcher," Toshio thought to himself. *"The one who genocided and tortured my people during the Kondo Wars...he shouldn't be alive. Nor should he be allowed to go on living."*

There were a hundred questions the ninja wanted to ask his companion but he settled with one. "How does a man become qualified—no, justified to take another man's life? At what point...does one deserve to die?"

It was a question Toshio never thought he would ask. Though he had been trained in martial arts almost all of his life, he had never once had to kill someone before. The fact he hadn't made him a measure of shame, considering the one who's back he was now pressing against.

"Killing good men or bad—it's never justified. Doesn't mean it's never right. Justice is like a fog men and women hide behind so they needn't face the true color of their actions. Samurai protect farmers from one province while pillaging and raping those in another," the ronin spat, their mood growing darker. "Worst of all, they'd be justified in doing so. No—I don't need to hide behind justice to know what's right and wrong!"

The ronin's words were thoughtful and true, spoken with a sort of conviction that Toshio found captivating. In truth, there was little about the ronin that *didn't* captivate him these days. He didn't understand why, only that he hated seeing them upset like this.

"Arigato, and gomenasai. I knew I was right about you, the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens. You never fail to bring clarity to my spirit."

The two spoke for a while longer as the evening grew later. Beneath the moonlight and amidst its shimmering reflection on the waves, it would seem true darkness would never reach the isle. Alone with the ronin and among such beautiful scenery, Toshio made a selfish wish that things could stay this way—forever.

It was a silly, childish wish that could never come true. Little did he know that in just one day later, it would. His wish would be granted...and become a curse unlike any other.

"If the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens dulls, my life will be the whetstone to sharpen it once more. If my actions are not just, may they at least be right."

■■■■

"Uah-whua...**WHAAAAAA!**"

Toshio awoke to the sound of a shriek from downstairs. It was most likely from Borgia given it's pitch and from the kitchens given it's echo. He cursed at himself for falling asleep; judging from the sun's position, he had nodded off for two hours.

It had been a late night and busy one as well: untrusting of the Baron's motives towards the ronin—especially with how oddly they had been acting as of late—the diligent shinobi had stood watch on their balcony as they slept. Hatch's attempt at skulking down the corridor woke the ronin up, prompting them to follow the streetfighter downstairs to the music room.

Toshio knew this because he had followed them both as well. He had also seen the display on the wall after Hatch put on the Baron's magical helmet. Regardless of his motive, the memory on the giant canvas wasn't his own: but the ronin's, involving them and Momoko in a...suggestive situation.

A situation that involved panting, moans, and other lewd cries that Toshio tried his best to forget. Though he had all but encouraged the ronin to pursue Momoko—for the sake of leaving Jun and their dark past behind—watching the two's passion unfold caused an unfamiliar jealousy to grow within the ninja. He was too ashamed to admit it and much less confront it, though his frustration had been nothing compared to Hachirobei's.

After witnessing the scene, the streetfighter fell to his knees with his fists shaking and his voice cracking. "No! How—how could you?! You know I loved her!" Hatch yelled, hurling a chair into the canvas, tearing it apart and breaking the mechanical device. He ripped the helmet off his head, crunched it within his grip and threw it away. "I thought you were my friend!"

The ronin spent the remainder of that night in Masashi's room which meant Toshio spent it in the room across with the door ajar ready to intercept any and every threat that came their way. Unfortunately, the ninja hadn't slept since their arrival on the island several days prior, and the fatigue was finally catching up to him.

But any thought of sleep was quickly dashed upon the sight waiting for him down in the kitchen.

<Observation>

Toshiaki Mukai had become a bulge of flesh atop a pool of blood. He was a bruised corpse, cut with two giant gashes in an 'X' shape across his torso. He was tied up in ropes across his wrists and ankles, and wore on his head the same helmet—now dented—that Hatch used last night. There was a message written in blood beside the victim's hands. It bore the streetfighter's name: ハッチ.

"No!" Hatch cried out, tears welling up in his eyes, "I didn't do this! I didn't want this!"

The Baron raised a hand as a gesture to calm his frightened guests. The host then closed his eyes before summarizing the obvious. He did so in a resounding tone. "Toshiaki Mukai has been murdered. **A person on this island killed him**.*.* As evidence stands, Hachirobei is the killer."

<Deduction>

"This is an obvious setup, and not even a good one," Toshio said, approaching the corpse and kneeling beside it and into a pool of blood. The others recoiled at his concern—or lack thereof. "We are being made to believe that, after getting slashed open, Mukai wrote the name of his killer in the final moments of his life. But we can see that only his index fingers are bloodied. Held as they are, his hands would never have been able to bend in a way such that the rest of his fingers would remain unbloodied.

"What also warrants attention," Toshio continued, "is the matter of his hands being tied to begin with. Why would the murderer bother to tie up Mukai in the first place? We can tell by the angles of the two slashes that the victim was on his back when he died, but what interests me more is the particular knot used to restrain him. This is," Toshio said, after cutting the bonds on Mukai's wrists free with a kunai, "a Jijinto sailor's knot. This would implicate the Jijinto native—"

"Or yourself!" Borgia cried, wiping his tears away with his handkerchief. "Does zhis not seem strange to anyone else, that zhis ninja appears so familiar with zhe murder?! Give us a moment to grieve—spirits save us!"

"The butler's right," Hatch said, crossing his arms and grimacing in pain. "It's all so gruesome...and you seem damn near excited about it, Toshio."

Excited was one way of putting it, especially as the streetfighter had just revealed another clue. Toshio re-adopted the persona of the Heartless Hound and all but leapt upon the streetfighter to get a look at his hands. Before Hatch could recover from the surprise, his secret was revealed.

“Slash marks across the palms. This explains why there are bruises all over Mukai’s body: you two got into a fight. Explain why you did it and why you tied him up afterwards.”

“I...I,” Hatch stuttered, unwilling to talk. Toshio’s interrogative instincts kicked in, and like a dog with its teeth, the ninja wrapped his arm around the streetfighter’s neck and locked him into a chokehold. He then twisted one of Hatch’s arms backwards and rammed a knee into his lower back.

The most likely culprit was restrained. When the ronin arrived, Toshio expected them to aid him or even thank him for their assertive detective work. The last thing he expected was a punch to the face.

wham

“Get the hell off him, Tosh! What’s gotten into you?!” they yelled, causing the ninja to freeze up in surprise. “Hatch is our friend—or at least he’s mine!”

“Even after what you saw last night?” Toshio asked as he nursed his cheek. A profound silence then followed with only Masashi’s sobs to break it as the ronin’s eyes took a golden glow. This was the Jigoku: the unholy sword style and source of the ronin’s most fearsome power. It was also a sign that the shinobi had made a mistake. Amidst his eagerness to solve the mystery, he had turned the Sword against him.

And now a physical one was pressed against his stomach. “Go! Leave! You’re not welcomed here!”

The sentiment was repeated by Borgia, Daisuke and Hachirobei, too. The Baron said nothing though looked particularly amused, while Masashi was too rattled to have an opinion either way. Like a beaten dog, the Heartless Hound got up and staggered away, not entirely sure of what had happened. The only certainty was that the murderer was getting away.

“That and...I’ve managed to sabotage whatever friendships I had. But I’ve always been this way, haven’t I, Satsu-kun?” Toshio reflected as he walked down the large, carpeted hallways alone. Though the shinobi had made an effort to be more sociable, the reality could no longer be ignored. *“I was never one for making friends. Not even you nor Fuji-sama could teach me that.”*

Toshio hung his head low and raised his shozoku’s mask above his mouth and nose—as if to hide himself from the rest of the world. The ronin’s Jigoku was a dissociative persona of some sort, Toshio surmised, and a hellish one at that judging from their massacre back at Shiroyama’s mansion in Jijinto. He would do likewise, then, becoming the Heartless Hound even if it meant turning everyone against him.

It was with this grave determination that he entered the cellar where the one remaining suspect was held: Sadao Hamasaki. That the cellar wasn’t locked as it should’ve been was Toshio’s first clue that something was amiss. The indentation beside the door suggesting it was forced open was another. The third was the drunken and unkempt appearance of Sadao, moaning and wincing from the light of the hall.

"Hamasaki. Get up," Toshio barked, taking a step inside. He was about to kick the Shinsengumi-turned-kabuki star until he saw the glint of metal half-hidden beneath his robes. He was holding a knife...and his drunken groans were far from genuine. Toshio had long since learned the difference—having traveled with the ronin for as long as he had.

Pulling out his own kunai, he approached the body like a falcon eyeing its prey. Like a mouse, Sadao's moans became more akin to squeaks as Toshio pounced upon him, quickly disarming the disgraced samurai and resting the knife against his throat.

"Don't kill me! Spirits, anyone, I don't want to die!" he pleaded. That, at least, sounded genuine.

Toshio didn't release his grapple but he did pull aside the knife from Sadao's throat—if only to inspect it closer. "A butcher's knife—with blood seeped into the top of the handle. It's fresh," the ninja said after giving it a lick.

"I...I didn't do it! I just needed something to defend myself with!" Sadao cried out once more, though in doing so he revealed quite a bit of information. This interrogation was going to be among the Heartless Hound's easiest.

"You 'didn't do it'...so you've seen the corpse already. I hope you realize what sort of position you're in, being found with the murder weapon. Now tell me who took your ropes off you. I want to know your accomplice."

"They're trying to frame me! They undid my ropes, just like they unlocked the door. I'm innocent, I swear!" he squirmed beneath Toshio, who tightened his hold and pulled back his arm until he got more specific. "You know his name. We came to this island together. He spared me from the Shinsengumi, only to have me killed here instead!"

"If Hatch wanted you dead, he wouldn't have bothered untying your ropes. Yet you marked his name down on the murder scene to frame him. Didn't you? *Didn't you?!*"

Upon the sound of Toshio's yell, a group of footsteps echoed from the hall. The ronin, Masashi, Hatch and Borgia arrived. Sadao cried out, claiming that the ninja was trying to kill him and that was enough for the streetfighter to pull Toshio off and put an early end to the interrogation.

"Zhis is zhe second time we've seen such brutality from your Kondo companion!" the butler said, scowling before addressing Toshio directly. "You forced yourself into zhis locked cellar to coerce a false confession from Mister Sadao, didn't you? How reprehensible!"

"He's lying—don't fall for it!" Toshio yelled, his frustration coming out in his voice. "The door was unlocked when I got here. Sadao was untied and carrying the murder weapon. Either he's the murderer or has been made to look like one. What we need to find out next is who unlocked the door. The only one among us with a key is—"

"This is madness! How dare you claim me a liar, after making up such an outlandish tale! This Kondo's behavior alone arouses suspicion! Do the rest of you not agree with me?" asked the butler, who was fidgeting and showing obvious signs of stress. That the others couldn't tell he was bluffing made Toshio even angrier—which only made Borgia's case even stronger.

"Please, Toshio-san..." Masashi said with a whimper, "...there's no need to hurt anyone. I am certain if we simply talk this out then all will be made clear!"

"The kid's right—mostly," said the ronin, who walked over and pulled up Sadao by the collar. "Except that this bastard deserves everything that's comin' to him. We all saw what he did to his pregnant wife. He was due to be executed today. Didn't have much to lose...but the chef? Wouldn't be my first choice."

Sadao clung to the ronin in a short-lived embrace until the latter tossed the former away and onto the floor. The disgraced samurai landed face-first into a half-eaten bowl of lentil soup, which he desperately coughed out and rubbed clean as if it was poison.

Probably because it was. "He—he tried to poison me!" Sadao screamed, pointing a finger towards Hatch and Borgia. The streetfighter hung his head in shame, while the butler visibly flinched. Wasn't hard to tell that both were involved.

"I didn't know there was poison in it!" Hatch said, clenching his fists and shaking them. "When I saw you choking, I ran off to find the cook. We got into a...well, we got into a fight."

Everything was making sense to Toshio now: Hatch had untied the ropes on Sadao to tie up Mukai after knocking the chef out during a brawl. His intent wasn't to kill him, but to keep him from escaping before the rest of them awoke the next morning. Sadao, thinking it was Hatch who had tried to poison him, attempted to escape until he saw the corpse in the kitchen.

"...realizing he would be the most likely suspect, Sadao framed his would-be killer by writing his name down on the murder scene. This still doesn't answer who spiked the soup or unlocked the cellar door to begin with, though."

"Gah! Get the hands off me at once! You barbarian!" Borgia yelled as Toshio tightened his hold over the dwarf's wrist. The ninja could tell that the butler had been one moment away from bolting out of there—though to the others, it looked quite differently.

"Toshio-san! Stop it!" Masashi yelled, jumping in to intervene. It was hard to say no to such a cute face, though Toshio was about to when the ronin walked forth with a hand idling at the handle of their katana. One look into those fierce and unrelenting eyes was enough for the ninja to let go and comply.

"I've always thought of you as the most reasonable person in our gang, Tosh. Not much of an honor, if I'm honest, but the way you've been acting...I think you've lost it. Hell, I think you've been losing it ever since we got on this island. Go get some sleep: consider it a request, this time."

Toshio wanted to protest, as close as he was to solving the mystery, but the look in the ronin's eyes left little room for protest. He supposed he *had* been acting strange, but considering that there was both a demon and a murderer among them—on an island that shouldn't even exist—Toshio thought he had been acting quite sane.

Fatigue did hit him, then, and so to keep himself awake and away from the others he decided to explore other portions of the mansion. He made his way to the Baron's gallery, unsure of what he was looking for but settling upon a giant oil painting depicting a naked, foreign man being clawed and eaten by a large eagle.

"Pietro Paolo Rubens," the Baron spoke in his foreign tongue. His presence surprised Toshio—not easy to do, even as sleep-deprived as he was. "Prometheus Bound. In punishment for stealing fire from the heavens, the titan Prometheus was nailed to a boulder and tormented each and every day as an eagle devoured his liver. Quite a gruesome punishment in return for aiding mankind, don't you think?"

"Without a liver, he'd die in a matter of hours," Toshio replied curtly. "He wasn't tormented long."

"Oh, on the contrary," the Baron chuckled, stroking his goatee. "For a titan regenerates its body each day, and so Prometheus could never die. What was once considered a blessing had become, for him, the ultimate curse. Quite fascinating!"

The ninja gave no reply. It would seem this painting depicted some foreign myth—one that held little practical application to the matter at hand. And Toshio wasn't referring to the murder of Toshiaki Mukai.

"Our boat passed through a toori—a spiritual gate—before we arrived here. It was well disguised and embedded up high between two giant oaks, but now I'm certain that's how your servant Bashō brought us here. This realm is not part of Hyuga, but of a demon's machinations. And only a foreigner could imagine works such as these," Toshio said, gesturing across the room with one hand while holding tight his kunai with the other.

"Why, I believe you've grrrown delusional, Misterr Toshio! You seem so very tired...why don't you rrrrest your eyes for a while longer? Your companions are certain to uncover the culprit before the trial this evening," the Baron said in an odd accent that almost sounded like a purr.

That was the last exchange the two would have before the ninja excused himself and continued his investigation alone. As the afternoon dragged on, he searched the victim's quarters as well as Daisuke's and Borgia's. Aside from Mukai's horrific manual on how to torture Kondos, Toshio found little of interest. The butler's office was locked—and the deceptive dwarf had already embedded himself into the others' confidence.

dring* *dong* *dring* *dong

The bells signaled that the trial was to begin. It's venue was nothing short of outlandish: it was to take place inside a giant reflecting pool that rippled beneath the drizzling rain. It was lit by a hundred paper lanterns, floating around a circle of raised pedestals for each member of the jury to stand.

They would stand beneath the statue of Lady Justice: the giantess in white marble who wielded a sword in one hand and a weighing scale in the other. She was blindfolded, too, unable to see the outrageous sight beneath her. A sight that included Hachirobei held inside a wooden contraption called a guillotine—which included a raised axe blade over his neck and a basket beside.

As to what that basket was supposed to catch...well, that didn't require much of an imagination.

The Baron cleared his throat. "We gather here this night to seek justice done to the murderer of Toshiaki Mukai. We come here as equals under the almighty law. Our fates are bound to it."

"Our fates are bound to it," Borgia and Daisuke replied in unison.

"Let these lanterns embody our spirits," the Baron said in priestly fashion, "so that they may guide us through the dark depths of our mortal bounds."

Toshio had a bad feeling that only grew worse as the proceedings went underway. Everything seemed too practiced and too refined to be anything short of a prepared trap. The shinobi would have to risk springing it to get Hatch free—and to put the demon in his place.

Unfortunately, he only made it halfway. A key witness in the murder, Sadao Hamasaki, wasn't present. Apparently he had escaped on a raft, potentially taking any chance of solving this mystery along with him. That was bad, but what was worse were the conclusions the others were making.

Mukai's book on torture techniques during the Kondo Wars was brought into evidence for a potential motivation for the killer. It didn't take much reasoning to figure out who it implicated. The ronin had discovered that the chef was indeed the Kondo Butcher, and one look at their troubled features confirmed Toshio's worst fears.

"Tosh...you asked me back on that night about taking another man's life...and at what point one deserves to die. I think we can both agree that Mukai got what was comin' to him. And I..."

"The motivation is clear, is what they are saying!" Borgia spoke up and interrupted the ronin. But instead of getting upset, the one who was to be Hyuga's savior hung their head low in shame. That was when Toshio knew it was over.

A foul magic froze the ninja in place, then, as Toshio was carried off by the lumbering giant Daisuke to take the place of Hatch beneath the guillotine. He couldn't even speak to protest or plead his innocence. At the moment, he envied Lady Justice: for to see the looks on his companion's faces was more than he could bear.

They looked at him as if he was a headless corpse—because that was exactly what he was about to be.

The vote was held, and though it came reluctantly, it was unanimous. Only Masashi failed to comply in the voting, weeping as he was. The magic bounding Toshio to silence lifted just after the Baron asked for his final words. He stared the ronin in the eyes, grit his teeth and spoke:

“Gomenasai! I have failed you. And in doing so, I have failed Satsuma and all of Hyuga as well!”

The last sight Toshio saw was an unforgettable one: while everyone was focused on him, the Baron was changing form. His skin began to pale and grow a dense, thick layer of white fur while his eyes and ears slanted upwards and his nose—now a snout—pushed outwards. An aura of blue flames danced around him as six giant tails grew from behind.

“A kitsune?!”

Lightning struck the moment the axe blade was released from above. It came down with a lurch and a whistle, and before Toshio knew it, it was over. His lifetime of service...had come to an end.

■■■■

“Uah-whua...WHAAAAAA!”

Toshio awoke to the sound of a shriek from downstairs. He jumped from his futon and clutched at his neck to find that it was still attached to his shoulders. The ninja tried to process all that had happened and earned himself a terrible migraine for doing so.

“A dream...a more lucid one that I’ve ever recalled. That must be it!” Toshio assured himself as he made his way downstairs. That assurance quickly faded upon the horrific-yet-familiar sight waiting for him in the kitchen.

Toshiaki Mukai’s corpse was splayed open no differently than it had been in his dream. When the others arrived they reacted just as they had before down to the very number of gasps and sobs.

“What’s going on here?!” Toshio asked, though his meaning was misinterpreted.

“Toshiaki Mukai has been murdered,” the Baron replied in a resounding tone. “**A person on this island killed him.** As evidence stands, Hachirobei is the killer.”

“No!” both Toshio and Hatch yelled in unison. The ninja fell to his knees and clutched his head trying to make sense of it all. He bit his tongue, pulled at his hair and even cut himself with his kunai to make certain he wasn’t dreaming. It made for a disturbing enough sight that the ronin intervened.

“Hey, Tosh,” they said, bringing the ninja in close. “Keep it together, would you? Can’t be your first time seein’ a corpse. We both know Hatch wouldn’t hurt a fly, so—”

“I’ve seen this already!” Toshio yelled, grabbing the ronin and pulling him towards the chef’s body. “I’ve investigated this before: look, two gashes from a butcher’s knife! We’ll find that weapon in the hands of Sadao in the wine cellar. Those ropes—they were tied by Hachirobei, who knocked out the chef after Sadao was nearly poisoned. Everything is the same as it was!”

Though the ronin didn't reply with a curse, the blank look on their face was far more damning. They looked as if they were watching a crazy person amidst a manic fit. Toshio turned to each of the others to see that their faces mimicked the same. This only frustrated him further and made him seem even crazier.

"What I say is the truth! We've had this investigation and trial before! I was executed beneath a guillotine while the true murderer—the demon of this island—remained free! And that kitsune demon...he stands before us right *here!*"

Toshio pointed at the Baron who didn't so much as raise an eyebrow in surprise. He didn't have to: compared to his dignified composure, Toshio was a tattered mess, screaming and making wild claims that no one could believe. The others muttered among themselves until the consensus was clear: the ninja was to hand over his kunai and excuse himself.

"You're playing into the demon's hands!" Toshio warned the ronin as he handed over his weapon. "Please tell me you believe me."

"Maybe I do. But I also know this island tends to play tricks on people. Did a number on me yesterday, remember? Seeing as you're actin' insane and all...might be best if you lay down and get some sleep."

Toshio gritted his teeth but nodded. He *was* tired, and stumbled around as he walked—even being so clumsy as to collide into Borgia on his way out of the kitchen. After promptly apologizing, he left the murder scene. He took the paper he had just pickpocketed from the butler's jacket along with him.

"If my theory is correct, Borgia was the one to unlock the cellar and poison the soup Hatch delivered last night to Sadao. But what I'm missing is a motive," Toshio mused, before opening the parchment and letting out a gasp. The written words brought forth a series of emotions ranging from surprise to outright rage.

Reborn son, beware,

the Lion whose reign must end,

sends one in his stead.

Test of devotion,

and for your family's health—

KILL HIS SAMURAI.

It was a pair of haiku, but more than that, it was a threat—not just to the Emperor but to Borgia as well. Whoever wrote this was a member of the rebellion, and their target had been none other than the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens.

“Except that the Sword is...not quite as refined as many assume an Imperial samurai would be. When Sadao Hamasaki—a member of the Shinsengumi—arrived on the island, Borgia must’ve mistook him as the intended target instead. That’s why he poisoned the soup.”

The timeline of events revolving around the murder was all coming together yet the murderer remained unknown. Toshio was almost certain that demonic magic was at play here—especially given what had happened at the trial last time.

Recalling that trial spurred him over to Mukai’s room to pick up the book of torture techniques and dispose it, considering that it had doomed him before. Unfortunately, Masashi was already there when he arrived, thumbing through the letters that Toshio had ignored last time.

Turns out he shouldn’t have.

“Oh, g-greetings, Toshio-san!” Masashi said, obviously spooked. Apparently the ninja’s outburst earlier had done him no favors. “This is, erm, a very interesting correspondence between Mukai-san and his wife, Sakiko-san. They...certainly spared no details,” the shugenja blushed.

“Sakiko...I’ve heard that name before,” Toshio thought aloud, recalling the memories of his youth. Then he recalled something that should’ve been obvious: Sakiko was the name of Satsuma’s aunt and Seijirō’s sister. Called the Lioness, in life she had been the greatest threat to Satsuma’s well-being. “She was married off to a hero from the Kondo Wars, to live away from the Capital somewhere near Tonogasha.”

“Do you mean...could this estate have been there’s, Toshio-san?” Masashi asked, exceptionally insightful as usual. “But it’s all rather strange...I could’ve sworn that the Baron mentioned his wife was also Sakiko. That Baka said he had a portrait of her in his bedchambers, too.”

‘That Baka’ was of course the ronin. Toshio didn’t wish to speculate what they were doing in the Baron’s bedchambers, only that he was going to pay a visit there as well. The ninja had never seen Sakiko before, though he was very familiar with the Emperor’s facial features. He would be able to tell at a glance if it was indeed his late aunt.

“What is this? Why is the Sword’s face up there?” Toshio thought aloud as he gazed upon the portrait. The paint used for the face was much fresher than the rest of it, as if it had been covered over recently. With a desire both to remove the ronin’s face and to find the one beneath, the ninja grabbed a cloth from the Baron’s easel, dipped it in turpentine, and proceeded to wipe away the face.

What he saw beneath it wasn’t Sakiko’s. Or anyone’s at all: it was a spiral of flesh, impossibly twisted and blurred. The sight of it drew Toshio into madness—as if he wasn’t already there. His very spirit cried out as his vision began to tunnel around him. The sound of the chamber door creaking open made him turn to see who it was.

Though the figure was twisted, turned sideways and distorted. Or maybe it wasn’t.

"My, my, how unforrrrtunate. You don't look so well, Misterrr Toshio," the Baron said with a purr. He approached with heavy footsteps that made a painful echo throughout Toshio's skull, compelling him to claw off his skin and tear away his hair. When the Baron made it to the ninja's collapsed form, he kneeled beside him and brought his face next to his.

Except that it wasn't his face, but Toshio's own.

"I hope you're enjoying this game as much as I am!"

■■■■■

"Uah-whua...**WHAAAAAA!**"

Toshio awoke to the sound of a shriek from downstairs. He jumped from his futon and clutched at his face to make sure it was still there. After ensuring it was, he clutched at his heart as it pounded out of his chest.

"The face-stealing magic of the kitsune...just a glimpse of it was enough to drive me mad! What hope do I have against this?"

The ninja didn't have an answer, and found himself reluctant to go downstairs once more. The Baron pronounced Toshiaki Mukai's death as he always did, and declared Hatch as the presumptive murderer just as before. Toshio kept his eyes on the foreigner throughout it all, with a gaze heavy enough for the ronin to notice.

"Hey, Tosh," they said, bringing Toshio aside and snapping their fingers in his face. "You in there? I'm askin' because you've been out of it for the past five minutes. We need your expertise here if we're going to clear Hatch's name. We both know he wouldn't hurt a fly, so—"

"The helmet," Toshio said, looking over the murder scene once more. It was the one item of interest he had yet to explore. Could the answers all be found there? Was it really that easy? "The magical helmet that reflects one's memories outward...we can use it to determine what each of us were doing last night."

"Zhat is true!" Borgia shouted. "Zhe device in zhe music room shall prove our guilt or innocence promptly!"

The rest of the group was enthusiastic as well, with two exceptions: Hachirobei and the ronin. No doubt the former felt guilty over beating up the chef and turning him into a helpless victim for the murderer. As for the latter...

"I don't think this is such a good idea, Tosh," the ronin said, grabbing ahold of the shinobi while the rest of the group went inside the wooden theater. "I can't speak on behalf of the others, but I've got some memories I'd rather not relive. And as for last night..."

"I understand your reluctance. More than you may know," Toshio replied, referring to what the two had witnessed in this theater before. "But I need to understand the truth behind this magic—and its limitations."

The ronin grimaced and was about to say something more when Masashi yelled at them to hurry on in. They shook their head but complied, and the group took front row seats just as they had with Sadao Hamasaki's murder of his wife. Toshio found it hard to imagine that anyone's memories would be half as horrific as that.

Boy, was he wrong.

At first was Borgia who had no distinct memories of last night—aside from mixing in an odd powder into the chef's soup and accepting Hatch's offer to deliver it to Sadao for a late-night meal. When asked what he had spiked the lentils with, the butler assured them it was a mixture of cumin and coriander.

"More like hemlock and nightshade," Toshio mused, though kept the thought to himself.

The ronin was up next, though was in no hurry to step onto the stage nor get strapped into the chair. He only agreed to do so after tasking Hatch with fetching them some wine—which the streetfighter was more than happy to do so. With him gone, the ronin was ready to get started.

Though the scene that appeared on the giant canvas before them was not of last night nor of any night before, but of a godforsaken afternoon at an orphanage during a hot summer in Genfu. To describe the scene in a single word...it was gruesome. Unbelievably so, with half-torn and half-chewed bodies of children splayed about in various stages of death and dying. Among them was a child coated in blood, gulping shreds of flesh and gnawing bones to get at their marrow.

That child was none other than the savior of Hyuga. The Sword Who Cuts the Heavens faced their younger self and in doing so, let out a roar that echoed down Toshio's spine. Brilliant, golden light burst forth from out of the ronin's eyes as they broke their leather bounds and unsheathed their katana.

Enveloped in rage and consumed by the Jigoku, the ronin went berserk. Daisuke—large as he was, was cut like a stick of butter beneath the summer sun. Borgia was no different, gurgling blood in his last breath as the ronin sent their sword through his mouth. Toshio rushed to grab Masashi in an attempt to spare him, and he did—if only for a moment.

The one whom Toshio was meant to serve plunged their katana across his back, severing his spine and sending waves of agony throughout the parts of him that withheld any feeling at all. Masashi weeped into Toshio's chest, the ninja's blue shozoku turning a shade of purple. It took all the strength Toshio had to turn over and watch the ronin cut Hachirobei and the barrel he was holding in half—sending blood and wine spraying in the aftermath.

It was after then that the ronin collapsed and broke from their demented fury. They took in large, heaping breaths as they gazed upon the carnage they had wrought. Though Toshio's vision was

darkening, he saw clearly enough to bear witness as the savior of Hyuga plunged their sword into their chest.

As all hope was lost, the Baron—now the kitsune—approached the ninja once more. Even as animal-like as he was, there was no mistaking the grin on his face.

“What an amusing turrn of events! Will you be able to see your beloved champion the same way again? I suppose we’ll find out in our next game!”

Toshio spat out a wad of blood. “I’m not...I’m not playing your game...demon!”

“Oh, trrrrust me, *that* can be arranged!”

■■■■■

“Uah-whua...**WHAAAAAA!**”

Toshio awoke to the sound of a shriek from downstairs. This made for the fourth time this had happened already. He needed a plan. He had nearly all the pieces required to solve the case—he just had to present them in a way that didn’t implicate him as the killer.

He had a good idea of what to do as he made his way to the kitchen. The others gasped and cried as they usually did, though this time they seemed to be more emotional than usual. Toshio thought he might have just been imagining it until the ronin fell to their knees looking absolutely dejected.

“Is something the matter?” Toshio asked. “Why is the chef’s death affecting you so deeply?”

“T...Tosh, I...I...” the ronin trailed off into half-withheld sobs, cupping their hands against their face. In contrast, Masashi weeping openly while Hatch punched the walls, countertops and even himself.

Looking closer at the corpse, Toshio realized the reason for the inconsistencies. His green eyes went wide—as wide as those on the body lying dead on the ground before him. For the corpse wasn’t Mukai’s...but his own.

“I’m not dead! That isn’t me!” Toshio insisted, yelling at his friends to cease their mourning. He reached out to grab the ronin and stretched right through them as they were made of air. But they weren’t—*he* was, and he confirmed as much by looking down at his hands and seeing the blood-stained floor right through them.

“Mister Toshio has been murdered,” the Baron replied in a resounding tone. “***A person on this island killed him.*** As evidence stands, our shogi finalist is the killer.”

Toshio did a double-take before glancing at the bloody symbols written on the floor beneath his own corpse. It was the ronin’s name, and it was as if he had wrote them just before he died.

"I didn't do this!" they yelled, their eyes flickering from black to gold. "But whoever the hell did—I'm gonna make them pay!"

There was some selfish happiness to be had, Toshio found, in seeing the ronin get so upset on the account of his death. The happiness quickly faded, however, when he saw the ronin's keen mind and instincts succumb to rage. What unfolded wasn't an investigation so much as an inquisition, with them threatening any and everyone at swordpoint—with Masashi as the sole exception.

As the day went on, Toshio witnessed Hatch and Sadao working on a raft to escape the island. It was an interesting alternative to taking part in the trial, but the streetfighter's good nature was taken advantage of in the end, and Sadao set off without him. Knowing how the ex-Shinsengumi member escaped in the first place was good information, but useless in Toshio's incorporeal state.

When the trial commenced that night, with the ronin beneath the guillotine, a lightning storm unlike any other erupted from out of the sky. Though Toshio was not a shugenja, he had been around enough of them to gain an understanding of how their magic worked. Almost always, they required written talismans to bring forth their will from another plane of existence.

The only exception was with the most powerful of shugenja during their most intense, life-or-death moments. To draw forth such untamed power was regarded as myth by most scholars and yet—after this night—Toshio knew it was much more.

Masashi, harnessing everything it was to be human—the ultimate feelings of anger, fear, sadness and love—brought forth from the heavens a ball of lightning that sparked out and was accompanied by a deafening thunder. The mansion before them was torn asunder, while Lady Justice disintegrated above them.

A brilliant, blinding white light was the last Toshio would see. At least before it was time to play again.

■■■■

"Uah-whua...**WHAAAAAA!**"

Toshio woke up but didn't bother rising from his futon this time. He had long since lost count of how many days had passed and how many games him and the kitsune had played. The demon's delight at his pain was limitless; he had died a hundred times and watched his friends die many more.

From gunpowder explosions in the cellar to a mystical shogi board channeling messages from Sakiko herself, the kitsune had no end of tortuous scenarios for Toshio to endure. The ninja had long since examined and explored every inch of the mansion: obtaining a rudimentary understanding of foreign script and mastery over several musical instruments. By taking on these pursuits and ignoring everything else, Toshio had been called everything from a simple 'baka' to a complete psychopath.

The simple fact was that he had given up caring long ago. This indifference coupled with the removal of any and all consequences prompted him to do things he'd otherwise never consider. He had grown a

penchant for wine, for example, and the boldness it offered. He had even...offered himself to the ronin on more than one occasion.

Toshio shook his head out of shame. The ronin had been tempted every time though never indulged him—for multiple reasons, but above all due to how oddly he was acting. Though Toshio understood this, it was hard to be normal when you had to relive the same day countless times over. He had long since forgotten what 'normal' even was anymore.

"I've tried everything to break this hellish cycle...Satsu-kun...why didn't you warn me of this?!"

He didn't have the energy in him to be frustrated nor did he have the patience to go through the motions in the kitchen once again. He knew every line they would say and every reaction they would give. So instead, he picked up a flask of wine on his way outside to watch the sunrise on the pier.

Toshio sat at the edge of it, watching the same sight he had beheld dozens of times before. To his surprise, it remained beautiful even as the rest of the world had long since grown drab and boring. He liked to imagine what life was like beyond the ocean...though he knew there was nothing to be found there. Many iterations ago he had taken a raft and found the edge of it.

"Nothing but a blank canvas," Toshio spoke to himself. He had said that before, too, and took down a chug of wine. He'd stay like this for a moment more, until finally...

"There you are! We need your help here, Tosh! The cook's been murdered—and they're blamin' it on Hatch. We both know he—"

"—wouldn't hurt a fly. Indeed," Toshio said, interrupting the ronin and taking another gulp of wine.

The ronin was confused by the ninja's behavior, though proceeded to step forth and sit beside him on the edge of the pier, dangling his feet just an inch above the waters below. Toshio handed over the flask just as the ronin was about to ask for it, and a bit of silence grew between them—at least until Toshio broke into laughter.

"What's so funny?" the ronin asked.

"You were about to make a pun about drinking wine and making...*pour* decisions. Never fails to make me smile."

The ronin stared at Toshio for a long while before taking another chug of wine. Then he got an idea—and not a bad one. Just not accurate in this case.

"Right, Sadao's mind-reading ring. The one he used to cheat himself into the finals of the shogi tournament," Toshio interrupted before they could start. "No, I'm not wearing it. And no, it wouldn't help us in the investigation—we've already tried. Though we could read each other's minds, we can't read the Baron's without him knowing. Since he's the demon of manipulation, he'd only use it to drive a wedge against us."

The ronin stared at Toshio for even longer while after that, before chugging the remainder of the flask. He braced a hand against his head and tried to make sense of it all. His insight was sharp—especially for someone who was no longer sober.

“Since you seem to know everything I’m gonna say, I take it we’ve had this conversation a few times before. Can’t imagine how boring that must be...it’s amazing you haven’t gone insane yet, Tosh.”

“I’m long past that point, my dear, but it does make me happy to hear you say it,” Toshio said though couldn’t do so without a hint of embarrassment—not even after the tenth time of saying it. Confessing his feelings like this when nothing mattered was cheating, Toshio knew, but he had to voice them to keep what sanity he had left intact.

It was incredibly selfish to play with the ronin’s feelings this way, and he apologized as he had every time before. They wouldn’t accept it so easily.

“Don’t apologize for me. Hell—makes me happy that you haven’t gotten sick and tired of me yet after all these repeats. Have we, uh...?”

“You ask that every time,” Toshio grinned. “No, we haven’t.”

“Then how about we make this the last time. Seems like this demon wants us to solve a murder mystery,” the ronin said, standing up to their feet and pulling Toshio up beside them. “So how about we play their game. We’ll figure out what’s going on and—”

“That won’t work. I already know every aspect of the murder: from the weapon that killed him, to the motivation and timeline of events before and after Mukai’s death. I’ve solved this case a hundred times, but it never matters in the end...I am either discredited, disbelieved, or otherwise deposed by the kitsune’s magic. It’s hopeless—even though you’ll tell me it isn’t.”

The ronin grabbed Toshio and shook him. In doing so, the winds around them picked up and the cry of swallows could be heard in the distance. The ninja was in such awe that he nearly missed what they were saying.

“...come on, don’t tell me you’ve given up! I’ll spare you the motivational speech seein’ as you’ve probably already heard it, but I sure didn’t lose to this demon a hundred times for no reason! Hey—you listening?”

Toshio was stunned at the sight overhead. A flock of blue-backed and golden-bellied barn swallows circled above them. These were the ronin’s spirit animal, but more than that, it was a deviation Toshio had never witnessed before.

“Y-yes, I’m listening! What should I do? I will do anything to break this curse!”

The ronin cracked his neck before cracking his knuckles and then finally a smile, too. “You say you’ve done everything to solve this mystery, but I got a guess as to somethin’ you haven’t tried yet. Knowing

you, Tosh, you've been handling this mystery all on your own—carrying it all on your shoulders so no one else has to.”

“What do you mean...what should I do?”

“Start believing in me, for starters. I might just be a dumb ronin from Genfu, but I'm a sharp enough swordsman so long as I'm pointed the right way. Help me figure out what's going on and maybe...maybe I can be somethin' more. I know we can do this if we work together, you and I.”

Toshio recalled a phrase he had spoken before, so long ago on the beach during their first night on the island: *“If the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens dulls, my life will be the whetstone to sharpen it once more. If my actions are not just, may they at least be right.”*

He realized what he had been doing wrong all this time. His mistake was obvious to him now: instead of being at the Sword's side and making them stronger, he had stepped out in front and blocked their path. His own ego and pride as a detective had gotten in the way of helping the one who was to save them all.

“I say somethin' wrong, Tosh? Not like you to get teary-eyed.”

Toshio leaped into the ronin and embraced them, pulling them in tightly and refusing to let go. Masashi and Hatch arrived at the most inopportune time, and yet the ninja couldn't release the one he loved. The one who had given him hope when he needed it most.

The one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with—*after* they got off this damn island.

■■■■■

“Uah-whua...**WHAAAAAA!**”

Toshio awoke to the sound of a shriek from downstairs. Borgia's scream would be imprinted on his mind forever, he knew, yet he smiled all the same. For the first time in countless iterations, Toshio was determined to do things properly. The ronin's words were fresh in his mind.

“I have to act as if I wear a fresh pair of ears and eyes...I can do this, for you,” he said to himself as he rushed downstairs along with the others. He looked upon the murdered Toshiaki Mukai in surprise—or at least feigned it—and waited patiently for the others to get over their initial shock.

“Looks like we've got another game to play, kid. I have a feeling this one will be more dangerous than shogi,” the ronin said to Masashi though their words might as well have been spoken to Toshio instead. He had been acting as a spoiled child—he realized—throwing tantrums and being a sore loser all because he never tried to learn the rules and play properly.

But all that was about to change.

With a newfound boldness, Toshio approached the ronin without their noticing—at least until he placed both of his hands upon their shoulders. He clamped down his grip as if to prevent them from running away. “Be sure of yourself. And no one else.”

Borgia coughed and interrupted their moment. “Z-zhe murderer is clear! Mister Mukai wrote it, in his own blood!”

“I swear I didn’t do it! So stop pointin’ fingers, you halfman!” Hatch yelled in reply, declaring his innocence for the thousandth time.

The butler was relentless, continuing to goad the streetfighter with accusations. It wasn’t especially wise: in the variations where a fight broke between them, Borgia had a perfectly losing record. “You’re a brute, an unwelcomed guest, and a murderer besides!”

The Baron restrained his employee while Masashi grappled Hatch around the waist to stop them from fighting. The ronin was anxious to get between them, too, but that would take precious time they didn’t have.

“Forget the distraction,” Toshio said, “we both know there’s more here than what at first appears. In our time together I have observed what goes on behind your eyes. And I do not speak of your golden ones. You have with you a weapon sharper than the steel by your side, if only you wielded it properly. Do you know what it is?”

The ronin didn’t know and gave no reply, and so Toshio would have to be less subtle. He had to prove to them that they weren’t some ‘dumb ronin from Genfu’ but something infinitely greater. No one in their life had ever encouraged their intellect and wit—both of which Toshio knew was far more vast than they themselves realized.

And so he lifted his hands from the ronin’s shoulders and brought them up to their forehead. “Your mind. You are a genius, and yet you refuse to realize it.”

The investigation began in earnest, then, and Toshio found himself truly excited about it for the first time since the very beginning. Unlike before, it wasn’t a personal excitement for patching together the clues but a vicarious one through the ronin: watching them puzzle out what had long since been routine for him was incredibly rewarding.

“There are five elements of this corpse worth investigating. A single word for each is all we need. I’m not telling you to make a choice—I am asking you to think,” Toshio said, holding back a grin. His glee only grew as the ronin deduced one clue after another, in some ways performing an even more thorough investigation than he had during the first iteration.

“If only I would’ve let you help me from the very start...how much torment would that have spared me?”

After everything from the murder scene was observed and deduced, the Baron clapped his hands. “What a display of detective work! Who knew we had such a pair of sleuths among us?” he asked aloud,

giving Toshio a smile that grew from ear to ear. “The tribunal will be tonight, and I grant you free reign around the mansion until then.”

The ninja glared at his eternal enemy until the ronin tapped his shoulder and brought him back to reality—such as it was. It prompted Toshio to ask them a question he’d been meaning to ask for many iterations now. “I would have you be honest with me. This game—as you first put it—do you enjoy playing? And is it wrong if I...if I...”

“Doesn’t matter if you like the game, because we have to win.”

Toshio nodded and grinned. “We can only win if we find the truth, and our opponent is a demon of manipulation. I can think of no better challenge, no higher stakes, and no greater purpose than this!”

And so the investigation went on: from interrogating Sadao to chasing down Borgia, to breaking apart and ensuring the ronin had possession of the magical ring for the trial, Toshio played his role to a tee. He risked everything on a gambit that the kitsune had never seen before: giving a false confession. Controlling his thoughts amidst it all so that the ronin could read them accurately—and not think he had gone insane—was the most difficult bit of all.

But it was all worth it in the end, as the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens proved themselves worthy of their title, embracing and manifesting their spirit—and in doing so, shining a light straight through the kitsune’s lies. The demon of manipulation contradicted himself, and with the authority above all others, the Sword sentenced him to death.

Truth was contagious, and in the heat of the moment Toshio found himself admitting the words he had only dared speak before—back when such confessions didn’t matter. That this would be their last and final day on this island meant every word spoken now meant everything.

“I am ashamed,” he whispered with a heat rising in his voice, “for these feelings I hold for you. I have been ashamed of them since the moment you sat by my side, in the teahouse where we first met.”

The ronin gazed upon his eyes, bringing their lips ever closer to his. This was all Toshio ever wanted and more. To be free from this hellish cycle...and to move forth beside the one he loved. Their lips would seal that future together.

“Yo! Look at you!” Hatch slammed a pat against the ronin’s back, destroying their kiss as well as the atmosphere. “When those birds came down, I was afraid you’d be in white—if you know what I mean! But this has got to be the sharpest kimono I’ve ever seen! The color really works well on you.”

The kiss may have been over but the battle wasn’t. The kitsune went berserk, screaming about injustice until the very end—with the trial concluded, so too did his magic. Watching his head get chopped off from beneath the guillotine...it was a sight Toshio would never forget.

And yet, though the island—the illusion—was collapsing around them, the demon was not yet vanquished. The ronin and the ninja climbed the steps up to the mansion, until it was time for them to

part.

"I know what you intend," Toshio stopped at the top of the stairs. He didn't want to turn around and risk revealing the emotions raging inside him. "You intend to fight this demon alone. Hashimoto-san is too gentle, and Hachirobei-san is too kind. They would not abandon you. You should be glad," his voice wavered, "that I am so heartless and cruel."

"They may be too gentle and too kind, but you're too reserved."

"I only wish you were correct." Toshio turned to face the ronin, bringing their hand to his chest. "It beats as if to break out from its cage. My only purpose in this life is to insure that you complete yours," he whispered, "so why does my heart beg me to stop you?"

Throughout all the iterations and amidst the countless pain and suffering Toshio had endured, no torture was greater than being helpless: to be unable to save his friends and the ronin most of all. Yet as the two shared their final kiss on this forsaken island and as Toshio watched the ronin go, one truth became evident above all others.

"Endless pain and countless trials...with you at my side, there is nothing I can't overcome!"

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

[Aug 7, 2020](#)

Hey readers! Wanted to give everyone an update about the side stories going forward. I always knew the time would come when I would squeeze the last remaining juice out of these characters. There's only so much more I can explore with them going forward, and so I'm setting a limit to the sidestories at 30.

The 30th sidestory will be one for Junko/Jun, as a sort of finale (lol) as I know there's been a big demand for her/him for some time. That means there will be 4 remaining stories you guys can vote on. You'll see that some of the options have been removed: I'm sorry if your favorite got pulled, but I wanted to focus down the voting a bit as we started to wrap things up.

Doing these sidestories has proven to be a big but rewarding challenge. They are weighing on me, I'll admit, but I'm happy to do them especially between early access's so you guys can (kinda) get your money's worth! After the 30th story is done, I plan on taking a break from doing them for a while.

After which, who knows? HYUGA HIGHSCHOOL ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE?!

≥ω≤



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 (+12)

4%

Daisuke, the servant (+8)

0%

Gensai, the swordmaster (+28)

41%

Keiko, the maid (+15)

2%

Kohaku, the samurai (+4)

4%

Kuniko, the farmer (+23)

0%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+26)

22%

Nishi, the yakuza (+28)

7%

Satsuma, the emperor (+22)

19%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+12)

2%

Poll ended Aug 31, 2020 · 54 votes total

[All About Art](#)

[Aug 10, 2020](#)

How do you feel about artwork (illustrations) in interactive fiction games?

I love it! The more art the better!

I like it. I think it adds to the story.

I'm indifferent about it.

I'm not a huge fan of art in IF games.

I hate it! Text only or GTFO!

128 votes total

[MC #12's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Aug 11, 2020](#)

The design for MC #12 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Masculine, Drifter**

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

Short (+11)

28%

Long (+0)

6%

Ponytail (+20)

53%

Chonmage (+9)

9%

Long bangs (+0)

4%

Poll ended Aug 15, 2020 · 47 votes total

[MC #12 Face Art](#)

[Aug 31, 2020](#)

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 Ishiyan ([twitter](#))!

This month's build: **Masculine, Drifter, Ponytail**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[Sep 1, 2020](#)

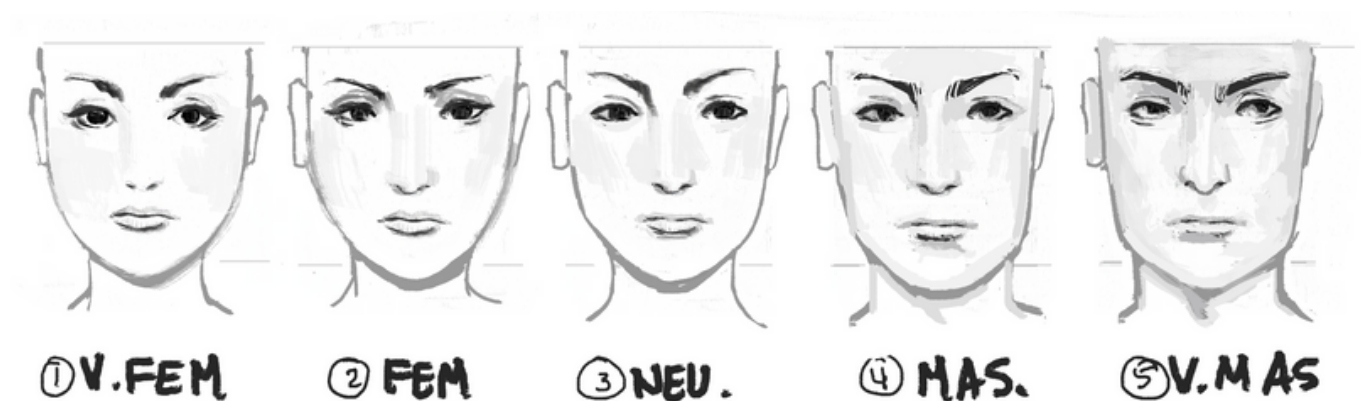
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+13)

48%

Feminine (+9)

19%

Neutral (+10)

21%

Masculine (+0)

7%

Very masculine (+4)

5%

Poll ended Sep 5, 2020 · 42 votes total

[MC #13's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Sep 6, 2020](#)

The design for MC #13 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 (+4)

0%

Calculated (+9)

0%

Perverted (+8)

26%

Chivalrous (+1)

5%

Charming (+3)

11%

Stoic (+3)

0%

Drifter (+0)

0%

Protective (+5)

8%

Brutal (+7)

8%

Finesse (+24)

42%

Poll ended Sep 10, 2020 · 38 votes total

[Side Story #26: Gensai's Golden Era](#)

[Sep 7, 2020](#)

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



Side Story 26: Gensai's Golden Era



■■ *The Midlands* ■■

Central Hyuga was a lush land of bamboo forests, of gorges with criss-crossing rivers between them, and fields ripe for harvesting azuki and soybeans. Centuries ago, villages sprung up and prospered all around the area, over time forming clans with their own distinct culture and heritage. They developed mostly everything on their own—down to even their sword techniques—independent of their neighbors and outsiders most of all.

For them to unite and fight side-by-side meant the situation was bad. For them to call upon the Northern, Western and Eastern clans for help meant it was downright dire.

VrrruhUMMM

A conch shell broke the tense silence of the samurai holding position at Kiso River. They wore colors and emblems of all sorts, wearing various types of armor and armaments, too, but more importantly, they were surrounded by an enemy they couldn't even see. While they had the swords, spears and bows to match any opponent, they hadn't accounted for shugenja magic.

An unnaturally-dense fog on a dry summer's day hid the Imperial army's approach. The Southern samurai who swore their allegiance to Yamato and its Emperor waded across both sides of the river under the cover of mist. They were led by a giant of a man called Benkei, who was no mere soldier—though he wielded a naginata atop his horse with profound skill.

He was a shungeja: a magician capable of tapping into the power of the spirits themselves to bring his will into reality. Tying a talisman to his polearm, he raised it up high and twirled in the air, over and over, the fog forming into a cyclone above him. With the mists lifted, the signal was given for the Imperials to launch their attack.

"Don't let a single one of them escape! Let them know the Mad Lion's wrath as we rip the manes off their backs!"

War cries and yells followed. The battlefield was in chaos; there was no organization or designated lines of attack. This would change in the years that followed, as commanders from both sides would grow more skilled and strategic, but as of now, both the Imperial forces and the united clans fought with nothing but frantic desperation.

Having only known peace for generations, these samurai lacked experience in battle. But not all Hyugans had known peace in this era. There were those in one such group who weren't just raised to fight, but were born in conflict—in a perpetual blood feud against their eternal rival. They were...

"The Takeda! They're here! The Northerners have come to save us!" came a rallying cry from the overwhelmed samurai. Never before had the sight of four black squares atop a field of red been so beautiful and so fearsome, led by a young samurai who had already gained a legendary reputation.

"Gensai Takeda! The Demon with Golden-Eyes is here!"

Gensai cut through the enemy forces—in quite the literal sense, not so much as pausing his charge as he slayed one Imperial after another. His opponents were called samurai but he found them anything but: they were cowards who couldn't even hold their swords properly. Even his eight-year old son had better technique than the soldiers he was splitting in two.

His men were right behind them, each of them already a veteran of a dozen battles with the Uesugi. No strangers to war, they showed no mercy to the Imperial soldiers even as they routed in fear for their lives. Even their prideful commander could see the tides turn and ordered their retreat. He summoned the mist once again to hide their tracks.

But Gensai had foreseen the retreat coming, and cut Benkei off where the river was at its shallowest. That Gensai could see him at all in this dense fog was surprising enough for the shugenja; that his eyes

emitted a golden light terrified him.

“So you’re their commander...the one with golden eyes, huh? You don’t look so fearsome to me!” Benkei shouted, swinging his naginata around in a display of skill. Gensai gave no reaction but to hold his katana up and ready. Unlike the samurai, the shugenja was atop a steed and had a much longer reach—a deadly combination, one that gave confidence to his charge.

“For the Emper—aAH!” he yelled as he fell forward and off his saddle, rolling headfirst into the stream. Gensai vanished right as Benkei was about to strike him down. The samurai’s speed made him a blur while his strength was enough to cut Benkei in two. Though the shungeja hadn’t been the samurai’s victim.

Benkei looked back and in horror, saw his beloved horse slashed wide open. A giant stallion, cut into two with a single, horizontal strike.

“Who are you...no, *what* are you?!” Benkei asked as he struggled to his feet, shaking in his sandals. Though he possessed powers from another realm and towered over his opponent, the fearsome commander could do nothing but add his piss to the Kiso River as Gensai approached him.

The lord of the Takeda answered with steel, severing Benkei’s right arm from his elbow. He did so with no more than a flick of the wrist, in a manner one would swat a troublesome fly. For that was what Benkei was, to him.

Gensai picked up the shugenja’s arm and tossed it back at him, giving his declaration in a voice of unquestionable authority:

“I am Gensai Takeda! Take this back to your lion Emperor. Tell him that he has chosen dangerous prey!”

The Imperial forces retreated thereafter with what few survivors they had. The bolstered clan forces wanted to pursue the enemy further, though Gensai ordered them not to. “Let them lick their wounds. We’ve secured the river—that’s all that matters. Now allow me a moment alone to reflect on the battle.”

Gensai waited until he was alone to withdraw the right hand he kept hidden inside his kimono. It was shaking as it always did after using that fearsome power—more than that, the flesh was blackened as veins bulged down his arm. It would settle down in time, Gensai knew, but this was the reason the swordsman didn’t engage in lengthy battles.

“To kill...whatever this curse is, it desires nothing more. Joukei-chan, if only I could hear your voice. None but yours can calm this monster within me.”

Joukei was the wife he had left behind in Hokusei. She was a wonderful woman and a patient one, too, to put up with a husband who traveled for months on end to train and challenge sword schools across Hyuga. She had been afflicted with a sickness just a week prior to Gensai leaving for war. He hadn’t wanted to leave her side, yet the central clans were desperate for aid.

Gensai grit his teeth as the tremors grew and as his arm began to flail as if amidst a seizure. Embracing this power within him was always easy—it was the ‘letting go’ that was becoming increasingly difficult. It was a power that had been with him since he was a boy, since those dark weeks trapped within Toi Mine with the others.

The samurai shook off those thoughts, thankful to be interrupted by one of his messengers. This one was from the rear convoy. “My apologies, Gensai-sama, but there is an issue with one of the caravans. They found a stowaway.”

“An enemy spy? A shinobi?”

“No...it’s your son, sir.”

■■■■

A month had passed since the Takeda arrived in the Midlands, aiding in the defence of the other clans. They had brought manpower and skilled swords enough to push back the Imperial forces, yet a lack of supplies were quickly becoming an issue. The Emperor had focused his efforts on cutting their supply routes to the east and west, and as such, they could only rely on the northern passages to keep themselves fed.

Ichiro—Gensai’s son—was munching on stale rice balls while on lookout duty towards their northern flank. As there was little to no chance of an attack from that direction, it wasn’t so much of a duty as it was a punishment considering an eight year old was of little use on the battlefield. His father had said as much with far less kinder words, striking him four weeks earlier.

The boy nursed the bruise on his right cheek. While it had long since healed and no physical pain remained, the sting of disappointing his father remained. Ichiro had wanted to help and follow in his father’s footsteps, but he was shunned for jeopardizing their clan’s future and worrying his mother, Joukei.

“But Mother is ill...it isn’t like they would let me visit her, anyway. And what good does it do me to sit around the mansion all day while Father is at war? How else am I gonna learn to be a proper samurai like him some day?”

Ichiro was so busy moping that he nearly didn’t see the white banners nor the samurai in matching armor approaching his position from down the road. Their numbers were in the hundreds; the sight alone was enough to freeze the boy in fear. Doubly so when he saw that their emblems were of two swallows kissing.

“Uesugi!” the boy yelled as he ran, running to his father to warn him of the enemy. “They’re here to attack us from behind!”

■■■■

Gensai was at a meeting: one of the countless councils he had the obligation to sit on among the other clan heads. The group had decided to call themselves the Azuniki Alliance, a combination of Azuma (East), Nishi (West), and Kita (North). As for which word was used first, second and third...it had taken the group two weeks of lengthy debate to decide.

That was how productive these meetings were.

"Their main encampment is in a heavily wooded area. I ain't able to commit my horses to such a...brazen frontal assault," Haramusa Nanbu said, repeating what he had said days and weeks prior. The lord of his clan, Haramusa was a samurai whose horsemanship was without equal; he represented the Westlands in the Azuniki Alliance. The horses his cavalry rode into battle were one-and-a-half times the size of the enemy's and many times more fierce.

Gensai considered him a just man, if a bit naive and difficult to understand given his accent.

"I *know* where their encampment is—that fort used to be mine, damn it!" yelled Nobuharu of Clan Oda. His lands were the most recent to be razed by Imperial forces. Nobuharu's family was large as were his forces, too, though both had been trimmed short in recent years. Gensai had much more respect for the lord's deceased brother, Nobunaga, who had possessed the lion's share of his family's intellect.

"Whatever action we take...it must be done promptly. My men are on their last bags of rice," replied Shatao Taira, representing the East. His infantry were among the greatest armored in Hyuga, following in the fashion of their lord whose armor was said to be impenetrable. Perhaps more importantly, his lands were among the most fertile for rice—their supplies having kept the alliance fed thus far. But with their supply line cut, it was only a matter of time before everyone starved.

"As much as I hate to agree, Nobuharu is right. The timing was ripe weeks ago—we must strike now or never!" replied Motonari of Clan Mori. "I've heard rumors that the Mad Lion's shugenja general, that Benkei, was seen on the frontlines again—with both arms attached! Perhaps you didn't cut as deeply as you thought, Lord Takeda?"

Gensai didn't dignify the remark with a response, so Lord Nanbu spoke for him. "Must've been that doctor of there's. I hear tell he can stitch together pieces of men and make a fresh new one. Could just be rumors, though."

"It doesn't matter," Gensai said, opening his eyes for the first time since the meeting began. "To overextend now would be foolish at best, disastrous at worse. With rations as tight as they are, a forward advance is unwise. What they want above all else is control of the Kiso...let them sit in their bamboo forests a while longer."

Of all the lords, Gensai was by far the greatest swordsman; he was a legendary duelist among both his troops and their own. As such, his words commanded more respect than most. And though his words were reasonable, they weren't popular among the other alliance members.

"You speak...as if we have time to linger, Gensai-san," said Lord Taira. "Is there perhaps...something you aren't telling us? It is not wise to keep secrets between friends—or allies, for that matter."

Gensai gave no reaction, though he noted that the heavily armored samurai was among the more insightful of the group. In truth, the Takeda did have plans: but not ones he could disclose with the others. The reality was, the greatest threat the Azuniki Alliance faced was from the inside; clans defecting to the Imperial forces were becoming more and more common. The Emperor offered no shortage of incentives.

"It isn't a matter of if one among you will betray us, but when," Gensai thought, peering across the table.

The meeting was then interrupted by a boy—Gensai's—who claimed the enemy were marching right towards them. "It's the, the Uesugi! They're here, Father! They're gonna kill us!"

Everyone at the table looked towards Gensai, who once again gave no reaction. Following Ichiro's plea was a heavy set of footsteps and guards yelling for their owner to stand down. They were pushed aside and made to cower as the frightening visage of the large, brown-haired samurai came into view.

Gensai was the first to greet him. "It's about time you showed up, Izō."

"Couldn't let you hog all the glory! Not too late to join this little club of yours, is it?" the head of the Uesugi bellowed, his laughter growing as he looked over each of the lords at the table. "These your retainers, Gensai? Hardly a swordsman between them! Ghahawhaw!"

The other clan lords rose from their seats in varying amounts of rage. They weren't used to such blatant displays of disrespect—especially not from a supposed ally. Gensai raised a hand to keep them from unsheathing their katanas and sending themselves to an early grave.

"Calm yourselves. He is simply trying to garner a reaction from each of you. Even a dull-headed Uesugi recognizes he's in the company of lords."

"Pft," Izō spat, "I was never much for talking. Once you and your pals are done tossing wind in here, let's continue where we left off. Assuming you still have the will to fight, Gensai."

■■■■

The clashing of steel echoed over a creek far away from the camp and nearby patrols. Gensai and Izō exchanged blows using blunted katanas—more likely to maim than kill, but still far too deadly for two clan heads to be using in a practice duel. Though this was beyond a training exercise: their fighting was intense, so much so that they had to do so in private so that their retainers wouldn't intervene.

To hold nothing back, to fully test your skill against another—that was all that mattered to a swordmaster.

“As quick and focused as ever,” Izō said, recovering from his missed lunge. “I’d have thought you’d be more distracted, given what’s happened. But you’re the same as you’ve always been.”

CLANG

The two clashed, forcing their weight down upon the other. In matters of brutish force, Izō had a stark advantage: he was the taller and heavier between them. His style of swordsmanship focused on dominating his opponent with his superior strength; for Gensai to explain it in a word, it was overbearing.

The Takeda retreated and recovered his breath. “What are you talking about? What has happened?”

Izō showed a look of surprise before he settled on his usual, wicked grin. “So they haven’t told you...well, better for me then. Give me the best fight you can, Gensai! Don’t you dare grow dull!”

schwing* *clink* *shwop

The fighting intensified, and it was becoming clearer that Izō was the attacker while Gensai was on the defensive. The Takeda caught himself losing focus over whatever it was that was supposed to distract him. Uesugi like Izō were terrible liars—which meant something was wrong, but what?

“Gah?!” Gensai let out a yelp when his guard broke from an uppercut he hadn’t seen coming. Both his katana and arms were pushed above his head, leaving his entire torso open for Izō’s next attack. Most samurai would end it there and claim themselves the victor; but Izō—like the wolf in human flesh that he was—always preferred to draw blood.

He swung his blade in an arc that would rip far more than Gensai’s kimono. Izō put all his power behind the strike; his feet were unsteady upon the loose rocks of the stream, and so when an eight-year old threw himself against him in a charging tackle from behind, he lost his balance, swung wide, and fell like an oak into the shallow waters below.

Time itself seemed to stop for Gensai, who braced himself to receive a slash across the chest that never arrived. He looked down at Izō’s large body, planted face-down into the stream. He then looked at the boy who stood beside it, speaking between pants of breath.

“Father, are you—”

SLAP

“How dare you!” Gensai yelled after the palm of his hand whipped across Ichiro’s face. “You’re no son of mine, to interrupt this match! Do you have any idea what you’ve done?! This dishonor will stain me and our family for...Izō, stand up,” the samurai said to his rival, who continued to lay down atop the stream. “Do not think for a moment this is humorous! Stand up, already!”

When his rival remained motionless, Gensai hurried to his side and turned the hulking body over. Izō looked up at him with empty, open eyes—the sort that dead men had. Holding his breath, Gensai checked Izō's as well as his pulse, thanking the spirits that the Uesugi still had both.

"Ichiro. Get a doctor," Gensai ordered. "And do not speak of what has happened here to anyone. Do you understand?"

■■■■

Gensai stripped off his kimono and tossed it into a nearby bush. He replaced it with the contents of the sack he had been carrying for the past couple hours. In it was an Imperial set of garments for a foot soldier—an ashigaru, complete with a conical iron helmet. After tying a rope belt around his waist and securing his katana within it, Gensai stood.

Not as a proud samurai of the Takeda, but a common soldier for the Emperor without so much as a family name.

He was behind enemy lines, now, on an operation so pivotal that he could only trust himself to see it through. Izō had fallen—quite literally—into a coma, and if the Uesugi were to learn of it, the truce between the two Northern clans would end and with it, any chance the Azuniki Alliance had of fending off the Emperor.

The only chance he had to save both Izō and the alliance was based on a rumor. The Emperor had a doctor in his service, said to be a legend who could all but raise fallen soldiers from the dead. The man's name was Matsuyo Fujii. Gensai's mission was to find, capture and retrieve the doctor at any cost.

"I've always wanted you dead, Izō...but not like this. Kuso!" Gensai cursed at himself while approaching one of the forward Imperial encampments the Mori had scouted a week prior. To his surprise, he wasn't questioned until he was inside the base, and even then...the question was a hypothetical one.

"What are you doing, maggot?! Quit standin' around and get to digging!" barked a drill sergeant who threw a shovel at him. Gensai snatched it and apologized before taking position at the end of a fifty-man team. They were digging ditches, either to be used as trenches or as moats with wooden spikes to halt cavalry charges.

They toiled mostly in silence and morale seemed to be low among them. They were well-tanned, skinny, and a tad shorter than the average Hyugan in height. From his travels, Gensai knew them to be Southerners, from Genfu or the neighboring villages. But it was only when the man beside him started singing could he be absolutely certain.

"Oh!!! Sōran, sōran, sōran!

When we hear the jabberin' of seagulls on the high seas,

we know we can't give up our fishing lives on the ocean."

This was the Sōran Bushi: a sea shanty that you couldn't help but hear in any port town or village down South. Even Gensai knew it; that blasted song had gotten stuck in his head long after he had challenged and defeated the sword schools down that way.

There was supposed to be a chorus after that line, though the other soldiers seemed too dispirited to chip in. So Gensai cleared his throat and did the best he could to hide his Northern accent.

"Put your backs into it! Heave, ho! Heave, ho!"

The others picked up before Gensai finished, and so too did their pace and the mood as the group carried on singing the fisherman's tune. An hour went into two without the samurai even noticing—such was the power of a group of men working in unison. As it was starting to grow dark, the drill sergeant told them to stop.

The man beside him—the one who started the song—introduced himself as Toshiaki, and thanked him for joining in when he did. He asked Gensai how he knew the lyrics, as he 'sure ain't no Southern boy'.

"I've traveled down to Genfu before, to learn from the schools there. Judging by the two tantos at your hip, can I assume that you are a practitioner of the Kamakiri Niten-ryū?"

"Aye, that I am! The School of the Two-Bladed Mantis...did you know Kagetada-sensei?"

"Yes, of course. He was a...skilled swordsman," Gensai recalled. He neglected to mention that the man was a drunkard, too, and was several cups deep before their scheduled duel. Once Gensai drew first blood, the outraged sensei ordered his best student to fight in his place—to the death. Gensai killed the young man and then forced Kagetada to take his own life out of shame.

"Kagetada-sensei...he was murdered in cold blood by some forsaken Northerner! Don't know whether it was a Takeedah or an Uesiigee, and frankly, I don't give a damn! I'll kill 'em all—swore an oath I would!"

Gensai nodded. He understood vengeance as well as any samurai. His dueling had made him no shortage of enemies.

"But enough chattin' about the past! Let's go get us some drinks and throw some bones around! First round is on me, er...whaddya say your name was?"

"Hideaki," Gensai replied. "Just...Hideaki."

The two became quick friends even though they were as opposite as two samurai could be. Toshiaki was noisy and boisterous while Gensai—or Hideaki—was quiet and reserved. From what the Northerner could see from the soldiers in training exercises around them, their tactics relied on overwhelming numbers and teamwork, minimizing single combat whenever possible.

Gensai would've inspected them further had his new friend not pulled him into a gambling den. The group was playing Chō-Han: a game of dice where you either guessed odd or even. The Takeda was

never a gambling man—it was a cheap thrill in comparison to a swordfight—but he feigned interest all the same.

While they were waiting for their turn at the table, he asked his new comrade questions about the army.

“You really are fresh, ain’t ya? Well, see, the Emperor doesn’t care none about who your father was, but what your rank is. That symbol on your vest there means you’re just a private like me. It’s why we’re the ones diggin’ ditches. Above us are sergeants, lieutenants, captains, and er...well, anyone higher than that, don’t look ‘em in the eyes. They don’t need an excuse to flay us on the spot!”

“I see...by this ranking system, even those who come from poor backgrounds or from dishonored families can improve their station. And they are still called samurai?” Gensai asked, to which Toshiaki replied with a resounding ‘aye’. “Does that not serve to cheapen the title, if every peasant wielding a katana is considered such?”

“K-keep yer voice down, would’ya?” Toshiaki said, hushing his companion. “Got some sensitive egos you could be bruising with that sorta talk. Way I figure, nobody wants to be a common footsoldier. They all want to be samurai, so why not hand ‘em a sword and let ‘em? They’ll fight harder that way, aye?”

“Is this your plot, Emperor Shigeru? You couldn’t destroy the samurai, so you intend to cheapen it with lowlifes such as these?”

When it was finally their turn at the table, neither had much luck. The difference between them was that Gensai knew when to cut his losses; Toshiaki had no such foresight, making even larger bets in an attempt to chase after lost ryō. Eventually he was heavily in debt.

“That’s it, Toshiaki. Time to pay the house,” one of the thugs said while his kin took places behind them. “I’m done holdin’ your debts. Your friend here has a nice lookin’ sword, though—been keepin’ my eye on it all this time. Tell him to hand it over and I’ll consider us even.”

A silence befell the gambling den—which was really just a large tent beside the soldiers’ mess hall. Even so, it was operated by a gang with some measure of organization. The reason became clear once Gensai spotted a few tattoos peeking out from their sleeves.

“I’m sorry about this, Hideaki, but—”

“I wonder what our Emperor would think if he knew yakuza were running gambling dens under his own nose. I don’t suppose he’d appreciate it much.”

“Why, you! You’ll lose more than just your sword, talkin’ that way to us!” said the yakuza, motioning to pull out his katana. His companions did likewise.

Gensai showed no fear for these so-called samurai warranted none. “You’re a gambler, aren’t you? Then how about we make a wager: your life or mine. A duel to the death. If you wish for my katana—you may pry it from my cold, dead hands.”

The yakuza was thinking it over, looking up and down Gensai and especially at his uniform and rank as a private. He himself was a lieutenant, two ranks superior to this uppity novice. Even still...there was something about the way his opponent carried himself that made him cautious. At least until Gensai sweetened the pot.

"I'll even keep my eyes closed during our duel, if you prefer. For human trash such as yourself—I'll dispose of you without even looking!"

Such a bold claim did more than just rouse the ire of his opponent; it spread across the encampment like wildfire, the event quickly becoming a gambling affair that was far and away more interesting than any roll of the dice.

"You...you don't gotta do this, Hideaki. Sure that's a nice katana—but it ain't worth dyin' over! Just give me the word and I'll put a stop to this," Toshiaki whispered. Gensai refused, instead looking over the crowd that had amassed around him. He could only grin and think of what an opportune time it would be for the other clans to strike: even the sentries had abandoned their posts to witness the fight.

"Hand me the blindfold," Gensai said. Toshiaki hesitated though he complied all the same. To be blinded was nothing new to Gensai: ever since the weeks he spent in pure darkness trapped inside Toi Mine, his sense of hearing had become heightened. Not to mention another, darker sense as well.

He would make use of both to defeat his opponent.

"Let's give our brave Hideaki a round of applause! It takes a special sort of idiot to challenge me to a duel. And to do so with a blindfold on—well, it's been nice knowin' ya!" the yakuza yelled, prompting the others to break out into cheers. Gensai's opponent knew what he was doing: getting the crowd to create noise made hearing his approach all the more difficult.

But that was fine by Gensai. The Takeda wanted a challenge. He crouched low with his katana in its sheath and his feet firmly planted on the ground.

"What's this? You're not even going to draw your sword? You're even dumber than I thought! Ora!" the yakuza yelled as he charged. Gensai focused on his footsteps, but more than that, he felt for the man's intent. Murderous intent had its own sort of energy—a vibration that resonated with his right wrist. The dark power within him fed on that very sensation.

The yakuza stopped well out of reach, pulling out something from his kimono that the crowd found rather humorous. Gensai guessed it was either an apple or a tomato—turned out to be the former, as the Takeda caught it right before it slammed into his face. He took a large bite out of it and spat out the seeds.

"Thank you for the meal. Now, if you're finished—come! Let me show you what it means to strike without action!"

The crowd was quickly converted to his side, infuriating his opponent who now came at him with deadly intent. But this wasn't Gensai's first time attempting such a stunt—and he could tell from the footwork alone that the yakuza was making a common mistake.

Just because Gensai was blind and in a quick-draw stance didn't mean he couldn't move. In this case he dashed forward, and that was all he was aware of doing before the power that possessed him took over.

swash

In less than a blink of the eye, Gensai's katana was unsheathed and had swung through what was once his opponent. The samurai didn't know for certain that he was dead—only that the hot blood spray flying up his arms and into his face seemed to indicate such.

There wasn't a roar from the crowd as the samurai expected there would be. When he took off his blindfold, he understood why: there was a guest of honor who had stepped forth to witness Gensai cut the yakuza clean through. It was the greatest guest there could be.

The Mad Lion, Emperor Shigeru. He began clapping, his mouth open wide with his partially-rotten teeth showing.

"Hyek-yekyekyek! That's the fastest sword draw I've ever seen! Tell me—who are you, samurai? One of our captains?"

Gensai shook his head. "No...Your Majesty. I am but a new recruit, named Hideaki."

"Well—you're a captain now! Fujibayashi, see to it that he's assigned to head one of our scouting divisions. It will be a nice change of pace to have a *single* good swordsman among them, don't you think?"

"Yes my lord," Fujibayashi said and bowed. He had both the attire and composure of a ninja: an agent with mastery over stealth and subterfuge. Shinobi like him were clever which meant they were dangerous, too, especially for Gensai who had to keep his identity secret.

As for his false identity, it was being heralded across camp.

"HI-DE-A-KI! HI-DE-A-KI!"

Toshiaki was chief among them, so excited that you'd have thought he had swung the sword and not Gensai. Apparently the Southerner had placed a bet that paid dividends and then some. Just as celebrations were about to begin, Fujibayashi took the samurai off to the side.

"You'll start your new position tomorrow morning. Just keep in mind: though His Imperial Majesty may praise your technique, it is unfamiliar to me. That and the way you carry yourself suggests a noble upbringing, though I don't recall a Hideaki among any daimyo. Are you a bastard?"

Gensai shook his head. "I am—or I was, a ronin. But now I am a samurai once more, and I shall serve my Emperor until the day I die."

Fujibayashi stroked his goatee and stared at Gensai for a long while before nodding. "Let us hope that day does not come too soon, then."

■■■■

Kiyotsukyo Gorge was made of volcanic ash that had hardened centuries ago. Its rocks were unique in that they were a series of columns with sharp angles, splaying out on either side of the river in a 'V' shape. This chasm was more than just a natural beauty: it was a strategic chokepoint that the Emperor was determined to hold.

The regiment that Gensai was now in charge of was the one holding it. Though after looking over his men—and the condition their swords were in—the samurai doubted they could hold it long. He held one of their swords up to his face and scowled.

"*This* is what passes for a katana, these days? It's cracked in three places! It's so dull I could clench the blade in my fist and not get so much as a papercut!" Gensai complained, before demonstrating just that. He tossed the piece of junk back to the recruit it belonged to. "I want you and everyone else in that river, digging for waterstones. If you don't know how to sharpen your blade, then spirits help you! The enemies will sharpen theirs with your skull!"

"Y-yes Sensei!" the recruit said and the sentiment was shared by the fifty-two others under Gensai's command. The group had already taken to calling him 'Sensei'—though he had done nothing in the first hours as a captain other than instruct them on the very basics of sword technique and footwork.

That they had learned neither prior to this point...well, it boded well for the Azuniki Alliance. The Mad Lion had essentially been handing out lengthy kitchen knives to farmers and fishermen alike, calling them 'samurai' and sending them off to war in droves. They'd die like the minnows they were—by the sharp teeth of the sharks that awaited them not long in the distance.

"*While I've earned the Emperor's regard, this is hardly getting me closer to Matsuyo Fujii. I need to find the doctor—and I can't do it out here!*" Gensai's frustrations came out in his eyes, which for a moment took a golden glow. His wrist ached, too, itching for the sensation of killing once more. The power within him was threatening to consume him entirely.

Only the sight of flowers quelled his bloodlust. Though what calmed him wasn't the purple primroses but the woman they reminded him of. "*Joukei-chan...I wonder what flowers I shall bring you when I return home. Something that only grows this far south, perhaps a—*"

"Hideaki!" Toshiaki yelled. The man had volunteered himself to join Gensai's division as a messenger. "I've just come back from the main camp—they're under attack! Our entire flank was exposed. There's smoke as far as the eye can see!"

The Imperial troops jumped from out of the river and begged Gensai for their orders. Even the sky joined in, it seemed, as rain began to trickle down on them.

“What color were there banners?” Gensai asked, to which Toshiaki replied that they were green. The attackers were no doubt cavalry led by Haramusa Nanbu, especially skilled in hit-and-run tactics. Harassing the enemy, never engaging long...such an approach was good for many things—particularly when you wanted the enemy to direct their forces elsewhere.

“Pack up the camp. Hide our supplies and tie up the horses further back. Let them think we’ve abandoned our post. Meanwhile, we’ll hide where the gorge is at its narrowest. Prepare for battle!”

Everyone was surprised by the order but no one questioned it—such was the power of the captain’s badge at his chest. Gensai wondered if his ‘students’ could actually survive an assault. He’d find out sooner rather than later.

In less than an hour of waiting, troops could be seen marching from the far end of the gorge. As it was much easier to walk through the chasm than around it, they approached forward in a steady march, not noticing the position Gensai’s soldiers had taken behind the rocks.

The samurai captain prayed they weren’t Takeda, and his prayers were answered when the banners came into view. They were yellow, which meant this was the Oda Clan. Looking closer, Gensai saw that the group was led by Nobutoki: Nobuharu’s half-brother.

The enemy had numbers on them: four-to-one, by Gensai’s estimation. As this was the Oda, they were mostly spearmen and archers—neither of which was useful in close-quarters fighting. Adding to Gensai’s advantage in the tight and rocky passage, the trickle of rain had since become a raging downpour.

Tension peaked as the Oda soldiers walked by them, though it wasn’t time for them to strike just yet. They had to let the vanguard through if they wanted to do as much damage as possible. To the Imperial soldiers’ credit, they managed to be more patient than most. That or they were all frozen by fear.

Either way, they did their job and earned their pay once Gensai gave the order.

“FOR THE EMPEROR!”

Chaos ensued. What the Imperials lacked for experience and expertise, they more than made up for in surprise and ferocity. Gensai noted that the techniques he had taught them had been all but forgotten—though perhaps that was for the best, as to think too much in combat was a rookie mistake.

So Gensai didn’t think much at all as he slayed his first twenty soldiers. Spearmen out of formation were all but useless, and crammed as they were, they squirmed as sardines while Gensai hooked one after the other. The Oda sought to reform atop the slippery slopes, many falling into the raging river doing so.

Behind them was Nobutoki in a full suit of yellow samurai armor. He was shouting orders with a war fan in one hand and a katana in the other, though his voice didn't carry far amidst the downpour. Not that his men were in any condition to listen to reason: some were diving into the river, preferring to risk their lives in the rapids then face the enemy they couldn't see.

As for the one they could...he frightened them most of all.

Gensai cut through their numbers as if they were weeds until reaching the Nobutoki. The Oda lord was abandoned by his retainers in the end, none of them willing to step in the demon's path. Gensai had managed to hold back the power within until now. With him and his prey alone, he let his eyes envelop in gold and peered into the crimson lines of death etched all over his opponent.

"Is...is that you, Gensai Takeda?! What are you—*huACK!*"

When the rain settled, Gensai held up Nobutoki's disembodied head by his hair. The Imperial troops that remained cheered and shouted, praising him as their enemies littered the canyon's floor. There was a pile of Oda raised high in the chasm—nearly enough to dam the river.

"You may never forgive me for this, Nobuharu. But everything I'm doing here...I do for the sake of the Alliance."

■■■■

"Hyek-yekyekyek! What an ugly face—and that expression, he looks constipated! He's an Oda, all right!"

The Mad Lion Shigeru laughed upon his golden throne at the center of the main encampment. Surrounding him were rows of heads in various states of decay. The smell was as putrid as one would imagine, but the old Emperor had long since lost his sense of smell. Gensai felt some pity for his retainers, who had to stand guard beside festering heads for hours on end.

Among them was Fujibayashi, the ninja, and Benkei, the shugenja. It was the latter that caused Gensai to keep his head down as he knelt before the Emperor. He could only hope the iron helmet he wore hid his face and that Benkei wouldn't recognize it from one month before.

"Which one was this, again? Nobu...toki? Bah! All those 'Nobu's...you think they'd come up with more original names! You, Benkei," the Emperor ordered, "place this head down in the third row with the other Oda. I'm going for a complete set!"

The large shugenja did so, though after he placed it, the Emperor gave another command: "Kiss him."

Benkei hesitated—and rightfully so, before kneeling and kissing Nobutoki on the forehead. He had to kiss him once more after the Mad Lion told him to do so on the lips.

"I imagine his lips taste cold, don't they? Almost as cold as my corpse would be, had Hideaki here retreated as you did on our eastern front! Thanks to you, you blundering idiot, the Taira clan have

secured their supply lines once more! Your foolishness has added ten years to this war!”

“My sincerest ap—”

“Save your sorries, General. Or should I say...Captain? You’re being demoted. Hideaki here is taking your command!”

The shugenja looked as if he had just been stabbed in the throat. He bowed deeply and groveled as any man would before the divine embodiment that was His Imperial Majesty, but the glare he gave Ichiro was nothing short of menacing.

“Now then, aside from your promotion, General Hideaki, you may make one request. Anything within reason shall be yours. Such an accomplishment in battle cannot go unrewarded.”

Gensai paused. This was the moment he had been waiting for. He cleared his throat and made the request.

“You wish to see the esteemed doctor, ay? He is quite good at what he does...very well then. I shall make arrangements with Matsuyo Fujii immediately. Whatever health concern you have, consider his services your own!”

“Thank you, my lord!”

Before Gensai could leave and after the Emperor had left for other affairs, the ninja Fujibayashi came and approached him. Though the talk was cordial, the samurai could tell that the shinobi was up to something. Especially when he handed him a slip of paper.

“I wrote this poem, though from what I hear from the soldiers, you have a much better singing voice than I. Would you be so kind as to read it aloud for me?”

It was an odd request, though Gensai complied.

“Compared to her grace,

the blossoms in Hokusei

wilt in jealousy.”

The samurai struggled with the words, not because they were unfamiliar but because they *were* familiar: this was one of the many poems Gensai had written for his wife Joukei when he was courting her years ago. That Fujibayashi was taking credit for his previous work was hardly his greatest concern.

The shinobi stared and examined Gensai for some time before the Takeda excused himself and hurried along. After the samurai left, Fujibayashi and Benkei whispered to each other, the latter breaking into a wide, maniacal grin.

■■■■

“A coma, you say? That’s quite troublesome indeed,” said the short and portly middle-aged man. He didn’t seem particularly special—certainly not as legendary as his reputation would have you believe—but Gensai knew appearances weren’t everything. Matsuyo Fujii had done with his hands what not even shugenja magic could do: save lives.

This time he needed to save Izō Uesugi’s.

“From what you’ve told me, the comatose was induced by a blunt striking upon the head—an advanced concussive state. Deer antler velvet is often used as smelling salts, having some benefit for such patients to regain alertness. But it would need to be strengthened significantly...hm, I’m afraid this seems beyond the realm of medicine, Hideaki-san. Now if you’ll excuse me, I—”

“I don’t think you understand,” Gensai said, placing one hand on his hilt. “This is an order from the Emperor. You’re coming with me to cure this patient.”

Matsuyo blinked and squinted, his eyes already beginning to fail. They worked well enough, at least, to see that it was better for him if he complied and so he did so, gathering the velvet along with other herbs and supplies. When he was ready to leave, Gensai stopped him.

“Wait. Something’s wrong. Do you hear that?” he asked.

The doctor shook his head. “Why, I don’t hear anything at all.”

Gensai nodded. Though he had only spent a couple nights here, he knew the camp was never quiet—especially not this time in the evening around supper. Something was wrong, yet he had no choice but to step out of the medicinal hut all the same.

crunch

The sound of a leaf crunching beneath his sandal was odd, given the summer season. One look down revealed that it wasn’t a leaf at all, but a slip of paper: a talisman, glowing white and growing brighter. Gensai hopped back right before it exploded in a puff of smoke and a clap of thunder!

If it wasn’t enough to kill him outright, it would’ve blown his legs out from under him.

“Awfully quick for a mere footsoldier. Though we both know you’re something much more than that...right, Gensai Takeda?”

When the smoke faded, Gensai’s greatest fear was revealed: he was surrounded by the Imperial army, led by Benkei who stood menacingly before him with his naginata embedded into the ground.

Benkei spat a wad of spit over at Gensai’s direction. “Puh! The dishonor you have given me—not once, but twice—I shall revel in returning it tenfold, Takeda! I wonder if I should kiss your lips as well, after I

tear your head from your shoulders, or if I should find other uses for them instead! Bhahahaha!”

The other soldiers joined in the laughter, at least until Gensai drew his sword. Rumor of his swordsmanship was well known by each of them. Some among them had fought right beside him just hours earlier. They would hesitate before killing their own captain and sensei—regardless of what clan he hailed from.

Gensai would’ve hesitated as well, at least until he heard what Benkei said next.

“You came here alone in order to die, didn’t you? How romantic...to be so eager to reunite with your dead wife! Would that more of you Northern samurai were so damn sentimental!”

“You lie! Joukei—she isn’t dead! She’s just ill!” Gensai replied, sweat forming on his brow. True dread flowed within him unlike any fear he had faced before. Facing a hundred men in battle was nothing compared to the terror of losing the part of him he needed most.

“Oh? They didn’t tell you? Your precious Joukei you’ve written so much about—she’s not so much of a beauty anymore, I’m afraid. Not with her face bubbled up in puss-filled bumps all over! That pox-ridden bitch must’ve made for one unsightly corpse, don’t you think?”

Gensai forgot himself.

He was no longer a Takeda, a samurai, or a man. He surrendered everything he thought he was—everything this world claimed him to be—to become no more than the wielder of his sword. Without a mind and without taking a single breath, the being that was once Gensai Takeda lurched forward with a speed and power unlike anything Hyuga had seen before.

It would not be the last Hyuga would see of what would eventually become the ‘Strike of Non-Thought’, but it was certainly a worthy debut. Samurai were to the sword no more than lines, and to the wielder they were but numbers to be counted and marked off in red.

“Ichi, Ni, San, Shi, Go, Roku, Shichi...Ni Juu Ni, Ni Juu San, Ni Juu Shi...Go Juu Shichi, Go Juu Hachi, Go Juu Kyuu...”

The wielder didn’t know how high he had counted when he finally stopped—when his bloodlust settled, his eyes burned and his breath returned in heaving gasps—but when he did, he knew the ‘battle’ was over. A field of corpses littered the campsite, a mist of blood floated stagnant in the air, and every inch of Gensai was coated in Takeda red.

As he took in deep, heaving breaths, he found what was left of Benkei and cut the scalp from the shugenja’s head. It was more than just a trophy, but a reminder of the day everything in this world had changed. For Gensai, the man he once knew was dead—finally consumed by the darkness within him.

He pointed at Matusyo Fujii, who was as pale as a ghost, with his blackened right hand and told him to follow. The doctor could do nothing but shiver and comply.

There was no sound to be heard upon this battlefield, and none alive—save for a certain shinobi. Fujibayashi was the lone survivor: a number left uncounted.

“That...that style, does it have a name?” Fujibayashi asked, struggling to remain on his feet. His ninja outfit was torn along with most of the skin on his arms. Gensai had no answer for him, so he shook his head. “Then may I...suggest you call it Hell’s Release: for you are a demon, let loose upon this land! Take what you’ve come for and leave!”

Gensai accepted the plea. He looked up into the sky, only realizing now that it was raining. Though while the water could wash away the blood from his skin, nothing could clean the stain inside his heart.

“Hell’s Release...the Jigoku Ittō-ryū. I like the sound of it.”

■■■■

“What in the...Gensai? Did I die and go to hell?” Izō asked, waking up from his lengthy slumber. Though Gensai was no medical professional, that the Uesugi lord was in such good humor was a good sign.

Matsuyo Fujii confirmed as much. “I can’t quite believe that worked! To think that a shugenja’s scalp of all things activated the antlers as some sort of agent...I can only surmise that the residue magic within the hair fibers...yes, how remarkable! I must make note of this at once!”

Gensai ignored the doctor and offered his fellow swordmaster a hand. When Izō took it, he knew something within the Takeda had changed. “I can feel it, Gensai. Your desire to kill: the appetite you’ve withheld for so long. Glad you decided not to hide what you are, anymore!”

The possessed swordmaster nodded.

“Without Joukei-chan, there is no reason for me to remain as I was any longer. Consider me a demon in human flesh. And make me an oath, Izō, that once this era is over, once Hyuga loses its taste for war...when those dedicated to the sword are no longer needed, Gensai Takeda and Izō Uesugi shall fight their final duel!”

His eternal rival accepted the oath—why wouldn’t he? To be immortalized in combat and to die before their blades grew dull...that was the ultimate goal of the samurai. For those who walked the way of the sword, it was the final destination.

A shame that neither of them would make it there.

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

[Sep 7, 2020](#)

Reminder: there are 4 side stories remaining. The 30th one is reserved for Junko/Jun, which means you have 3 more months to decide the stories you want to read next. Pick carefully!

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 (+14)

4%

Daisuke, the servant (+8)

0%

Keiko, the maid (+16)

2%

Kohaku, the samurai (+6)

4%

Kuniko, the farmer (+23)

4%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+38)

40%

Nishi, the yakuza (+32)

13%

Satsuma, the emperor (+32)

27%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+13)

7%

Poll ended Sep 30, 2020 · 55 votes total

[Book 5 Early Access Announcement](#)

[Sep 10, 2020](#)



Just wanted to give everyone a heads up: early access for Book 5 begins on the 15th!

Like last time, it'll be one chapter (two if the chapters are shorter) released on the 15th of every month leading up to the book's release. I'm pretty hyped about giving you guys a glimpse about what I've been working on—and where MC's journey takes them next!

The tier for early access is \$10. Whether it's something that interests you or not, keep in mind that there will be a public demo of the first few chapters released down the road. As far as estimates on Book 5's release go, my current guess is somewhere in mid 2021.

And of course, thanks for reading!



[MC #13's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Sep 11, 2020](#)

The design for MC #13 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Very feminine, Finesse**

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

Short (+24)

35%

Long (+3)

11%

Ponytail (+0)

11%

Chonmage (+13)

37%

Long bangs (+2)

7%

Poll ended Sep 15, 2020 · 46 votes total

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapter 1](#)

[Sep 15, 2020](#)

Another book, another early access!

It's hard to believe it's been over two years since early access began for Book 4. A lot of crazy things have happened since then—most of them good! Reading the old posts, I was bragging about this patreon being over \$200 back then. Now look at it! The amount of support you guys have given me is frankly insane.

Joining the early access, especially this early on in the process, means a lot to me. Ten bucks a month is not cheap, especially when the full book will cost you less. I realize that and I just wanted you to know that I appreciate it, too.

I hope you all enjoy the start of Book 5!

[MC #13 Face Art](#)

[Sep 30, 2020](#)

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 Peekase ([twitter](#), [pixiv](#))!

This month's build: **Very feminine, Finesse, Short hair**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[Oct 2, 2020](#)

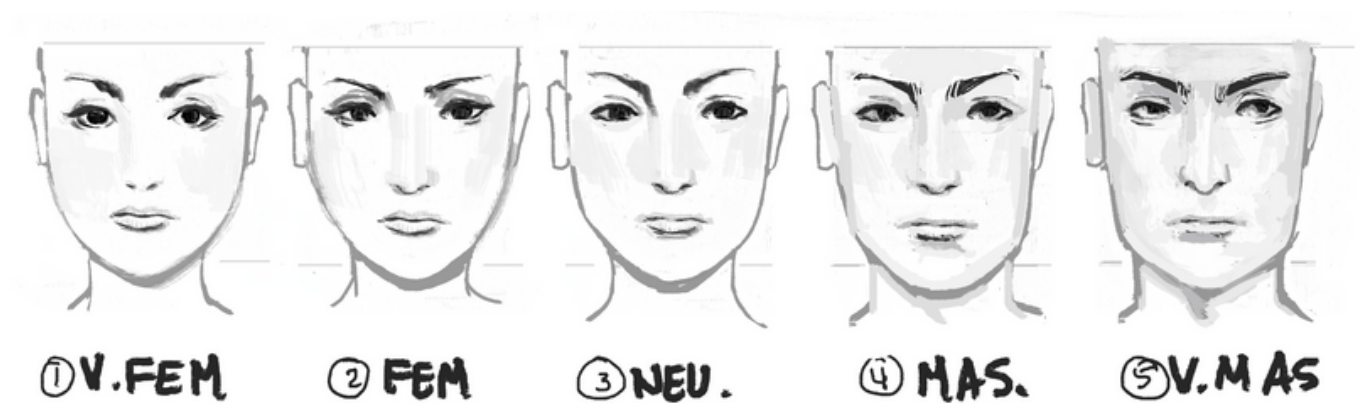
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+0)

13%

Feminine (+17)

40%

Neutral (+19)

28%

Masculine (+3)

2%

Very masculine (+6)

17%

Poll ended Oct 5, 2020 · 53 votes total

[MC #14's Face Poll: 2/3 \[UPDATE\]](#)

[Oct 6, 2020](#)



Hey patrons! Wanted to give you guys an update on face portraits going forward. I'm not sure how many I want to do in total (probably 16-20), but I do want there to be some diversity with these last few. The gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #14 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!

Calculated (+9)

4%

Perverted (+18)

22%

Stoic (+3)

4%

Drifter (+0)

0%

Protective (+8)

59%

Brutal (+10)

12%

Finesse (+0)

0%

Poll ended Oct 10, 2020 · 51 votes total

[Side Story #27: Masami's Graduation](#)

[Oct 7, 2020](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1. It offers some insights into characters from Book 5. Keep this in mind if you want to avoid all potential spoilers!>



Side Story 27: Masami's Graduation



■■ *The Seijirō Museum of Fine Arts* ■■

“Oh, cruel master of fate, how hath I wrong thee to be cursed so? I am undone, bound to this witch in place of my pearly-eyed maiden! Forsooth, what—”

Fumihiro's lamentations were silenced by an elbow to the gut courtesy of Hikiko. The dark, drab and dour shugenja was assigned to be the kendo captain's off-campus partner. So long as they were off Academy grounds, they had to be tied together with string. Several feet of it was raised taut between their wrists as the two fussed and bickered.

“Urusai! This field trip. Already painful enough. Should've gone to the kabuki theater.”

Students were rarely permitted outside of the Academy due to security reasons: abductions of the magically-gifted students were not uncommon. The exception to this was during class outings such as this one the local art gallery. Though it was far more than that now after its recent endowment courtesy of His Imperial Majesty. It had been renamed the 'Seijirō Museum of Fine Arts' at the Emperor's request in honor of his father.

But the recent endowment wasn't why they were there. The reason had to do with the graduation ceremony: at the end of every season—this one's being spring—a select group of students, thoroughly tested and vetted for their magical abilities, were made to undergo a special ceremony. Though the ritual itself was mostly unknown, it required special preparations at the school, forcing the rest of the student body outside.

And so the class was assigned partners at random. Some pairings were more...favorable than others.

"Oh, Masa-chan! I'd love to check out the pottery display next!" said Hitomi with glee. She was an itako: a blind shrine maiden with the ability to commune with the dead. She was also a few years older than her partner and over a foot taller, looking like an overly-affectionate older sister.

"Ah, s-sure. But there's no reason to cling to me so tightly, you know," Masami said, her face growing crimson. The younger shugenja guided her partner from exhibit to exhibit, much like their 'date' in the spirit world. The only difference was that there were other people around—including their classmates—and so it was many times more embarrassing.

Though most of the exhibits couldn't be touched, Masami did her best to explain what they looked like in detail. She also read the placards and labels aloud. Hitomi listened intently all the while, letting her imagination go wild. Of course, not but a few weeks ago she hadn't needed an imagination at all: in the spirit world, she had been able to see the gallery with her own two eyes.

"It's amazing, isn't it Masa-chan? Though the exhibits aren't as they were before, the halls and the layout of this building are exactly the same!"

Hitomi made a good point that Masami hadn't considered. While there wasn't an ancient shogi board, kabuki outfits or an odd wooden device with a giant blade raised overhead, everything else about the gallery was the same as it had been in the spirit world.

"...yet neither of us had ever visited the gallery prior," Masami thought aloud. "That means the spirit world must be more than just a reflection of our own thoughts and experiences. It's more than just a dream...almost like an alternate reality..."

"You look so cute when you're deep in thought like that," Hitomi teased. Of course, she couldn't see Masami but that didn't stop the younger shugenja from going flush all the same. It was a relief when they met up with Fumihiko and Hikiko—the former all but dragging the latter.

"Lady Hitomi, Daughter of Hashimoto: perchance the two of you would accompany us to a new exhibit?" Fumihiko asked, bowing—or at least trying to, tied up as he was. "We've still a moment 'afore the

seminar.”

The group agreed, wanting to observe as many exhibits as they could. The seminar was to be a classwide meditation session with a guest lecturer: a spiritual guru from the Suijin Mountains. While it was likely to be as exciting as it sounded, Hikiko was uncharacteristically optimistic.

“A monk from Suijin. Isolated from the world. Training above the clouds. Probably strong and dreamy. Like the villain in *Tsuchi Gumo*,” Hikiko said, referencing a popular theater play. If Masami recalled correctly, that one was about a monk who was actually a spider demon in disguise, who killed his liege lord only to be hunted down and slain in his lair later.

The fact that Hikiko found such a villain dreamy...wasn’t much of a surprise, really.

What was a surprise was the new exhibit; the sight of it caused Masami to gasp and rush forward, pushing through her friends and dragging Hitomi behind. For what she saw behind a glass container was familiar: a wooden sculpture of a red panda. It looked almost identical to the one she had seen in her trip to this gallery before. That one that had turned into Pan-kun, her spirit animal!

Masami said as much to her friends, each of which had their own reaction.

“Hm...indeed, ‘tis peculiar,” Fumihiro said, scratching his chin while inspecting the sculpture. “The craftsmanship is...hardly remarkable, and this plaque here says nothing—save that it is from an anonymous artist. Methinks this exhibit is misplaced!”

“Look closer,” Hikiko said, pointing. “In its mouth. Holding a small bell. Looks familiar. Can’t remember where it’s from, though.”

Each of them—save for Hitomi—placed their faces up against the glass to see clearer but none of them could make out the details before the teacher yelled at them to head over to the seminar. Though Masami was reluctant to leave Pan-kun behind, she was more resolved than ever before.

“This has to be a sign, I know it! Reuniting with you, Pan-kun, and finding out whatever is behind that strange door...that must be what the black swan was talking about! I can’t waste anymore time!”

Speaking of wasting time, the entire class did just that as they sat in a circle around a mummified old man. It was a rather macabre display, Masami thought, hardly eliciting the comforting atmosphere required for deep meditation. Of course, meditation was a daily requirement for every shugenja...even if many just used it as naptime.

One minute passed and then several more all while the shugenja grew more and more restless. They were beginning to think their guest lecturer wouldn’t arrive until the mummified man opened his eyes.

After the resulting screams and commotion died down, he spoke.

“Sokushinbutsu is the practice of preserving oneself to enter mummification while still in the realm of the living,” he said, his voice dry. His face had so many wrinkles that it was hard to tell when his mouth was actually open. It didn’t help that he hardly spoke above a whisper. “Practitioners such as I consume nothing but pine needles and drink only rainwater from the heavens above. It is—*huACK, haK, huk!*”

Fumihiro turned towards his partner as the dry heaving continued. “Quite the strapping monk indeed, Hikiko. Mayhaps he’ll give you an autograph after the seminar!”

The joke earned him a second elbow to the gut, this one powerful enough to send him buckling over. Hitomi let out a polite giggle while Masami remained focused on the monk. If anyone knew about spirit animals and entering the spirit realm—it had to be him.

The group meditation session began shortly thereafter, with everyone humming in unison albeit offkey. Like everything else he did, Fumihiro over-embellished his chants while Hikiko forgoed hers altogether. Eventually the monk—whose name was Tenkai—grew frustrated and told them all to quiet.

Nearing the end of the seminar, he allowed the students to ask questions. Masami’s hand shot up immediately, the young shugenja having waited for this moment for the past hour.

“In our studies,” Masami started, “we are told that the spirit world is a reflection of our own memories, as well as what we’ve seen and heard about. But is it really just a projection of our imagination...or is it something more defined?”

The mummified monk creaked his eyes open a little wider. Though by appearances he was all but deceased, his eyes were as clear as crystal and betrayed a stark intellect. He mused over the question a little longer before giving his response.

“Imagination is thought given life. The spirit world is the collective imagination from all of life’s creation. The viewer distorts their reality just as they do in this world. The perspective of an emperor and an orphan...are hardly one and the same! Though the same elements may exist in both of their worlds, they will have very different experiences. Only a still mind, free of doubt and worldly desires, may have any hope of glimpsing either world as they truly are.”

“And our spirit animals,” Masami continued, “we’re told that they are the embodiment of our past reincarnations in spiritual form...but is it possible that they can enter this realm, as well?”

As for a reply, the monk Tenkai went into a lengthy coughing fit—long enough for the teacher to put an end to the questioning. The seminar was over and a new project was assigned: they were each tasked with giving presentations on their spirit animal by the end of the week.

After the shugenja groaned in dismay, they were let out from the chamber and back to the school. Masami trailed behind, desperate to know more from Tenkai. The teacher all but pushed her out—but not before the mummified monk could utter his parting words.

“Tread carefully but in the absence of fear, young one. Above all else...keep your goal in front of you.”



Three days had passed since that seminar at the museum. The four shugenja were eating lunch in Hikiko's Flower Arrangement clubroom. Usually this wasn't permitted, but as the cafeteria was still off-limits due to the ceremony, they had special permission. The group found that eating among the camellias, violets and cherry blossoms made even the most bland miso soup enjoyable.

"Masami-chan. You look sleepy. Unlike you," Hikiko said, brief as usual. "Something wrong?"

Masami shook her head to deny it, but soon Fumihiro was on her case as well.

"Come to think of it...you raised your hand for but three-quarters of the questions in class this morning. Usually you do so for all of them," the kendo captain recalled. "Mayhaps you have been stricken with illness?"

Hitomi placed a hand on Masami's forehead causing the younger shugenja to go red—though not with fever. "You feel fine to me...but there have been odd noises from out of the cafeteria lately. Could it be that they are disturbing your sleep, Masami-chan?"

Masami assured them that everything was fine and that she was up late doing research for her spirit animal. It wasn't technically a lie. Luckily, the topic of tomorrow's presentation shifted the conversation. Fumihiro was quick to boast as usual.

"I shall be presenting far more than a mere report on my spirit animal, the magnificent koi! Prepare thyselfes, as all shall soon behold the majesty of my great-great grandfather: Yusuke Morita!"

Hikiko replied with an exaggerated yawn. "Sounds boring. This presentation is dumb."

"Oh, Hikiko-chan, your spirit animal is the octopus, correct? Perhaps that's why you're so talented in spewing ink?" Hitomi asked with a giggle. The itako got no reply aside from a glare that was so menacing even the blind could see it.

Usually, it was Masami's job to intermediate between them—though today she wasn't up for it. Trying to enter the spirit world these past three nights had been as exhausting as it had been futile: no matter how determined she was to see Pan-kun again, she couldn't make any progress. It had been so easy to do so before, when she went in to rescue Hitomi, yet now it seemed impossible.

"Masami-chan. You sure you're okay? Bell for afternoon classes rang," Hikiko said, placing a hand on the shugenja's shoulder and shaking her softly. "Not been yourself. Not since you spoke to that monk, earlier."

"A monk? Oh, that's right! I'll be fine, Hikiko-chan. I'll join you in class soon...I just have to get something from my room, first!" Masami said in a rare lie. She excused herself and ran off—though not to her quarters. She instead went down one unused corridor to the next, Tenkai's parting words repeating inside her mind.

"Tread carefully but in the absence of fear, young one. Above all else...keep your goal in front of you."

To enter the spirit world required profound willpower and determination—but even that wasn't enough, it turned out. Perhaps most importantly, there had to be a compelling reason to go there in the first place. Before it was to rescue Hitomi-chan. Now, it was to...

"...to find out what secrets you're hiding," Masami said aloud, facing the mysterious door she had found earlier. Pan-kun had led her to it before for a reason, Masami knew, even if she hadn't the slightest idea why. Though it wasn't just the red panda that came to mind as the shugenja sat down in a traditional seiza.

It was a swan as well. A black one, who had spoken to her in the spirit realm so clearly that she could hear it within her mind even now. *"Study well and learn quickly, Hashimoto-san. For you do not have the luxury of time."*

Masami focused on her breathing, trying desperately to slow down the beat of her racing heart. She knew she wasn't supposed to be here, and that the talismans on the door emitted a powerful, dreadful ward, but she couldn't let fear cloud her thoughts. Skipping class and ruining her perfect attendance record would've been enough for her to deter her before, but no longer.

Because being a perfect student wasn't enough. As much as she enjoyed her stay at the Academy and the friendships she had made here, Masami couldn't help but wonder if there was something more out there. A restlessness had grown within her, and whether it was for a person or a purpose, she found her spirit pushing her forward.

And that push, right now, was enough to send her to another world.

■■■■

"Hnnng, uah!" Masami grunted, trying to slide open the door. She was in the spirit realm—or at least, she had grown a couple feet taller—which was exciting all its own. Though aside from the hallways looking smaller due to her size, the Academy mostly remained the same.

And that included this blasted door. No amount of pounding, kicking and asking nicely was enough for it to move. She had even attempted to stare it down and 'will' it open with her mind. All she got was a headache for her trouble. Though the talismans that once decorated it were gone, in their place was a thin, bluish gauze that ran both across the door and to the walls on either side. It rippled ever so slightly to Masami's touch, but remained firm.

"It's a barrier...it has to be," Masami concluded. Barriers were a type of magic found only on scrolls depicting myths; they were scarcely even mentioned in their textbooks. According to the course material, creating such a permanent ward that worked both in the physical realm and the spiritual one ought to have been impossible.

Turned out that not everything was covered in the course curriculum.

With all the noise she was making, Masami had gotten the attention of a spectator: a cute and tiny one with red fur, white ears and a striped tail.

“Pan-kun!” the shugenja shouted, scaring it off. She quickly apologized—though the gesture was wasted—and pursued it down the hall. Masami wanted to hold it and pet it, but more than that, she hoped to speak to it. If the swan could talk then surely the panda could, too!

The hall ended at the wing of the school where all the classrooms were. Masami noted that classes must’ve recently ended, with students chatting about in the halls in their semi-ethereal forms. She saw some inconsistencies, too, but it wasn’t until she saw Hikiko that her pace slowed to a stop.

The usually dark and drab shugenja with disheveled hair down her waist wore a flashy kimono of pink and orange, with her hair tied up in elaborate braids with an ivory hairpin just like the one Masami wore. She was at the center of a large group of students, giggling and chatting like she was the most popular girl in school.

Further down the hall towards the clubrooms, Masami was assaulted by the sweet and piney scent of turpentine. While she assumed it was from the Incense Appreciation Club, the source turned out to be Hitomi’s club, instead.

And instead of arranging flowers, the once-blind shrine maiden was busy painting a subject that stood on a pedestal before her. Masami nearly had a heart attack as she realized the model was herself: or at least, a very flattering and older version of her—posing on the stone podium. She looked nearly identical to her current spiritual form.

The difference being that one modeling was stark naked.

Masami let out an eep before closing the door and going beat red from embarrassment. She continued hot on the trail of Pan-kun who had entered through another clubroom: the kendo club’s, if Masami recalled correctly.

And she didn’t—or at least, what was once a training hall for swordsmanship had been replaced by a dimly-lit library. There was just enough light to make out the frail figure hunched inside.

The lone student resembled Fumihiro and was muttering to himself over and over. It wasn’t lengthy poetry, but a single name: “Noriko...Noriko...Noriko...”

It was a sad and pathetic sight so unlike the boisterous young man Masami knew. Before the shugenja could reach out to touch him, he vanished, leaving only dust behind. Pan-kun sniffed around the floor before heading out once more—this time to the cafeteria.

“What I’ve just witnessed...could these be the true reflections of my friends? The parts of themselves that they keep locked away and hidden?”

Masami didn't know for sure. Soon, she was certain of nothing at all, for as she and Pan-kun approached the Academy's mess hall, screams began to echo throughout the walls. They were accompanied by the ringing of a small bell whose chime sent shivers down Masami's spine. A pressure bore down upon the shugenja's shoulders as well, making each step more difficult than the last.

There was something evil up ahead. Every bone in her body and voice in her head told her as much, though she ignored it all as she continued to follow Pan-kun. The red panda showed no concern nor hesitation, pausing only to sniff the barred-off entryway to the cafeteria.

After it was thoroughly satisfied by its scent, it jumped right through.

"T-that's right. In the spirit realm, walls can be passed through. Those that aren't warded, anyway," Masami thought to herself. Though that was the theory, in practice it was far more difficult: she had to truly believe her hand could pass through the barricade before it did.

It took a few tense moments to gather her courage—especially upon hearing the screams inside—but Masami collected it all the same, plunging herself through even if she had to do so with her eyes closed.

When she opened her eyes, she couldn't believe them: the tables, chairs and kitchens were all gone, along with many of the floor panels, too, to make room for a gigantic tree that came forth from the depths below. It was ancient and alive, and most of all it was animated: its giant roots twisted and spread across the walls and ceiling.

A muffled noise came from inside a pod raised up beside Masami. The shugenja noted that there seven of such pods in total: giant seeds encased in roots and leaking what seemed to be sap.

She didn't have time to inspect further before a figure emerged from the dark depths below. It was not a man, an animal, or any being Masami had seen before. It was small and freakish with a pale white body that lacked all definition and features—save for its eyes and mouth that were black, empty voids.

It didn't walk so much as it floated and hopped about the room, dancing as it hummed in a hollow, creeping tone. Masami was frozen in fright and would've remained that way had the sight of Pan-kun not urged her to move. She quickly—and silently—darted over to the spirit animal's side behind an upturned table.

She held the red panda tightly to keep it safe. Or at least that was what she told herself as she mentally ran through each and every prayer for protection she knew. Though Masami didn't know why she was so convinced, she knew that this thing wasn't just some figment of her imagination. It wasn't just a monster from a ghost story, either.

It was a demon. And it was real.

ring* *ring* *ring

The creature shook a bell beside one of the pods—though how it held it without any fingers let alone an opposable thumb was a mystery Masami would never solve. The shugenja recognized the bell to be the same shape and design as the one in the museum earlier. Ringing it seemed to activate something within the pods.

While the pods shook amidst a magical vibration, the roots clenched tighter around them, squeezing whatever was inside. The sap flowed out as it did so, its juices glistening and flowing down the sides of the pods.

It was then that the demon's humming stopped. It spoke in a language that neither Masami nor any Hyugan in this era had ever heard.

“Diht lama crop þes mæl...ápwítan.”

The words ran laps around Masami's mind as she was unable to follow them. It almost sounded like a spell; the shugenja was certainly entranced by one. Only the nuzzling of Pan-kun against her neck brought her from out of her daze. By that time, the pale figure had vanished—leaving its bell behind on a table.

“I need that bell, don't I, Pan-kun?” Masami asked inside her mind and swore that she saw the panda nod. Finding her courage, she darted over from one pod to another, ignoring the sap sticking to her sandals. She reached out and grabbed the bell, careful to hold the clapper inside so as not to alert the monster. She darted out as quickly and as quietly as she could into a nearby wall, not stopping until she was back by the classrooms.

She panted heavily until she remembered that she was in the spirit world: where tiredness shouldn't exist in an immaterial form. Suddenly rejuvenated, she went back to the mysterious door from before—the one secured by a powerful barrier. With Pan-kun on her shoulder, she took in a deep breath and rang the bell.

ring* *ring

Though the sound was rather weak, its effect on the ward was anything but. The ripples through the faint blue barrier started small though quickly became violent, like an ocean amidst a typhoon. The waves clashed against themselves before dissolving into nothingness. When there was no sign of the barrier left, Masami looked at Pan-kun who nodded once more.

“Time to find out what secrets are behind this door,” the shugenja said, sliding the shoji door open.

The air that flooded out from it was as stale as an ancient crypt's—as if it hadn't been opened for centuries. The insides seemed to confirm it with a thick layer of dust coating a bare dirt floor. There was a pit at the center for a fire and large columns made from gnarled logs all around.

“Just how old is this place? And who's memories are held here?” Masami asked aloud. She kept wondering until Pan-kun came upon a pile of hay and started chirping, wagging its tail as a dog would

before jumping inside. “At least one of us is having fun. How I wish I could be as carefree as you, Pan-kun!”

There was something beneath the hay that caught the shugenja’s attention, and before long she was on her knees beside her spirit animal digging at the pile to find out what it was. It turned out to be a bronze chest that had long since turned green. With more than little hesitance, Masami opened it and peered inside.

She found a stack of papers that were remarkably white and showed no signs of age. The ink used was fresh and the writing was modern. But that didn’t make the words any easier for Masami to read, for what they said was beyond believable.

“These names...these are the upperclassmen! This season’s graduates!” she gasped, reading over a chart with their names as well as their height, weight, age, and even what type of blood they had. Masami didn’t even know there *were* different types of blood!

Not only that, there were columns for their magical proficiencies, their academic scores as well as their potentials, too: a measure of how much spiritual energy they had at their command. The last column at the end was labeled ‘harvest value’—whatever that meant.

Masami quickly flipped through the pages until she got to her class and saw their names and numbers. Her own name was underlined and circled in red, the potential score left blank. In the field at the end, beneath the column for harvest value, was...

“...extraordinary, aren’t you, Hashimoto-chan?” said a voice from behind her. “You never fail to impress me. But don’t you think it’s time you...woke up from this dream?”

Before Masami could turn around to see who it was, her vision faded to black and her consciousness leaped from out of her.

■■■■

She awoke the next morning on her futon in her room. Why wouldn’t she? Masami had just had the strangest and most vivid dream she could ever recall, though even doing that much was becoming a difficult task. Pan-kun was in it, she was pretty sure, as well as a giant tree beneath the cafeteria...there was a bronze chest and a distinct ringing noise as well.

The only ringing now was from the sound of the morning bell for classes to start. Masami shot up from her bed and quickly got dressed: she had overslept! While it was true she hadn’t been sleeping well lately, today was presentation day.

“Oh, how I despise public speaking! And now I’ll have to do so on an empty stomach,” the shugenja complained as her stomach growled. She grabbed her books and rushed over to class, racing alongside the usually delinquent students. Hikiko was among them, dragging herself with little to no pace at all,

while Fumihiro wasn't far ahead. He was pushing a sizable utility cart, accompanied by a pair of samurai wearing jackets with the Maori clan crest on them.

As for what was on the cart and inside a giant bowl hidden beneath a tablecloth, Masami was soon to find out as Fumihiro was the first to presentate. The self-acclaimed warrior poet got up to the podium and started as soon class began, going into an elaborate speech he had memorized days prior.

"Delivered to us this day, from its residence in Yamato at the esteemed Sleeping Duck inn, I present to you...my spirit animal! The majestic koi fish—behold it's beauty!" Fumihiro yelled, removing the tablecloth with dramatic flair. Beneath it was a giant koi of at least twenty pounds, colored white with beautiful red splotches. It was indeed majestic, but...

"Is it dead?" one of the students asked. A dozen others giggled.

"I-It is merely sleeping!" Fumihiro said, poking the glass. "At...at any rate, this koi is over a hundred years old! It retains within it the very spirit of my father's, father's father, Yosuke Morita!"

It was as if speaking his ancestor's name summoned life into the fish, who roused from its sleep and slammed against the confines of its bowl. Fumihiro started howling in glee...before doing so in terror as the giant koi leaped from out of its bowl, flopping directly towards the class. Chaos ensued as students desperately tried to avoid the flailing fish while Fumihiro and the samurai hurried to chase it down.

Hikiko was beside herself with amusement, cackling in the corner—at least until the fish made way towards her direction. A force of twenty pounds and then some slammed her into the wall, knocking the wind from out of her. The samurai caught the ancestral fish shortly thereafter, though it took far longer for the class to calm down.

That much excitement so early in the morning was just what Masami needed to recover from her fatigue. And though she was fully awake, she couldn't help but think that she was missing something. That she had forgotten something vitally important.

She shook off the feeling because she had too: she was the next to give a presentation. With unsteady footsteps due to nerves and puddles of water, she made her way to the podium. When she got there and glanced down at the papers she had written about the red panda, she could only see a blur.

Everything was blurry, and the awkward silence only embarrassed her further. Soon the students began to whisper and chuckle, all while the shugenja fumbled over her words.

"The red panda, its habitat is...their diet consists of..." she trailed off into murmurs. Masami was beset with a sudden headache that pounded upon the sight of each of her classmates. This continued as she looked about the room, until she glanced down to her own desk at the front row.

For sitting on her chair curled up into a ball, was Pan-kun.

“Hashimoto-san? Is everything all right?” the teacher asked. It was a question soon everyone would be asking as the shugenja slumped down over the podium. Masami shook her head and asked to be excused, but was halfway out the door before she got an answer.

There was no time for presentations, not when she heard a ringing bell down the hall. She had remembered everything.

“The graduates...they’re in danger!” Masami thought and Pan-kun nodded, jumping upon the shugenja’s shoulder as she sprinted over towards the cafeteria. She stopped by her room to fill up a sack with her belongings: ink, ryō and paper, too, hastily scribbling down a pair of spells before reaching the barricade.

“Am I doing the right thing, Pan-kun? I could get expelled for this!” Masami asked her partner who replied with a nip and a nuzzle against her neck. That was all the confirmation she needed as she placed a talisman on either side of the wooden wall.

She clapped and whispered a chant to activate them, forcing her hands together tightly as the talismans pressed inward against each other with tremendous force. The wood between them cracked and buckled, breaking down as splinters flew every which way. Masami continued her chant even as shards of wood flew and cut across her cheeks and forehead, not stopping until there was a hole large enough for her to get through.

Pan-kun had already gone ahead. The sight inside—which should’ve been different from the spirit world—was mostly the same: a giant, overgrown tree poked out from beneath the floor, its roots like vines now consuming the entire room. The large pods hanging from the ceiling were now shriveled husks discarded on the floor with large, gaping cavities from within them.

“No...no! I’m too late?!” Masami gasped and then cried, gazing upon the open-eyed stare from one of her upperclassmen. A graduate student—a young man—once filled with ambition of a life serving Hyuga and his Emperor, now laid pruned like a raisin.

The voice from before echoed from the depths below, pounding through Masami’s mind like a drum.

“Hwa durran heg sé bedríp?”

The small, pale monstrosity floated from out of the tree, hovering about with its black, voided eyes staring deep in Masami’s soul. The pressure she felt across her body, mind and spirit was immense, powerful enough to crush her from the inside out.

“I don’t know...what you are, but...I won’t let you hurt anyone else! I won’t let you hurt my friends!” Masami shouted, her voice seeming to take physical form via a powerful wind, sending the floating demon spiraling away. It wasn’t long before its dance continued, however, as it picked up its bell and started ringing it.

What looked to be large, green leaves spiraled around the demon as its dance continued. Each had a white, glowing inscription on it—though they were moving too quickly for Masami to read. After one final ring, the leaves shot out and flew about the room. Masami closed her eyes and braced for an attack. But what happened next was something much worse.

To the young shugenja's horror, the corpses of her upperclassman began to shamble and shake. They rose to their feet not as people but walking husks! Their shriveled masses, dead eyes and sunken faces were in various stages of decomposing—and they each bore a stench to match.

They let out deathly groans as they made their staggered approach towards Masami. Her fellow shugenja reached out with their arms to grab her, their intent betrayed by their open jaws and drooling mouths.

speeeew

A stream of thick, black liquid sprayed out into those open mouths from behind Masami. It was ink, she realized, before also realizing that her friend Hikiko had come to rescue her. And not just her—Fumihiro and Hitomi were there as well!

"By the heavens, what are these abominations?!" Fumihiro yelled, swinging his bamboo training sword into one of the walking corpses. It was only afterwards that he recognized his shriveled opponent. "Shi...Shigeo-senpai? Is that you?"

"These things. Not people," Hikiko spoke, hosing down a pair of walking dead. "More concerned about...that thing."

She gestured to the creature that had stood still for the past minute or more. It stared upon the group with no expression—for its eyes and mouth were simply voids—yet Masami couldn't help but feel as if it was smirking. It began to ring its bell once more.

"That ring...there's a spell within it," Hitomi said, listening intently. "The plants and trees are crying out—their will is at its mercy! We must stop it before we all become its slaves!"

Masami glanced over at Pan-kun who nodded once more. She then dumped the contents of her sack—pocketing only the ryō—leaving her books, reports and papers scattered on the root floor. Deep down, Masami knew that she wouldn't have need of those anymore.

Because she was about to graduate. She was about to leave the Academy and her friends for good.

"Whatever you're thinking. Bad idea, Masami-chan," Hikiko warned her. It was appreciated but ignored all the same as the young shugenja ran forward. It was a reckless charge and easily dodged by the pale demon—except that it was busy getting bitten by a red panda that had gone feral.

Pan-kun was shaken and thrown off though not before forcing the demon to release its bell. As soon as it did, Masami got within range: not for some magical attack but a far more orthodox one. She pulled the

sack over the monster's head, dragging it down from the air with her weight. She tied it closed as quickly as she could before falling to the cafeteria floor.

When she recovered, she grabbed the bell and Pan-kun and ran off to the others. The floor itself seemed to shift as she ran. The roots grew animated and angry, tripping the shugenja at every step. It snatched at her ankles and whipped at her legs as she passed.

"If that bell be what hath turned our classmates into conjured corpses...then it is foul, and must be removed from this school at once!" Fumihiro declared. "Daughter of Hashimoto—go! Hikiko-chan and I shall hold them off here!"

"But I—"

"He's right," Hikiko said, interrupting Masami's protest. "Take Hitomi-chan with you. Get out. Now!"

The order was clear as were the eyes of her two dear friends. Though Hikiko and Fumihiro despised each other and had nothing in common, they fought back-to-back against the undead students together. Hitomi took Masami by the hand and ran. Even though she was blind she seemed to know exactly where she was going.

Masami's greatest regret was not giving them a proper goodbye.

The path ahead was hardly clear: roots poked out from beneath tatami mat tiles, crisscrossing across the floor and stretching up the walls. Some rooms had become entirely closed off, their doors barricaded in roots. Yells from within from trapped students made for an atmosphere that was growing thick both in fear and something else.

"Ah, ah, *achoo!*" Masami sneezed. It was difficult enough to see with the air fogged as it was; sneezing every few seconds only made matters worse.

"It's pollen," Hitomi said, covering her nose. "Try not to breathe in too much of it. I have a hunch allergies will be the least of our concerns!"

With the blind itako leading them, the pair made it into the Flower Arrangement clubroom. How they were going to escape from there was a good question. Luckily, it was one Hitomi already had an answer for.

"There's a secret exit to the school's gardens," Hitomi said, pushing some of her potted plants out of the way. "Well, it's not a secret...it's just that everyone forgot about it. From here, you'll—ah!"

"Hitomi!" Masami yelled as her friend was choked by an overgrown lavender that had wrapped itself around her neck. Though between the two of them they managed to get it off, the cherry blossoms, wisterias and the rest of Hitomi's collection were quickly growing violent.

"I'm beginning to think that going through the gardens is a bad idea!" Masami said, panting heavily. She continued to do so as she watched the shrine maiden pull out a jar from a cupboard. With a sniff to confirm it, she smiled. She then poured its contents down over Masami's scalp.

"It's vinegar," Hitomi explained. "I'm sorry about the smell, but to many plants the acidity makes it poisonous. They should avoid you while you wear it. Now then...you should get yourself and that bell out of here before it's too late, Masa-chan!"

Masami was already shaking her head. "I can't go without you! Please...don't leave me on my own!"

Hitomi said nothing but knelt down and gave Masami a hug. She embraced her friend tightly, tighter than she had even in the spirit world all those weeks ago.

"I know how brave you really are. Hikiko-chan and Fumihiko-kun know it, too. It's obvious to everyone that you're going to be an amazing shugenja someday. I...I just hope you're as cute then as you are now," Hitomi said, forcing out a laugh. She choked down her tears and squeezed tighter. "Come back to save us soon, okay? Promise you won't forget about us, Masa-chan!"

Masami gave Hitomi her promise. Little did she know that it wasn't one she could keep.

Exchanging farewells, the young shugenja left through the gardens, the plants parting in her path thanks to Hitomi's vinegar. The ones that didn't—rhododendrons and gardenias, mostly—whipped and lashed at her as she ran through. Pan-kun was racing up ahead though stopped to sniff at something at the edge of the field.

Masami wouldn't know what it was until she collided into it; she slammed up against an invisible barrier, her forehead bruising and her eyes seeing double. She was still dazed when the demon arrived from out of the school, flying as a specter across the garden. The flowers around it browned and withered as the sensation of rage and malice came forth.

"Unc eyre unberéafigendlic!"

A beam of light formed from within the demon's mouth and eyes, the cavities glowing blindingly white. The afternoon sky darkened as it did so—as if it was stealing from the sun itself. Maybe it was. Pressed up against the barrier, Masami could do nothing but cover her eyes with her arms and pray for this nightmare to end.

As if an answer of her prayer, a gentle voice came from beside her neck. It came in the form of a gentle, nuzzling whisper.

"I'm so happy to have met you, Masami. But it's time for you to continue your journey without me. If you remember nothing else, then remember this: you must seek a bodyguard and go to Yamato."

Nothing seemed real and soon none of it would be, not for the shugenja. At the last moment, as the ray shot forth towards Masami, Pan-kun snatched the bell and jumped into its path. Light, force and sound

Fumihiro's lamentations were silenced by an elbow to the gut courtesy of Hikiko. The dark, drab and dour shugenja was assigned to be the kendo captain's off-campus partner. So long as they were off Academy grounds, they had to be tied together with string. Several feet of it was raised taut between their wrists as the two fussed and bickered.

"Urusai! This field trip. Already painful enough. Should've gone to the kabuki theater."

Students were rarely permitted outside of the Academy due to security reasons: abductions of the magically-gifted students were not uncommon. The exception to this was during class outings such as this one the local art gallery. Though it was far more than that now after its recent endowment courtesy of His Imperial Majesty. It had been renamed the 'Seijirō Museum of Fine Arts' at the Emperor's request in honor of his father.

But the recent endowment wasn't why they were there. The reason had to do with the graduation ceremony: at the end of every season—this one's being spring—a select group of students, thoroughly tested and vetted for their magical abilities, were made to undergo a special ceremony. Though the ritual itself was mostly unknown, it required special preparations at the school, forcing the rest of the student body outside.

And so the class was assigned partners at random. Some pairings were more...favorable than others.

"Oh, Masa-kun! I'd love to check out the pottery display next!" said Hitomi with glee. She was an itako: a blind shrine maiden with the ability to commune with the dead. She was also a few years older than her partner and over a foot taller, looking like an overly-affectionate older sister.

"Ah, s-sure. But there's no reason to cling to me so tightly, you know," Masashi said, his face growing crimson. The younger shugenja guided his partner from exhibit to exhibit, much like their 'date' in the spirit world. The only difference was that there were other people around—including their classmates—and so it was many times more embarrassing.

Though most of the exhibits couldn't be touched, Masashi did his best to explain what they looked like in detail. He also read the placards and labels aloud. Hitomi listened intently all the while, letting her imagination go wild. Of course, not but a few weeks ago she hadn't needed an imagination at all: in the spirit world, she had been able to see the gallery with her own two eyes.

"It's amazing, isn't it Masa-kun? Though the exhibits aren't as they were before, the halls and the layout of this building are exactly the same!"

Hitomi made a good point that Masashi hadn't considered. While there wasn't an ancient shogi board, kabuki outfits or an odd wooden device with a giant blade raised overhead, everything else about the gallery was the same as it had been in the spirit world.

"...yet neither of us had ever visited the gallery prior," Masashi thought aloud. "That means the spirit world must be more than just a reflection of our own thoughts and experiences. It's more than just a dream...almost like an alternate reality..."

"You look so cute when you're deep in thought like that," Hitomi teased. Of course, she couldn't see Masashi but that didn't stop the younger shugenja from going flush all the same. It was a relief when they met up with Fumihiko and Hikiko—the former all but dragging the latter.

"Lady Hitomi, Son of Hashimoto: perchance the two of you would accompany us to a new exhibit?" Fumihiko asked, bowing—or at least trying to, tied up as he was. "We've still a moment 'afore the seminar."

The group agreed, wanting to observe as many exhibits as they could. The seminar was to be a classwide meditation session with a guest lecturer: a spiritual guru from the Suijin Mountains. While it was likely to be as exciting as it sounded, Hikiko was uncharacteristically optimistic.

"A monk from Suijin. Isolated from the world. Training above the clouds. Probably strong and dreamy. Like the villain in *Tsuchi Gumo*," Hikiko said, referencing a popular theater play. If Masashi recalled correctly, that one was about a monk who was actually a spider demon in disguise, who killed his liege lord only to be hunted down and slain in his lair later.

The fact that Hikiko found such a villain dreamy...wasn't much of a surprise, really.

What was a surprise was the new exhibit; the sight of it caused Masashi to gasp and rush forward, pushing through his friends and dragging Hitomi behind. For what he saw behind a glass container was familiar: a wooden sculpture of a red panda. It looked almost identical to the one he had seen in his trip to this gallery before. That one that had turned into Pan-kun, his spirit animal!

Masashi said as much to his friends, each of which had their own reaction.

"Hm...indeed, 'tis peculiar," Fumihiko said, scratching his chin while inspecting the sculpture. "The craftsmanship is...hardly remarkable, and this plaque here says nothing—save that it is from an anonymous artist. Methinks this exhibit is misplaced!"

"Look closer," Hikiko said, pointing. "In its mouth. Holding a small bell. Looks familiar. Can't remember where it's from, though."

Each of them—save for Hitomi—placed their faces up against the glass to see clearer but none of them could make out the details before the teacher yelled at them to head over to the seminar. Though Masashi was reluctant to leave Pan-kun behind, he was more resolved than ever before.

"This has to be a sign, I know it! Reuniting with you, Pan-kun, and finding out whatever is behind that strange door...that must be what the black swan was talking about! I can't waste anymore time!"

Speaking of wasting time, the entire class did just that as they sat in a circle around a mummified old man. It was a rather macabre display, Masashi thought, hardly eliciting the comforting atmosphere required for deep meditation. Of course, meditation was a daily requirement for every shugenja...even if many just used it as naptime.

One minute passed and then several more all while the shugenja grew more and more restless. They were beginning to think their guest lecturer wouldn't arrive until the mummified man opened his eyes.

After the resulting screams and commotion died down, he spoke.

"Sokushinbutsu is the practice of preserving oneself to enter mummification while still in the realm of the living," he said, his voice dry. His face had so many wrinkles that it was hard to tell when his mouth was actually open. It didn't help that he hardly spoke above a whisper. "Practitioners such as I consume nothing but pine needles and drink only rainwater from the heavens above. It is—*huACK, haK, huk!*"

Fumihiro turned towards his partner as the dry heaving continued. "Quite the strapping monk indeed, Hikiko. Mayhaps he'll give you an autograph after the seminar!"

The joke earned him a second elbow to the gut, this one powerful enough to send him buckling over. Hitomi let out a polite giggle while Masashi remained focused on the monk. If anyone knew about spirit animals and entering the spirit realm—it had to be him.

The group meditation session began shortly thereafter, with everyone humming in unison albeit offkey. Like everything else he did, Fumihiro over-embellished his chants while Hikiko forgoed hers altogether. Eventually the monk—whose name was Tenkai—grew frustrated and told them all to quiet.

Nearing the end of the seminar, he allowed the students to ask questions. Masashi's hand shot up immediately, the young shugenja having waited for this moment for the past hour.

"In our studies," Masashi started, "we are told that the spirit world is a reflection of our own memories, as well as what we've seen and heard about. But is it really just a projection of our imagination...or is it something more defined?"

The mummified monk creaked his eyes open a little wider. Though by appearances he was all but deceased, his eyes were as clear as crystal and betrayed a stark intellect. He mused over the question a little longer before giving his response.

"Imagination is thought given life. The spirit world is the collective imagination from all of life's creation. The viewer distorts their reality just as they do in this world. The perspective of an emperor and an orphan...are hardly one and the same! Though the same elements may exist in both of their worlds, they will have very different experiences. Only a still mind, free of doubt and worldly desires, may have any hope of glimpsing either world as they truly are."

"And our spirit animals," Masashi continued, "we're told that they are the embodiment of our past reincarnations in spiritual form...but is it possible that they can enter this realm, as well?"

As for a reply, the monk Tenkai went into a lengthy coughing fit—long enough for the teacher to put an end to the questioning. The seminar was over and a new project was assigned: they were each tasked with giving presentations on their spirit animal by the end of the week.

After the shugenja groaned in dismay, they were let out from the chamber and back to the school. Masashi trailed behind, desperate to know more from Tenkai. The teacher all but pushed him out—but not before the mummified monk could utter his parting words.

“Tread carefully but in the absence of fear, young one. Above all else...keep your goal in front of you.”

■■■■

Three days had passed since that seminar at the museum. The four shugenja were eating lunch in Hikiko's Flower Arrangement clubroom. Usually this wasn't permitted, but as the cafeteria was still off-limits due to the ceremony, they had special permission. The group found that eating among the camellias, violets and cherry blossoms made even the most bland miso soup enjoyable.

“Masashi-kun. You look sleepy. Unlike you,” Hikiko said, brief as usual. “Something wrong?”

Masashi shook his head to deny it, but soon Fumihiko was on his case as well.

“Come to think of it...you raised your hand for but three-quarters of the questions in class this morning. Usually you do so for all of them,” the kendo captain recalled. “Mayhaps you have been stricken with illness?”

Hitomi placed a hand on Masashi's forehead causing the younger shugenja to go red—though not with fever. “You feel fine to me...but there have been odd noises from out of the cafeteria lately. Could it be that they are disturbing your sleep, Masashi-kun?”

Masashi assured them that everything was fine and that he was up late doing research for his spirit animal. It wasn't technically a lie. Luckily, the topic of tomorrow's presentation shifted the conversation. Fumihiko was quick to boast as usual.

“I shall be presenting far more than a mere report on my spirit animal, the magnificent koi! Prepare thyself, as all shall soon behold the majesty of my great-great grandfather: Yusuke Morita!”

Hikiko replied with an exaggerated yawn. “Sounds boring. This presentation is dumb.”

“Oh, Hikiko-chan, your spirit animal is the octopus, correct? Perhaps that's why you're so talented in spewing ink?” Hitomi asked with a giggle. The itako got no reply aside from a glare that was so menacing even the blind could see it.

Usually, it was Masashi's job to intermediate between them—though today he wasn't up for it. Trying to enter the spirit world these past three nights had been as exhausting as it had been futile: no matter how determined he was to see Pan-kun again, he couldn't make any progress. It had been so easy to do so before, when he went in to rescue Hitomi, yet now it seemed impossible.

“Masashi-kun. You sure you're okay? Bell for afternoon classes rang,” Hikiko said, placing a hand on the shugenja's shoulder and shaking him softly. “Not been yourself. Not since you spoke to that monk,

earlier.”

“A monk? Oh, that’s right! I’ll be fine, Hikiko-chan. I’ll join you in class soon...I just have to get something from my room, first!” Masashi said in a rare lie. He excused himself and ran off—though not to his quarters. He instead went down one unused corridor to the next, Tenkai’s parting words repeating inside his mind.

“Tread carefully but in the absence of fear, young one. Above all else...keep your goal in front of you.”

To enter the spirit world required profound willpower and determination—but even that wasn’t enough, it turned out. Perhaps most importantly, there had to be a compelling reason to go there in the first place. Before it was to rescue Hitomi-chan. Now, it was to...

“...to find out what secrets you’re hiding,” Masashi said aloud, facing the mysterious door he had found earlier. Pan-kun had led him to it before for a reason, Masashi knew, even if he hadn’t the slightest idea why. Though it wasn’t just the red panda that came to mind as the shugenja sat down in a traditional seiza.

It was a swan as well. A black one, who had spoken to him in the spirit realm so clearly that he could hear it within his mind even now. *“Study well and learn quickly, Hashimoto-san. For you do not have the luxury of time.”*

Masashi focused on his breathing, trying desperately to slow down the beat of his racing heart. He knew he wasn’t supposed to be here, and that the talismans on the door emitted a powerful, dreadful ward, but he couldn’t let fear cloud his thoughts. Skipping class and ruining his perfect attendance record would’ve been enough for him to deter him before, but no longer.

Because being a perfect student wasn’t enough. As much as he enjoyed his stay at the Academy and the friendships he had made here, Masashi couldn’t help but wonder if there was something more out there. A restlessness had grown within him, and whether it was for a person or a purpose, he found his spirit pushing him forward.

And that push, right now, was enough to send him to another world.

■■■■

“Hnnng, uah!” Masashi grunted, trying to slide open the door. He was in the spirit realm—or at least, he had grown a couple feet taller—which was exciting all its own. Though aside from the hallways looking smaller due to his size, the Academy mostly remained the same.

And that included this blasted door. No amount of pounding, kicking and asking nicely was enough for it to move. He had even attempted to stare it down and ‘will’ it open with his mind. All he got was a headache for his trouble. Though the talismans that once decorated it were gone, in their place was a thin, bluish gauze that ran both across the door and to the walls on either side. It rippled ever so slightly to Masashi’s touch, but remained firm.

"It's a barrier...it has to be," Masashi concluded. Barriers were a type of magic found only on scrolls depicting myths; they were scarcely even mentioned in their textbooks. According to the course material, creating such a permanent ward that worked both in the physical realm and the spiritual one ought to have been impossible.

Turned out that not everything was covered in the course curriculum.

With all the noise he was making, Masashi had gotten the attention of a spectator: a cute and tiny one with red fur, white ears and a striped tail.

"Pan-kun!" the shugenja shouted, scaring it off. He quickly apologized—though the gesture was wasted—and pursued it down the hall. Masashi wanted to hold it and pet it, but more than that, he hoped to speak to it. If the swan could talk then surely the panda could, too!

The hall ended at the wing of the school where all the classrooms were. Masashi noted that classes must've recently ended, with students chatting about in the halls in their semi-ethereal forms. He saw some inconsistencies, too, but it wasn't until he saw Hikiko that his pace slowed to a stop.

The usually dark and drab shugenja with disheveled hair down her waist wore a flashy kimono of pink and orange, with her hair tied up in elaborate braids with an ivory hairpin just like the one Masashi wore. She was at the center of a large group of students, giggling and chatting like she was the most popular girl in school.

Further down the hall towards the clubrooms, Masashi was assaulted by the sweet and piney scent of turpentine. While he assumed it was from the Incense Appreciation Club, the source turned out to be Hitomi's club, instead.

And instead of arranging flowers, the once-blind shrine maiden was busy painting a subject that stood on a pedestal before her. Masashi nearly had a heart attack as he realized the model was himself: or at least, a very flattering and older version of him—posing on the stone podium. He looked nearly identical to his current spiritual form.

The difference being that one modeling was stark naked.

Masashi let out an eep before closing the door and going beat red from embarrassment. He continued hot on the trail of Pan-kun who had entered through another clubroom: the kendo club's, if Masashi recalled correctly.

And he didn't—or at least, what was once a training hall for swordsmanship had been replaced by a dimly-lit library. There was just enough light to make out the frail figure hunched inside.

The lone student resembled Fumihiro and was muttering to himself over and over. It wasn't lengthy poetry, but a single name: "Noriko...Noriko...Noriko..."

It was a sad and pathetic sight so unlike the boisterous young man Masashi knew. Before the shugenja could reach out to touch him, he vanished, leaving only dust behind. Pan-kun sniffed around the floor before heading out once more—this time to the cafeteria.

“What I’ve just witnessed...could these be the true reflections of my friends? The parts of themselves that they keep locked away and hidden?”

Masashi didn’t know for sure. Soon, he was certain of nothing at all, for as he and Pan-kun approached the Academy’s mess hall, screams began to echo throughout the walls. They were accompanied by the ringing of a small bell whose chime sent shivers down Masashi’s spine. A pressure bore down upon the shugenja’s shoulders as well, making each step more difficult than the last.

There was something evil up ahead. Every bone in his body and voice in his head told him as much, though he ignored it all as he continued to follow Pan-kun. The red panda showed no concern nor hesitation, pausing only to sniff the barred-off entryway to the cafeteria.

After it was thoroughly satisfied by its scent, it jumped right through.

“T-that’s right. In the spirit realm, walls can be passed through. Those that aren’t warded, anyway,” Masashi thought to himself. Though that was the theory, in practice it was far more difficult: he had to truly believe his hand could pass through the barricade before it did.

It took a few tense moments to gather his courage—especially upon hearing the screams inside—but Masashi collected it all the same, plunging himself through even if he had to do so with his eyes closed.

When he opened his eyes, he couldn’t believe them: the tables, chairs and kitchens were all gone, along with many of the floor panels, too, to make room for a gigantic tree that came forth from the depths below. It was ancient and alive, and most of all it was animated: its giant roots twisted and spread across the walls and ceiling.

A muffled noise came from inside a pod raised up beside Masashi. The shugenja noted that there seven of such pods in total: giant seeds encased in roots and leaking what seemed to be sap.

He didn’t have time to inspect further before a figure emerged from the dark depths below. It was not a man, an animal, or any being Masashi had seen before. It was small and freakish with a pale white body that lacked all definition and features—save for its eyes and mouth that were black, empty voids.

It didn’t walk so much as it floated and hopped about the room, dancing as it hummed in a hollow, creeping tone. Masashi was frozen in fright and would’ve remained that way had the sight of Pan-kun not urged him to move. He quickly—and silently—darted over to the spirit animal’s side behind an upturned table.

He held the red panda tightly to keep it safe. Or at least that was what he told himself as he mentally ran through each and every prayer for protection he knew. Though Masashi didn’t know why he was so

convinced, he knew that this thing wasn't just some figment of his imagination. It wasn't just a monster from a ghost story, either.

It was a demon. And it was real.

ring* *ring* *ring

The creature shook a bell beside one of the pods—though how it held it without any fingers let alone an opposable thumb was a mystery Masashi would never solve. The shugenja recognized the bell to be the same shape and design as the one in the museum earlier. Ringing it seemed to activate something within the pods.

While the pods shook amidst a magical vibration, the roots clenched tighter around them, squeezing whatever was inside. The sap flowed out as it did so, its juices glistening and flowing down the sides of the pods.

It was then that the demon's humming stopped. It spoke in a language that neither Masashi nor any Hyugan in this era had ever heard.

“Diht lama crop pes mæl...ápwítan.”

The words ran laps around Masashi's mind as he was unable to follow them. It almost sounded like a spell; the shugenja was certainly entranced by one. Only the nuzzling of Pan-kun against his neck brought him from out of his daze. By that time, the pale figure had vanished—leaving its bell behind on a table.

“I need that bell, don't I, Pan-kun?” Masashi asked inside his mind and swore that he saw the panda nod. Finding his courage, he darted over from one pod to another, ignoring the sap sticking to his sandals. He reached out and grabbed the bell, careful to hold the clapper inside so as not to alert the monster. He darted out as quickly and as quietly as he could into a nearby wall, not stopping until he was back by the classrooms.

He panted heavily until he remembered that he was in the spirit world: where tiredness shouldn't exist in an immaterial form. Suddenly rejuvenated, he went back to the mysterious door from before—the one secured by a powerful barrier. With Pan-kun on his shoulder, he took in a deep breath and rang the bell.

ring* *ring

Though the sound was rather weak, its effect on the ward was anything but. The ripples through the faint blue barrier started small though quickly became violent, like an ocean amidst a typhoon. The waves clashed against themselves before dissolving into nothingness. When there was no sign of the barrier left, Masashi looked at Pan-kun who nodded once more.

“Time to find out what secrets are behind this door,” the shugenja said, sliding the shoji door open.

The air that flooded out from it was as stale as an ancient crypt's—as if it hadn't been opened for centuries. The insides seemed to confirm it with a thick layer of dust coating a bare dirt floor. There was a pit at the center for a fire and large columns made from gnarled logs all around.

“Just how old is this place? And who's memories are held here?” Masashi asked aloud. He kept wondering until Pan-kun came upon a pile of hay and started chirping, wagging its tail as a dog would before jumping inside. “At least one of us is having fun. How I wish I could be as carefree as you, Pan-kun!”

There was something beneath the hay that caught the shugenja's attention, and before long he was on his knees beside his spirit animal digging at the pile to find out what it was. It turned out to be a bronze chest that had long since turned green. With more than little hesitance, Masashi opened it and peered inside.

He found a stack of papers that were remarkably white and showed no signs of age. The ink used was fresh and the writing was modern. But that didn't make the words any easier for Masashi to read, for what they said was beyond believable.

“These names...these are the upperclassmen! This season's graduates!” he gasped, reading over a chart with their names as well as their height, weight, age, and even what type of blood they had. Masashi didn't even know there *were* different types of blood!

Not only that, there were columns for their magical proficiencies, their academic scores as well as their potentials, too: a measure of how much spiritual energy they had at their command. The last column at the end was labeled 'harvest value'—whatever that meant.

Masashi quickly flipped through the pages until he got to his class and saw their names and numbers. His own name was underlined and circled in red, the potential score left blank. In the field at the end, beneath the column for harvest value, was...

“...extraordinary, aren't you, Hashimoto-kun?” said a voice from behind him. “You never fail to impress me. But don't you think it's time you...woke up from this dream?”

Before Masashi could turn around to see who it was, his vision faded to black and his consciousness leaped from out of him.

■■■■

He awoke the next morning on his futon in his room. Why wouldn't he? Masashi had just had the strangest and most vivid dream he could ever recall, though even doing that much was becoming a difficult task. Pan-kun was in it, he was pretty sure, as well as a giant tree beneath the cafeteria...there was a bronze chest and a distinct ringing noise as well.

The only ringing now was from the sound of the morning bell for classes to start. Masashi shot up from his bed and quickly got dressed: he had overslept! While it was true he hadn't been sleeping well lately,

today was presentation day.

“Oh, how I despise public speaking! And now I’ll have to do so on an empty stomach,” the shugenja complained as his stomach growled. He grabbed his books and rushed over to class, racing alongside the usually delinquent students. Hikiko was among them, dragging herself with little to no pace at all, while Fumihiko wasn’t far ahead. He was pushing a sizable utility cart, accompanied by a pair of samurai wearing jackets with the Maori clan crest on them.

As for what was on the cart and inside a giant bowl hidden beneath a tablecloth, Masashi was soon to find out as Fumihiko was the first to presentate. The self-acclaimed warrior poet got up to the podium and started as soon class began, going into an elaborate speech he had memorized days prior.

“Delivered to us this day, from its residence in Yamato at the esteemed Sleeping Duck inn, I present to you...my spirit animal! The majestic koi fish—behold it’s beauty!” Fumihiko yelled, removing the tablecloth with dramatic flair. Beneath it was a giant koi of at least twenty pounds, colored white with beautiful red splotches. It was indeed majestic, but...

“Is it dead?” one of the students asked. A dozen others giggled.

“I-It is merely sleeping!” Fumihiko said, poking the glass. “At...at any rate, this koi is over a hundred years old! It retains within it the very spirit of my father’s, father’s father, Yosuke Morita!”

It was as if speaking his ancestor’s name summoned life into the fish, who roused from its sleep and slammed against the confines of its bowl. Fumihiko started howling in glee...before doing so in terror as the giant koi leaped from out of its bowl, flopping directly towards the class. Chaos ensued as students desperately tried to avoid the flailing fish while Fumihiko and the samurai hurried to chase it down.

Hikiko was beside herself with amusement, cackling in the corner—at least until the fish made way towards her direction. A force of twenty pounds and then some slammed her into the wall, knocking the wind from out of her. The samurai caught the ancestral fish shortly thereafter, though it took far longer for the class to calm down.

That much excitement so early in the morning was just what Masashi needed to recover from his fatigue. And though he was fully awake, he couldn’t help but think that he was missing something. That he had forgotten something vitally important.

He shook off the feeling because he had too: he was the next to give a presentation. With unsteady footsteps due to nerves and puddles of water, he made his way to the podium. When he got there and glanced down at the papers he had written about the red panda, he could only see a blur.

Everything was blurry, and the awkward silence only embarrassed his further. Soon the students began to whisper and chuckle, all while the shugenja fumbled over his words.

“The red panda, its habitat is...their diet consists of...” he trailed off into murmurs. Masashi was beset with a sudden headache that pounded upon the sight of each of his classmates. This continued as he

looked about the room, until he glanced down to his own desk at the front row.

For sitting on his chair curled up into a ball, was Pan-kun.

“Hashimoto-san? Is everything all right?” the teacher asked. It was a question soon everyone would be asking as the shugenja slumped down over the podium. Masashi shook his head and asked to be excused, but was halfway out the door before he got an answer.

There was no time for presentations, not when he heard a ringing bell down the hall. He had remembered everything.

“The graduates...they’re in danger!” Masashi thought and Pan-kun nodded, jumping upon the shugenja’s shoulder as he sprinted over towards the cafeteria. He stopped by his room to fill up a sack with his belongings: ink, ryō and paper, too, hastily scribbling down a pair of spells before reaching the barricade.

“Am I doing the right thing, Pan-kun? I could get expelled for this!” Masashi asked his partner who replied with a nip and a nuzzle against his neck. That was all the confirmation he needed as he placed a talisman on either side of the wooden wall.

He clapped and whispered a chant to activate them, forcing his hands together tightly as the talismans pressed inward against each other with tremendous force. The wood between them cracked and buckled, breaking down as splinters flew every which way. Masashi continued his chant even as shards of wood flew and cut across his cheeks and forehead, not stopping until there was a hole large enough for him to get through.

Pan-kun had already gone ahead. The sight inside—which should’ve been different from the spirit world—was mostly the same: a giant, overgrown tree poked out from beneath the floor, its roots like vines now consuming the entire room. The large pods hanging from the ceiling were now shriveled husks discarded on the floor with large, gaping cavities from within them.

“No...no! I’m too late?!” Masashi gasped and then cried, gazing upon the open-eyed stare from one of his upperclassmen. A graduate student—a young man—once filled with ambition of a life serving Hyuga and his Emperor, now laid pruned like a raisin.

The voice from before echoed from the depths below, pounding through Masashi’s mind like a drum.

“Hwa durran heg sé bedríp?”

The small, pale monstrosity floated from out of the tree, hovering about with its black, voided eyes staring deep in Masashi’s soul. The pressure he felt across his body, mind and spirit was immense, powerful enough to crush him from the inside out.

“I don’t know...what you are, but...I won’t let you hurt anyone else! I won’t let you hurt my friends!” Masashi shouted, his voice seeming to take physical form via a powerful wind, sending the floating

demon spiraling away. It wasn't long before its dance continued, however, as it picked up its bell and started ringing it.

What looked to be large, green leaves spiraled around the demon as its dance continued. Each had a white, glowing inscription on it—though they were moving too quickly for Masashi to read. After one final ring, the leaves shot out and flew about the room. Masashi closed his eyes and braced for an attack. But what happened next was something much worse.

To the young shugenja's horror, the corpses of his upperclassman began to shamble and shake. They rose to their feet not as people but walking husks! Their shriveled masses, dead eyes and sunken faces were in various stages of decomposing—and they each bore a stench to match.

They let out deathly groans as they made their staggered approach towards Masashi. His fellow shugenja reached out with their arms to grab him, their intent betrayed by their open jaws and drooling mouths.

speeeew

A stream of thick, black liquid sprayed out into those open mouths from behind Masashi. It was ink, he realized, before also realizing that his friend Hikiko had come to rescue him. And not just him—Fumihiro and Hitomi were there as well!

“By the heavens, what are these abominations?!” Fumihiro yelled, swinging his bamboo training sword into one of the walking corpses. It was only afterwards that he recognized his shriveled opponent. “Shi...Shigeo-senpai? Is that you?”

“These things. Not people,” Hikiko spoke, hosing down a pair of walking dead. “More concerned about...that thing.”

She gestured to the creature that had stood still for the past minute or more. It stared upon the group with no expression—for its eyes and mouth were simply voids—yet Masashi couldn't help but feel as if it was smirking. It began to ring its bell once more.

“That ring...there's a spell within it,” Hitomi said, listening intently. “The plants and trees are crying out—their will is at its mercy! We must stop it before we all become its slaves!”

Masashi glanced over at Pan-kun who nodded once more. He then dumped the contents of his sack—pocketing only the ryō—leaving his books, reports and papers scattered on the root floor. Deep down, Masashi knew that he wouldn't have need of those anymore.

Because he was about to graduate. He was about to leave the Academy and his friends for good.

“Whatever you're thinking. Bad idea, Masashi-kun,” Hikiko warned him. It was appreciated but ignored all the same as the young shugenja ran forward. It was a reckless charge and easily dodged by the pale demon—except that it was busy getting bitten by a red panda that had gone feral.

Pan-kun was shaken and thrown off though not before forcing the demon to release its bell. As soon as it did, Masashi got within range: not for some magical attack but a far more orthodox one. He pulled the sack over the monster's head, dragging it down from the air with his weight. He tied it closed as quickly as he could before falling to the cafeteria floor.

When he recovered, he grabbed the bell and Pan-kun and ran off to the others. The floor itself seemed to shift as he ran. The roots grew animated and angry, tripping the shugenja at every step. It snatched at his ankles and whipped at his legs as he passed.

"If that bell be what hath turned our classmates into conjured corpses...then it is foul, and must be removed from this school at once!" Fumihiro declared. "Son of Hashimoto—go! Hikiko-chan and I shall hold them off here!"

"But I—"

"He's right," Hikiko said, interrupting Masashi's protest. "Take Hitomi-chan with you. Get out. Now!"

The order was clear as were the eyes of his two dear friends. Though Hikiko and Fumihiro despised each other and had nothing in common, they fought back-to-back against the undead students together. Hitomi took Masashi by the hand and ran. Even though he was blind he seemed to know exactly where he was going.

Masashi's greatest regret was not giving them a proper goodbye.

The path ahead was hardly clear: roots poked out from beneath tatami mat tiles, crisscrossing across the floor and stretching up the walls. Some rooms had become entirely closed off, their doors barricaded in roots. Yells from within from trapped students made for an atmosphere that was growing thick both in fear and something else.

"Ah, ah, *achoo!*" Masashi sneezed. It was difficult enough to see with the air fogged as it was; sneezing every few seconds only made matters worse.

"It's pollen," Hitomi said, covering her nose. "Try not to breathe in too much of it. I have a hunch allergies will be the least of our concerns!"

With the blind itako leading them, the pair made it into the Flower Arrangement clubroom. How they were going to escape from there was a good question. Luckily, it was one Hitomi already had an answer for.

"There's a secret exit to the school's gardens," Hitomi said, pushing some of her potted plants out of the way. "Well, it's not a secret...it's just that everyone forgot about it. From here, you'll—ah!"

"Hitomi!" Masashi yelled as his friend was choked by an overgrown lavender that had wrapped itself around her neck. Though between the two of them they managed to get it off, the cherry blossoms, wisterias and the rest of Hitomi's collection were quickly growing violent.

"I'm beginning to think that going through the gardens is a bad idea!" Masashi said, panting heavily. He continued to do so as he watched the shrine maiden pull out a jar from a cupboard. With a sniff to confirm it, she smiled. She then poured its contents down over Masashi's scalp.

"It's vinegar," Hitomi explained. "I'm sorry about the smell, but to many plants the acidity makes it poisonous. They should avoid you while you wear it. Now then...you should get yourself and that bell out of here before it's too late, Masa-kun!"

Masashi was already shaking his head. "I can't go without you! Please...don't leave me on my own!"

Hitomi said nothing but knelt down and gave Masashi a hug. She embraced his friend tightly, tighter than she had even in the spirit world all those weeks ago.

"I know how brave you really are. Hikiko-chan and Fumihiko-kun know it, too. It's obvious to everyone that you're going to be an amazing shugenja someday. I...I just hope you're as cute then as you are now," Hitomi said, forcing out a laugh. She choked down her tears and squeezed tighter. "Come back to save us soon, okay? Promise you won't forget about us, Masa-kun!"

Masashi gave Hitomi his promise. Little did he know that it wasn't one he could keep.

Exchanging farewells, the young shugenja left through the gardens, the plants parting in his path thanks to Hitomi's vinegar. The ones that didn't—rhododendrons and gardenias, mostly—whipped and lashed at him as he ran through. Pan-kun was racing up ahead though stopped to sniff at something at the edge of the field.

Masashi wouldn't know what it was until he collided into it; he slammed up against an invisible barrier, his forehead bruising and his eyes seeing double. He was still dazed when the demon arrived from out of the school, flying as a specter across the garden. The flowers around it browned and withered as the sensation of rage and malice came forth.

"Unc eyre unberéafigendlic!"

A beam of light formed from within the demon's mouth and eyes, the cavities glowing blindingly white. The afternoon sky darkened as it did so—as if it was stealing from the sun itself. Maybe it was. Pressed up against the barrier, Masashi could do nothing but cover his eyes with his arms and pray for this nightmare to end.

As if an answer of his prayer, a gentle voice came from beside his neck. It came in the form of a gentle, nuzzling whisper.

"I'm so happy to have met you, Masashi. But it's time for you to continue your journey without me. If you remember nothing else, then remember this: you must seek a bodyguard and go to Yamato."

Nothing seemed real and soon none of it would be, not for the shugenja. At the last moment, as the ray shot forth towards Masashi, Pan-kun snatched the bell and jumped into its path. Light, force and sound

exploded all at once, sending Masashi through the forcefield, rolling down the hill the Academy was seated upon.

The earth quaked from beneath the shugenja as he clutched his sore back, arms and shoulders. Though he was in pain he was numb in awe, too, as he witnessed the hillside turn mountainous and the grassy knolls part and break open. Earth, roots, dirt and stone erupted from below as the Academy was raised higher and higher.

Masashi gripped his head and sneezed once more, the magical pollen finally taking its toll. The demon, the destruction of his school, the walking corpses of the graduates...soon, all of it began to fade and grow hazy. Every memory the shugenja had at the Academy, every day since his older sister had dropped him off here, began to slip away.

Soon *their* faces did, too, and along with them...the promise he had made Hitomi-chan.

Masashi looked around at his surroundings before combing back his hair and wondering why he stunk of vinegar. He also questioned why he was cut up, bruised and sore all over. He had an increasing number of questions with no likely answers—and yet there was one thing he knew for certain.

"Hyuga is a dangerous place...even for a shugenja. I think I shall hire myself a bodyguard!"

Which character should November's side story be about?

Oct 7, 2020



Reminder: there are 3 side stories remaining. The 30th one is reserved for Junko/Jun, which means you have 2 more months to decide the stories you want to read next. Pick carefully!



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 (+16)

3%

Daisuke, the servant (+8)

0%

Keiko, the maid (+17)

4%

Kohaku, the samurai (+8)

21%

Kuniko, the farmer (+25)

5%

Nishi, the yakuza (+39)

8%

Satsuma, the emperor (+47)

49%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+17)

10%

Poll ended Oct 31, 2020 · 73 votes total


[MC #14's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Oct 11, 2020](#)



For these last few portraits: the gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #14 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Feminine, Protective**

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

Ponytail (+5)

39%

Chonmage (+30)

18%

Long bangs (+5)

44%

Poll ended Oct 15, 2020 · 62 votes total

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapter 2](#)

[Oct 15, 2020](#)

Not gonna lie, this one is pretty steamy! (╯▽╰)

With introductions out of the way in Chapter 1, it's time to see how our favorite ronin reacts upon learning the truth. There are certain to be some big changes in store for them—changes that required a decent bit of programming under the hood! Really happy with how it all turned out and I hope you are, too!

Oh, and warning: this chapter is nsfw!

[MC #14 Face Art](#)

[Oct 31, 2020](#)

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 [mutanttac0](#)! If you like it, feel free to tell her about it on the patreon discord!

This month's build: **Feminine, Protective, Chonmage**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



Also, a heads-up: Due to the upcoming US Presidential Election (and all the chaos that comes with it) November's side story may be slightly delayed. Sorry for any inconvenience! Early Access for Chapter 3 of Book 5 will still be on the 15th.

[MC #15's Face Poll: 1/3](#)

[Nov 2, 2020](#)

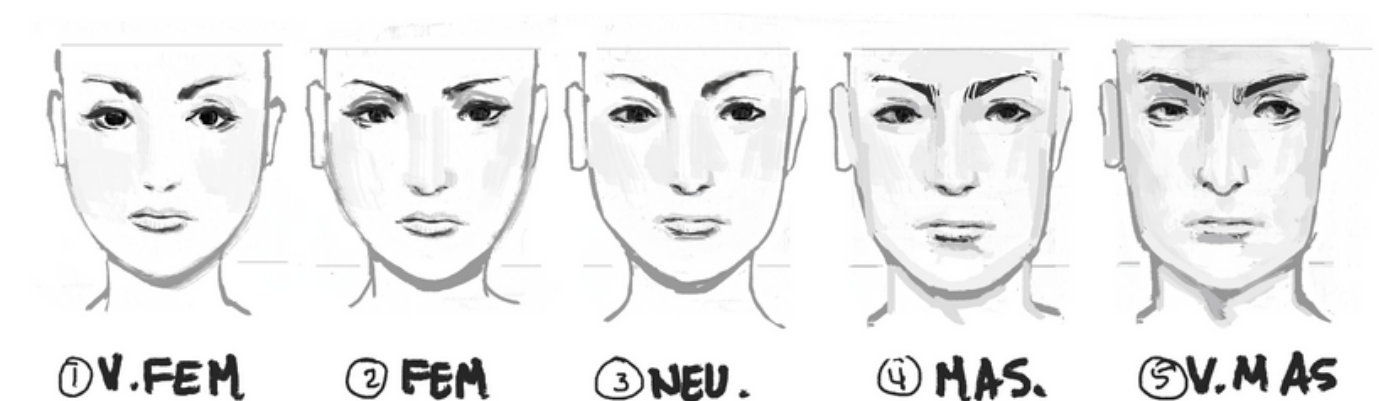
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+7)

16%

Feminine (+0)

10%

Neutral (+34)

35%

Masculine (+4)

27%

Very masculine (+15)

11%

Poll ended Nov 5, 2020 · 62 votes total

[MC #15's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Nov 6, 2020](#)



For these last few portraits: the gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #15 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 (+4)

9%

Calculated (+11)

46%

Chivalrous (+3)

12%

Charming (+7)

6%

Drifter (+0)

4%

Protective (+0)

7%

Brutal (+16)

13%

Finesse (+0)

3%

Poll ended Nov 10, 2020 · 68 votes total

[Personality Tropes](#)

[Nov 10, 2020](#)

What is your favorite anime personality type/trope?

Bakadere: ditzzy and cute, prone to making mistakes but always means well.

Dandere: quiet and antisocial on the outside, open and expressive on the inside.

Deredere: kind and lovey-dovey inside and out.

Himedere/Oujidere: rich, royal and arrogant on the outside, modest and flustered on the inside.

Kuudere: calm and composed on the outside, hidden feelings on the inside.

Sadodere: sadistic and cruel, manipulative and possessive.

Tsundere: rough and stuck-up on the outside, loving and gentle on the inside.

Yandere Type #1: sweet and gentle on the outside, mentally ill and possessive on the inside.

Yandere Type #2: mentally ill and possessive on the outside, sweet and gentle on the inside.

140 votes total

[Side Story #28: Satsuma's Necklace \(Toshie Version\)](#)

[Nov 10, 2020](#)

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



Side Story 28: Satsuma's Necklace (Toshie Version)



■ ■ Western Hyuga ■ ■

"Please, Nobutoshi-dono, you must take me with you!"

The six-year-old Hyugan pleaded with his eyes bloodshot and the shadows beneath them growing. Satsuma hadn't left Toshie's side since late yesterday afternoon when the chieftain's daughter returned with his carving knife. The future emperor had lost it while fending off a coyote attack—an attack that may well prove fatal for his newest friend.

"Dhere's nothing left we can do," said one of the wise women before dawn. "Her fever is growing worse. Dhe wound is infected...a rabid sand wolf's bite can take down a horse! All we can do now is pray."

Satsuma shook his fists. He had done plenty of praying at his friend's bedside watching her cry out in delirious pain. As her condition worsened, it became clear that no amount of pleading to the spirits was going to save her. Nobu, the chieftain's oldest son, agreed, though he was more concerned about who to blame.

"Dhis is all dhe sisam's doing!" Nobu yelled, pushing through the crowded tent to reach Satsuma. The older boy towered over the future emperor, glaring down at him with eyes filled with rage. "It's your fault Toshie is dying! Pah!"

He spat on the younger boy and—with his fist raised overhead—was about to punch Satsuma when Nobutoshi intervened. Satsuma didn't understand much about Kondo culture or their family dynamics, but the intervention came in the form of a wicked kick that sent Nobu down to his knees gasping for breath.

"That is *not* how we treat guests in my home, Nobu! As for the rest of you," the chieftain turned to address his warriors, each standing stoically with their arms crossed, "prepare to ride. We make for Nanbu Ranch. Our scouts have confirmed that Kyō-Kyō and the others from the northern tribe are held captive there."

His words gave Satsuma an idea. For the Nanbu hadn't just captured the Kondos, but his mother and Fujibayashi as well. The latter of which was a ninja skilled with medicines, poisons and the like. When Satsuma tried to plead his case, however, he didn't get much further than the man's name before getting interrupted.

"Fujibayashi...the Warrior of the Wind. I wouldn't believe a child like you knew such a man, or that he would ever be out here in the Westlands, were it not for the necklace you're wearing," the chieftain said, gesturing to the ivory neckpiece encrusted with priceless jewels around Satsuma's neck. "I have many questions to ask him, but for now...I'll allow you to accompany us to the ranch. Hyugan medicine may be the only way to save Toshie now."

Satsuma jumped in excitement and was right about to take off to pack his things when the chieftain stopped him. He gave the boy one final warning. "Whatever it is you do, Young Lion...keep that necklace close to you. Understand?"

Satsuma nodded even though he thought his new nickname was rather strange: though his spirit animal was a lion—according to Ume-Ume, who had read his palm back in Yamato—he didn't recall ever mentioning it to Nobutoshi. Regardless, he had to hurry to fill up his knapsack with food and water for the trip.

He paid one last visit to Toshie before he left. To his surprise, the girl was awake and mostly cognizant. Enough to be in good humor, even.

"Dhink I'd rather die...dhan be saved be a sisam like you! Hehe," Toshie said between hoarse breaths. "Riding with Papa and his men...you'll never keep up with dhem. But take Kiso-chan with you. At least she...won't let you...fall off..."

That was the last Toshie spoke before she dozed off into sleep. Satsuma put his hand in hers, which was burning hot, and squeezed tightly. Though they hadn't known each other for very long, and they came from entirely different worlds, he knew the two of them would become close friends.

"I won't let you down, Toshie-chan!"

■■■■■

“Dhat’s dhe most gentle mare I’ve ever seen,” said a Kondo named Oku who was said to be the best horse breeder in the tribe. Though the rest of the squad riding to Nanbu Ranch kept their distance from the Hyugan, Oku couldn’t help but be curious. It was obvious that Satsuma had no experience on horseback—yet he somehow managed to keep pace.

“Kisouma breeds like dhat tend to do poorly with unskilled riders, but dhis one is very kind. It seems very attached to you, too. You may have dhe gift, young one.”

Just as Satsuma was about to ask what the gift was, Nobu trotted his horse in between them. The son of the chieftain sneered as he inspected the Hyugan’s horse. “Pft! A wimpy horse like dhat is useless. I bet it would run from dhe rain! Fitting for a sisam like—gaah?!”

CLUMP

Kiso-chan latched out at Nobu’s hand, coming from within an inch of biting it off. Flinching in fear, Nobu fumbled halfway off his horse—which was sent charging across the prairie. The other warriors looked on with laughter as the proud chieftain’s son cursed and yelled while trying to remount his steed.

Nobutoshi raised a fist into the air which caused them to quiet, and after retrieving his embarrassed son, he spoke to the group as a whole. “Keep alert, each of you! The Nanbu Ranch is right up ahead. We do not wish to make enemies of them. We are here to retrieve Kyō-Kyō and the others.”

True to his word, Satsuma soon found himself in awe as they crested over the hill. He had never seen a ranch before let alone the largest in the Westlands. Nanbu Ranch consisted of multiple stables, barns filled with hay as well as large, fenced-in grazing areas. And of course: hundreds of horses.

There was even an odd sort of track that wrapped around like a stretched-out ring, which Nobutoshi explained was used for racing. Visions of watching horse races filled Satsuma’s head—at least until one of the warriors spotted something else.

“Chief! At the center of dhe track—look! It’s dhem! Damn sisam have ‘em tied up in chains!”

Hollers and warcries broke out from the bunch, led by Nobu who was working himself into a frenzy. He wielded a bow with an arrow already notched and ready to fire. Nobutoshi had to shout in order to silence them.

“Don’t be fools! Put those arrows back in your quivers! We’re here to negotiate their release—not to start a war!”

Though war was exactly what seemed to break out after a bell began to ring from the nearest watchtower. It was followed by several more and accompanied by shouts of “Kondos” and “dirtskins”. The noise was enough to frighten Kiso-chan, who ignored Satsuma’s orders and trotted over to a nearby field to graze.

While Kiso-chan was munching on an early lunch, every rancher before them mobilized: they hastily mounted their horses, readied their weapons and went into formation. They outnumbered the Kondos two-to-one, though many of them were field hands wielding little more than scythes and pitchforks.

There were a handful of samurai, however, yet they were nothing like the ones Satsuma had seen at the Capital. For starters, they wore an odd blanket over their armor. Their colors were green and their emblems gold, and instead of helmets they wore conical farmer's hats made of straw. Each of them wielded either a bow or a spear, keeping their katanas sheathed at their hips.

Their steeds were perhaps more impressive than the riders: though they ranged in colors from spotted whites to browns, blacks and greys, their armor was of a uniform steel that ran from their snouts to their tails. It was in another league compared to the padded blankets the Kondo warriors used on theirs.

Though if the Kondos were at all intimidated, they made no sign of it. All Satsuma could say for certain was that he was glad Kiso-chan had decided to wander away. None of the ranchers were paying the two of them any mind as the negotiation started.

"Lady Nanbu, it's a shame we have to meet under such circumstances," Nobutoshi said to the small rider at the center of the samurai. Their leader was a middle-aged woman with greying hair and a steely gaze. A true wife of a samurai, she wielded a glaive and seemed more than capable of using it.

"I could say the same, Chieftain. I know why you're here," she said, before turning and pointing her glaive out towards the race track. "The bald one hasn't stopped hollerin' about you since we found 'em. He's enough of a sore that I'd almost pay you to take him off my hands, but it ain't all that simple."

"How so?"

"My husband's gone," Lady Nanbu replied, her words growing grim. "Headed out Ojita way on business. Ain't no one heard from him or his group for a week now. Word is, one of the tribes got 'em."

"Not mine. We have no feud with the Nanbu. We've steered clear from your banners for years, and you ours. If Lord Nanbu and his company were taken," Nobutoshi explained, "it was most likely an attack done by the Samku-Sainu. We have no relation with the Southern tribes in—"

"By the hells, why's we listenin' to this—*hiccup*—damned dirtskin?!" yelled the largest samurai of the group, mounted in the horse beside Lady Nanbu. He reeked of alcohol and introduced himself as Lord Nanbu's brother, Nobunao. "We all know's you's a lyin'! Each an' every..."

That was as much as Satsuma could overhear before Kiso-chan decided she was finished grazing on grass. For dessert, the mare wanted hay, and so she galloped over to the nearest stable in search of some. The boy atop her was helpless but to follow wherever the horse wanted to go.

"I've never been in a stable before," Satsuma remarked. It was empty of horses—but that didn't mean there wasn't any evidence of them. He grimaced while covering his nose. "I never imagined it would...smell so foul!"

“You sayin’ our stables ain’t clean enough for ya?” a voice yelled from behind. It was young but tried its best to sound deep and bellowing; that combined with the odd Westlands accent made Satsuma giggle. “What? Quit laughin’!”

Minding his manners, the future emperor hopped down from his horse and bowed deeply to apologize. When he arose, he saw who he had insulted: a girl around his own age, though she was at least a head taller than him. She had short hair that was mostly untidy and wore a katana—though not at her hip. She wore it on her back instead with a strap running across her chest.

“Gomenasai. I didn’t mean to insult the efforts of a stablegirl. I only—”

“How dare ya!” the girl interrupted before pounding her chest. “I’m the daughter of a sam’rai—and not just any! My father is Lord Nanbu, and I’m gonna be the one who finds him! The name’s Kohaku.”

It was only after her introduction that Satsuma noticed the portly man accompanying Kohaku. He was a rancher by his attire and an officer of the law by his words. He introduced himself as Deputy Susumu, and from what Satsuma could understand through his accent, his job was to keep an eye on Lord Nanbu’s daughter.

“Koha-chan over here’s got a bad habit of rushin’ off after danger. I’m here to make sure she lives to outgrow it. Asides, your ma said she’d tan my hide if I let you take out one of the horses. I’m sure the sam’rai will find your pa all spit and span!”

Satsuma began to giggle before laughing outright. The phrases and sayings were so outrageous and colorful that the boy from Yamato couldn’t help but be amused. He had no idea people in the Westlands spoke this way—but he wanted to learn how to speak like them, too. Kohaku was many times less reserved and refined than his fellow students at the Capital.

The two kids talked about Fujibayashi and Satsuma’s mother, who Kohaku admitted were currently residing at her family’s house as guests—but only because the Nanbu were ‘hospitable folk’. Normally, they’d never trust a Hyugan who travelled alongside Kondos.

“But why?” Satsuma asked, perplexed. “They’ve been kind to me...oh, and they sing some great songs, too! Kyō-Kyō taught me one they only sing when they’re building a new house. They use the names of the future residents in—”

“I don’t care what they told ya! All they do is lie—everyone knows that,” Kohaku spat. She then gripped the hilt of the katana behind her neck and sneered. “You might be one of their spies, I reckon! Makes me sick to my stomach just thinkin’ about working for ‘em!”

Satsuma ignored the accusation altogether when Kohaku’s words made him remember why he was there in the first place. “Sick! That’s right...I need medicine! Please, my friend—she’s been bitten by a coyote and has taken up a terrible fever!”

Kohaku and Susumu exchanged glances, the latter of which tilting his hat as if to offer his condolences. "Mighty poor timing, I'm afraid. Only doctor worth his salt this side of the Celestial Sea is Etsuji-san, and he's off ridin' with Lord Nanbu."

The samurai's daughter scratched her chin while looking Kiso-chan up and down. She slammed her fist into an open palm before grabbing a spare saddle and putting it on the young mare. To Satsuma's surprise, Kiso-chan didn't seem bothered in the slightest.

"Koha-chan! What in tarnation...you know what your mother said! You're forbidden to ride any of her horses outside the ranch!"

"*Her* horses," Kohaku clarified with a grin. She mounted Kiso-chan and then leaned over to offer Satsuma her hand. "Seems like you and I got the same goal. So hows about we go for a ride, er...what'd you say your name was, again?"

Satsuma smiled, introduced himself and took Kohaku's hand. He was well on his way to making a second friend!

■■■■

Lord Nanbu adjusted his farmer's hat as the glaring afternoon sun bounced off the dunes. He took another look at the parchment in his hand and the imperial seal planted upon it. This piece of paper was why he was here in the White Hills—the middle of nowhere—with nine of his best men.

It was also why he was escorting a leper covered head-to-toe in the most ornately designed and embroidered silk robes the samurai had ever seen. Though in contrast to his elegant wardrobe, the man's scent was downright putrid. Even after a week on the road together, the group still hadn't grown accustomed to the stench.

"Fought alongside—and against—a lot of your types in the war," Lord Nanbu remarked, trying to get his guest to speak. "A shugenja personally sent by the Emperor himself...I'm surprised you came to the Westlands alone! I would've expected a retinue of Shinsengumi, at least."

After what felt like a minute or longer, the hooded figure gave a toneless, muffled reply. It was the same he had given dozens of times before. "Take me to the crest of the White Hills, Son of Nanbu."

Whatever accent the stranger had, it wasn't one the samurai lord or his men had ever heard before. They each exchanged uncertain looks and tightened the reins on their horses. It was bad enough that they were deep in Kondo country; the shugenja had sent them riding all around the desert for the past week, planting a piece of paper—a talisman—at seemingly random locations during their journey.

The men were growing weary and low on rations. If this mission wasn't completed soon, he'd have to call it off and risk making an enemy of the Emperor. The aging samurai knew well the risks of having such an opponent: he still suffered from the wounds given to him in the many battles of the Golden Era, afterall.

“Hara-kun,” whispered Etsuji, a doctor and childhood friend of the samurai. “I did as you asked. I inspected his wrappings last time we camped. He doesn’t have leprosy. Moreover, those bandages he’s wrapped in...they’re a hundred years old at least! In all these days, we haven’t seen his shoulders raise once. Whatever that thing is...it ain’t breathin’.”

Lord Nanbu nodded as he gripped his katana’s hilt even tighter. His heart began racing, too, while a trickle of sweat came off from his brow. Whatever this creature was, he could no longer permit it to live. He got ready to unsheathe his katana and give the command.

That was when the shugenja dismounted from his horse, fell to his knees and clapped his hands together in prayer. He gazed upon the white dune before them as he muttered an arcane phrase:

“Byre onben ingefeallan, delfan!”

The world trembled and reshaped around them. Like a parting ocean, the sand around them shifted as if taken by an unknown tide while an almighty wind whipped across the dunes. The last Lord Nanbu and his men saw, in those final moments, were walls of sand twenty horses high forming up around them. They grew to such heights as to blot out the sky.

And then...they collapsed.

■■■■

“Hey! Wake up, already. Can’t believe ya’ fell asleep on the saddle!”

Satsuma was elbowed into consciousness by Lord Nanbu’s daughter until he awoke from his mid-day nap. The heat on the prairie combined with his lack of sleep from the night before made it difficult for the future emperor to keep his eyes open.

What he had seen with them, closed, however, was too remarkable to bring to voice. He had had dreams before, of course, but none this lucid—with the exception, perhaps, of the one in which he was chased by a lioness and led by a sea eagle into a herd of bears.

In this most recent dream, he had been walking across an oasis with square plots ahead of him in a line that spanned well into the distance. They were garden plots, not unlike the ones he had passed by in Yamato on his way to school. Each plot depicted a different arrangement: first was a bed of roses, then a sakura tree, a pair of pink tulips and so on. They were forty-eight in total, and thanks to a naturally gifted memory, Satsuma could recall every one.

After those plots was something even stranger: a sea of brass jars emerged onto the desert floor, rolling about the sand on their sides. They spun in circular patterns, making it near impossible to wade through them without stumbling. Once Satsuma did, he came upon something *truly* ridiculous.

“Your spirit animals,” Satsuma asked his companions, “could it be that they are a horse and a frog?”

Susumu, the deputy, gave a snort. “Now I don’t know where you heard it from, young feller, but mine’s the stream toad—not a wee frog, so don’t get it twisted! Still, heck and hell of a guess. Not too many toads like yours truly out here in the Westlands, I’d wager. Guess I’m just that special, I figure!”

Satsuma ignored the boasting, focusing instead on the last sight he had seen prior to waking up. Beyond the field of brass jars, a horse, lion and toad were wandering together through the desert. That alone was weird, but weirder still was what each of them were wearing: they were blindfolded and gagged. Raging sandstorms flailed around them, and...and that was the last Satsuma remembered before waking up.

“Sandstorms ain’t as common as foreign folk like yourself would expect,” Susumu said after the boy asked about them. “They’re mostly tall tales: like when a rancher has to explain to the missus why one of their calves has gone missing. Course, real reason was losin’ out on a bad bet. Speakin’ of which, best gambling hall in all the Westlands is right up ahead: Salty’s Saloon. Not a bad watering hole, either.”

The trio had arrived in the frontier town of Ojita though it was unlike any town Satsuma had seen. The Yamato native was accustomed to large, imposing buildings standing side-by-side in rows that spanned as far as the eye could see. He was used to cobblestone streets, groups of women wearing the latest fashions of silk, and armored guardsmen at every corner.

Here, the buildings were mostly ramshackle: actively falling apart. They were spaced few and far between, each made in a different style than Satsuma had ever seen. Everything from the wood they were made out of to the swinging doors at their entrances were different.

By the time they reached Salty’s, Satsuma was deeply confused. “I don’t understand...where’s the pond? This doesn’t look like much of a watering hole to me.”

Susumu couldn’t help but laugh while Kohaku rolled her eyes. The daughter of Lord Nanbu clarified for him. “He didn’t mean a real watering hole. It’s just a saying for a place where men go to wet their whistles.”

Her explanation only confused Satsuma further. The future emperor was beginning to feel more in common with the tribal Kondos than these Westerners—at least they didn’t speak in expressions all the time. In any case, according to the deputy, all news in the region reached Salty’s ears. If anyone knew where Lord Nanbu was, it was him.

After ‘hitching’ Kiso-chan and Susumu’s horse to wooden stakes in front of the saloon, the trio made their way in. The twangs from a sanshin—a popular local instrument with three strings—met their ears as the lingering scent of tobacco reached their noses. The place was mostly empty, it still being the afternoon, but it was lively all the same. Satsuma had already fallen in love with it and was the first among them to take a seat at the bar.

That seat was a stool: the first the future emperor had ever sat upon. It felt wondrous to be high into the air, and though it was much less comfortable than a pillow, it was many times more fun. He spun around

it and observed everything from the memorabilia on the walls to the odd-shaped bottles lined up on racks behind the bar. Satsuma had questions about each and everything he saw, but the most pressing one pertained to the odd brass jar in the middle of the room.

The one that looked no different than those he had seen in his dream.

“That there’s a spittoon, kid,” the barkeeper said while raising an eyebrow. He gave Kohaku a smile and Susumu a nod. “See you’re on babysittin’ duty today, ay Deputy?”

The two shared a chuckle before Salty poured the officer a cup of his ‘usual’. Satsuma got laughed at when he asked for the same, and instead was served a cup of stale sencha tea. Though to call it tea at all was a generous statement.

“My father,” Kohaku said, her voice deadly serious, “he ain’t returned to the ranch in a week. Need you to tell us everything you know, Salty-san.”

The barkeeper twirled his grey moustache while going deep into thought. According to him, Lord Nanbu and his men had passed through Ojita four days back, escorting a strange fellow covered head to toe in fancy silk robes. No one knew who he was or what he came to the Westlands for, only that he smelled horrendous.

“I don’t like this none at all,” Kohaku said, grimacing. “Did they say where they were go—”

The young rancher was cut short when the doors bursted open, creaking after being kicked in by a particularly unsavory fellow with a large grin on his face. He was accompanied by several more types with the same demeanor. Even as inexperienced in the world as Satsuma was, he could tell these men weren’t the type you wanted to associate with.

Aside from being all men and mostly unkempt, the only thing they all had in common were the giant gloves they wore: they were made of leather and flared upwards, far enough to reach their elbows. To Satsuma, they looked pretty silly. He was wise enough to keep that opinion to himself, however, as he watched them take a table and start yelling at Salty for drinks.

Susumu turned to the two kids and whispered, “Best we get a move-on. Them’s be the Glovers Gang: group of tanners from out Dry Ridges way. Known for gambling and roughhousing.”

Satsuma didn’t know what a rough house was, but gambling had more of an interest to him—at least, he became reluctant to leave once one of the gang members pulled out a deck of cards. They were playing some sort of game involving stacks of ryō. Susumu had to pull the boy away from the bar, but not before the future emperor knocked over the brass spittoon with his foot.

“I know it’s silly but...maybe my dream was trying to tell me something,” Satsuma thought, though even the six-year-old thought it was childish. Regardless, the three of them left the saloon but didn’t get very far before Kohaku froze in place.

She began to shake at the sight in front of her: a giant Nanbu stallion, black-coated with a black mane, that dwarfed the rest of the horses hitched at Salty's Saloon. Though it looked terrifying, its ears perked up upon the sight of Kohaku. It nuzzled against the girl's face even as she was frozen in place.

"Midnight...Father's horse..."

With a trembling hand, Kohaku unsheathed the katana on her back, gripping the hilt with knuckles white with rage. One of the gang members must've rode Midnight in, meaning Lord Nanbu was lost in the desert without his steed at best.

And at worst...

"Koha-chan! Don't do nothin' rash!" Susumu pleaded, though it was far too late. Kohaku ran into the saloon with her katana raised overhead, running straight towards the closest member of the Glovers Gang she could find. The target in this case was an older man leaning back in his chair, grinning at the cards he was holding. He was too focused on the game to realize that this would be the last hand he'd ever play!

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That was, until a brass spittoon got in the way. It rolled into the middle of Kohaku's warpath, sending the girl spiralling forward and sending her katana spiralling harmlessly into a nearby wall. She collided right into the back of the gang member, causing chaos but nothing fatal. Satsuma's eyes went wide with equal amounts of wonder and fear.

"Did I...change the future? Did I save that man's life?"

It was a thought for another time as 'that man' grabbed Kohaku and tossed her into a nearby table, sending glasses and chairs scattering everywhere. The girl cried out in pain as her forehead started bleeding.

"By the hells! What sort o' ship you runnin', Salty, havin' brats like these runnin' around? Lucky that sword of yours missed, girl, or I'd have tanned your hide with it!"

Kohaku spat a wad of blood in reply. She stood up and staggered back to her opponent. One of her eyes were shut closed from the blood running down it. "Midnight! You stole him from my father, didn't you?! That's Lord Nanbu's horse! What have you done to him?!"

The proud samurai's daughter charged forward once again though she was far less formidable without her sword; a knee to the gut was enough to send her down on her knees.

"Finders keepers—that's the way o' the Westlands, girl!" he spat, missing the spittoon on purpose, aiming the wad at Kohaku's face instead. "You damn Nanbu think you run this place just 'cause of your fancy armor and swords. Ain't no place for samurai here—or brats like you! Beat it!"

Deputy Susumu finally found the courage to intervene, stopping the fight after it was already over. Kohaku was bleeding and bruised, but the greatest wound she suffered was to her pride. The thought of losing her father's horse to this lowlife was unforgivable.

Throughout all this excitement, no one had paid attention to Satsuma; the boy had taken a seat at the table completely unnoticed. Surrounded by the burly members of the Glovers Gang, the boy spoke up in a polite and regal manner.

"Excuse me, sir, I'd like to play a game."

"What?! This here's a gamblin' game, boy, and you ain't got nothin' to wager!" the head of the gang said, growing frustrated by all this commotion. There was something akin to fear, too, seeing this strange child sitting among them without so much as an ounce of fear. He couldn't place the accent either, though the brat sure sounded rich.

"So if I win," Satsuma said with a sly smile, "I'll get the black Nanbu stallion out front, correct?"

One of the goons slammed the table with his fist while another raised Satsuma up by his collar, plucking him out of his chair. "I don't think you heard my boss. You ain't got nothin'...worth..."

The rancher was dumbfounded upon the sight of Satsuma's necklace. The boy rose it above his head and showed it off for everyone in the saloon to see. The jewels encrusted on the ivory band glistened even in the faint light of the dingy gambling hall. Its value was immense, and the men looked upon it with their mouths agape.

"I would like to wager this necklace for the horse," Satsuma said, taking back his seat at the table. "Is that a suitable bet? Or perhaps...you are scared?"

The boy's words quieted the entire room. The members of the Glover's Gang gave each other long, uncertain glances before they all broke out in laughter. The entire table was in agreement that this was all a grand joke—and that this kid was the easiest mark they'd ever find in Ojita.

Despite Susumu's protests, the gangsters were eager to play and were sporting enough to instruct Satsuma on how to play. The game was called hanafuda: it was a card with four different suits and twelve ranks. It was fairly complex as far as gambling games went, with varying card values and sets a player had to collect in order to score points.

Satsuma soaked in all the details like a sponge, however, asking questions that were far too insightful for a six-year-old.

"Alright, we playin' or what?" said the gang's leader and best player. "Let's get this over with. We're just gonna play one game: my horse for your necklace. You ready?"

"Satsuma-kun..." Kohaku whispered, tugging the future emperor's sleeve. "You don't gotta do this. This ain't your battle...it's mine."

Satsuma's eyes glistened as a smile crept onto his face, for as his opponent dealt out eight cards face-up on top of the table, the young lord noticed each to resemble the plots he had seen in his dream—and in the same order, too. When he received his cards, they were just as he imagined them to be...which meant he knew his opponent's hand, too.

As for the spectators, the rest of the Glover's Gang were having a jolly time cracking jokes and chugging bottles of saké, already celebrating their boss's victory. It made it difficult to concentrate, though Satsuma managed to flip through his memory all the same.

"This ribbon card has the highest value on the table, so I should...no! The next card he'll draw is the deer in the field of carnations...in that case I'll pick up the single carnation card—it'll block him from collecting the suit!"

Satsuma ended up picking up a low value card from the table, a move most players would consider a mistake. His opponent did as well, wearing a sneer on his face until he drew the next card and realized he was out on points. The game continued like that one hand after another, but while Satsuma was clearly enjoying himself...the same could not be said for his opponent.

"Shut up, you idiots! I'm concentratin' over here!" he shouted at his men to cease their merriment. Looking at the field of play, Satsuma was in a superior position: he had more and higher-scoring sets collected while the number of cards remaining in the deck grew fewer and fewer.

It wasn't until Satsuma put down a set including a crane perched atop a bed of lavenders that his opponent unleashed his frustration. When it became obvious that he'd lose, the gangster tossed the table over breaking half a dozen saké bottles in the process.

"To hells with this bet!" he yelled, pulling out his tanner's knife. It looked more like a saw than a dagger but it was dangerous just the same. "Ways I see it, I'll just *take* the necklace! Lord Nanbu's daughter, too! Tie 'em up, lads! I'm sure Lady Nanbu will pay a pretty price to get 'em back!"

Talk about being a sore loser.

■■■■

The late afternoon sun hung mercilessly up in the sky, beaming down at three figures marching through the desert. Satsuma, Kohaku and Susumu were captives of the Glovers Gang: a group of tanners-turned-kidnappers after a game of hanafuda gone wrong. They were not the most professional group of bandits—having only recently joined the profession—and so there was plenty of debate among them as to what to do next.

"We'll write 'em a letter! Tell 'em we got their daughter—stick a piece of her hair onto it too, make 'em know we mean business!" one of them declared. While it was the best idea they had come up with yet, in the hour march to their encampment, there was one problem.

"Ain't none of us can write," the leader said, scowling as he fiddled with his new necklace. He kept it wrapped around his wrist instead of his neck—the latter had proven to be too large for it to fit around. That didn't mean he hadn't tried for the past hour to get it on, though.

Satsuma offered to write for them but was declined, not on the account that he would write something to betray them but that a boy's handwriting would be too weak and effeminate to intimidate the samurai properly. That didn't make much sense, but then again, little much they decided upon did.

The fact they forced the prisoners to march slowed the group down considerably, not to mention it made what they were doing all the more suspicious. More than a few ranchers had spotted them leaving the outskirts of Ojita.

Of the three captives, Satsuma was taking the kidnapping the best by far. Kohaku was sullen and fueled with frustration, struggling in vain against the rope that tied her hands behind her. As for Susumu, he begged for his life at every step. The fact that he was supposed to be an officer of the law was...embarrassing, really.

"Come on, fellas! I got me's a whole family back home a'waitin' for me! My ma's heart will go out if she hears word of me being captured! You only need the kids, don'tcha? Let me go free—let bygones be bygones!"

The deputy's betrayal earned him the ire of Kohaku who released her pent-up frustration by headbutting, biting and kicking Susumu. It took three of the Glovers Gang to get the girl off him. To put it mildly, the mood around the group was poor.

Satsuma was beginning to grow weary, too—at least until a strong wind pressed up across his back. He recalled the dream he had earlier of the lion, horse and toad walking through the desert with their faces covered in cloth. As the winds began to pick up, he knew what he had to do.

"We ought to be blindfolded," the future emperor suggested, "otherwise we'll be able to tell the samurai where your camp is. You'll end up imprisoned, hanged or worse if that happened!"

The gang of tanners let out a collective gulp as they considered their potential fates. They quickly rushed to find whatever they could to cover their prisoners' faces, settling on hemp sacks used to carry animal hides into Ojita. To say they were stinky was an understatement.

"Great! Just great!" Kohaku yelled, flailing about in vain. "I can't see...can't hardly breathe, neither! You're just makin' everything worse, Satsuma-kun!"

As much as the young lord wanted to apologize, a part of him knew that this had to be done. He couldn't explain why, but soon he wouldn't have to: the horses—including Kiso-chan and Midnight—start squealing as animals often recognized danger well before people did. They felt the tremor in the sands and the humidity in the air begin to rise; what few clouds there were in the sky whipped across the ocean of pale blue in a hurry.

When the wind came, it came crashing like a tsunami's wave upon the desert travellers. It was enough to knock grown men off their horses, and it didn't come empty handed: countless grains of sand flew every which way as the floor beneath them began to spin. The members of the Glovers Gang cried out, scratching their eyes as the sand grated against their pupils.

They then began to choke as the sand invaded their mouths, making a run down their throats. Though the three prisoners couldn't see what was going on, the sounds alone painted a horrifying picture.

After a moment to recover his nerve, Satsuma freed his hands from his bindings, having managed to cut himself free with his carving knife over the past hour in secret. The would-be kidnappers should've been more thorough.

While the hemp bag made it near impossible to see, he managed to crawl over to Kohaku all the same before carefully cutting the rope around the girl's hands. By the time he was finished, the initial gust had ended. The two kids wasted little time to retrieve their most prized possessions: a necklace, katana and two horses.

Though just as they mounted Kiso-chan and Midnight, they realized they had forgotten someone. Kohaku looked over at a Susumu with a grimace, but after mumbling a curse word or two under her breath, she asked Satsuma to help rescue him.

"W-wait just a cotton pickin'...untie me, won't you?!" the deputy pleaded.

"There's no time!" Kohaku said as she and Satsuma loaded Susumu on the back of Midnight. It took all their strength and then some to get the overweight officer over. "Hang on best you can, Susumu-san. Midnight—ya, ya!"

Lord Nanbu's daughter spurred Midnight forward like lightning through the clouds of sand. The immense power of the Nanbu warhorse was on full-display, and Satsuma found himself in awe—at least until he got a mouthful of sand from leaving his mouth agape. He decided it best to hurry along after them.

"Let's go, Kiso-chan! Our journey isn't over yet!"

■■■■

Satsuma's eyes stung as the group made their way to the White Hills. It turned out that weren't hills at all, but dunes whiter than any snow. The sand was made from gypsum: a mineral that made the landscape look like a sculpture carved out of alabaster. Though neither of his companions had ever seen snow before, Satsuma assured them that frozen water was nothing like this.

"It's pretty—I'll give it that much. Now how's about we bottle some up as a souvenir and hightail it outta here?" Susumu asked, looking around nervously. "We're deep in Kondo Country now, kids. When it comes to dirtskins, there's savages and then there's savages. The ones we're liable to cross 'round here are the latter."

"Quit bein' such a coward," Kohaku replied, her eyes never rising from the map. She had found it on Midnight and it chronicled the journey Lord Nanbu had taken over the past week. He and his men had traveled all across the region in what looked to be a hexagonal pattern, the last stop being at the dead center of the White Hills.

Which was exactly where the three of them were headed right now.

As much as Satsuma wanted to enjoy the scenery, he too was absorbed in a piece of parchment. Though instead of a map, his was a letter: one with the Imperial seal planted atop it instructing Lord Nanbu to accompany a shugenja for a matter of the utmost importance. The only issue was...

"...this handwriting, it's nothing like the one Father uses when he writes letters to Mother and me. Did he really write this?"

"Woah!" Susumu yelled, halting Midnight in his tracks. The deputy had a good reason to stop: an immense canyon opened up from behind the dune. His shout echoed within it and was joined by Kohaku and Satsuma's as the children gasped at the sight. "Now I ain't been 'round this area for years, but...pretty sure I'd recall somethin' like this!"

It looked like a chunk of Hyuga was missing—as if the gods had taken a giant shovel to the land. Kohaku was the first among them down, having spotted something in the distance. Excited for any sign of her father, she stumbled down the sandy cliffside with trails of sand rolling at her every step.

It was as dangerous as it looked.

"I'm checkin' on ahead! You two take the horses 'round where it's less steep. Oh, and make sure to zigzag down 'em so they don't stumble," Kohaku ordered. The two had little left to do but comply, though Susumu complained the entire way down. Getting down the canyon was easy enough—if a bit dangerous.

"We'll just have to worry about getting back up once we find Lord Nanbu and the others," Satsuma said to both the deputy and himself. Though his eyes had grown accustomed to the brightness, the ever present wind made the canyon shift around them. How Kiso-chan hadn't gotten dizzy was a testament to her resolve.

But even her resolve had its limit—especially when she started getting hungry. Susumu's stomach growled just then to further emphasize the fact that they had no supplies. The grim reality was starting to kick in: they were deep in the middle of nowhere, likely lost and definitely going to be in danger soon.

All those concerns faded from Satsuma's mind, however, when he caught up to Kohaku. The samurai's daughter was on her knees with her back turned to him. Though she didn't make a single sound, her shoulders heaved repeatedly. Almost as if...she was crying.

"This helmet...it belongs to my Pa," she said between chokes of air. In her arms, clutched tightly to her chest, was a samurai's helmet: a traditional kabuto that Satsuma was accustomed to seeing in Yamato.

This one was green with an intricate golden trim and matching emblem at the front.

It was also coated in sand.

Looking around, there was no sign of the samurai, their horses, or anything else upon the white canyon floor. Midnight lowered his head up against his master's helmet and nuzzled against it, a gesture that caused Kohaku to start weeping in earnest.

Susumu stepped forth and placed a hand on the girl's shoulder, taking his hat off with the other. He placed it against his heart and spoke with the reverence of a priest.

"Haramusa Nanbu...we wouldn't none of us be here without him. Us Westlanders were nothin' but outcasts—dead ones at that, had he not come and shown us what true sam'rai are made out of! A rancher, a warrior...and a friend. They don't make men like your father no more, Koha-chan."

Watching Kohaku crying and hearing Susumu's eulogy caused whatever composure Satsuma had to collapse. He didn't know what to do: nothing in his life nor his dreams had prepared him for this, and in that moment, he felt very much like a six-year-old boy from Yamato who was well and truly far from home.

He missed playing alongside his classmates, trips with his mother to fancy teahouses, and stuffing himself full with taiyaki at festivals. It was such a comfortable and easy life compared to the one Satsuma lived now. A life in the Westlands where no one was safe, when you could lose the people closest to you from a sandstorm or a coyote's bite...this life just wasn't for him.

"I wanna go home," Satsuma said as he clutched his carving knife—the last gift Emperor Seijirō had given him. It was a selfish wish, he knew, especially after witnessing Kohaku's loss. He felt terrible about himself and how weak he was, becoming desperate to keep any and all thoughts away.

He meditated upon his father and what few memories they shared together back at the Capital. Dread began to fill Satsuma when he had trouble recalling his father's face. The memories of man he so loved and respected were beginning to trickle away like sand off the top of a dune. In its place was the sight of his burning house and the cackling laughter of Lady Sakiko: the Lioness.

The despair of never being able to return home, to never see his father again, to be banished to this harsh and unforgiving wasteland...it hit Satsuma all at once. He realized that this wasn't just a trip or an extended vacation. *This* was a permanent change. He was trapped in this scary world where there was nothing he could do but close his eyes and pray.

Luckily for the future emperor, someone was paying attention.

"D-did you hear that?!" Satsuma asked, looking around with his eyes open wide. "There it is again! And once more! It's a lion's roar!"

His companions thought he had gone insane—not all that unusual for those left out in the sun for too long. The boy had gone delirious, they assumed, especially as he began to press his ear against the canyon’s floor. At the very least, his antics gave Kohaku a momentary pause in her weeping.

“You, er, all right there laddie? You ain’t been hit by heatstroke, have ya?” the deputy asked in growing concern. Satsuma was on all fours, now, though instead of the lion the boy claimed to hear, he was acting much more like a dog trying to find an old bone.

He dug into the sand feverously. No words could reach him as he seemed possessed to keep on digging. Soon, he wasn’t alone: Kiso-chan began to prod the sand, too, with her front hoof. Kohaku joined in shortly after, using her father’s helmet as a bucket to hasten the effort. Susumu grumbled but finally pitched in, too, and a minute later...they struck gold.

Or in this case, something even better.

“T-there’s a chamber below! It’s hollow!” Satsuma exclaimed. Someway and somehow, a large pocket of air had formed beneath the sand. It was pitch black down below and there wasn’t a sound: save for the lion the boy insisted he could hear.

Kohaku was the first to volunteer to go down, lowered by a lasso tied around her waist. The chamber wasn’t too deep and, according to the young rancher, the floor was made of stone. Yells for her father got no response, and while there seemed to be a structure ahead, it was impossible to tell in the darkness.

Satsuma jumped down after her and in doing so, alleviated the problem. He didn’t carry a lantern or a torch—for they had none—but he did have something else: his necklace. Though he couldn’t explain why, the jewels embedded into the ivory neckpiece began to glow, emanating faint lights each in their own shade. The walls of the cavern lit up as if swallowed by a dim rainbow.

It made for quite the lightshow as the boy moved about. After more than a little encouragement, Susumu joined them as well. They would need the grown man’s strength soon enough as a large door made from marble blocked their path.

“Ain’t never seen nothin’ like this,” Susumu said with a gulp. “Still not too late to turn back, you two.”

Kohaku was far too determined and Satsuma was much too curious for that ever be an option, and so the three took up positions to push the door aside. It gave but just a little, and after no small amount of grunts, cursing and groaning they forced it open.

They were rewarded by a gust of stagnant air and lights from within; the immediate entry room was a short hallway with a set of stairs leading down—all of it made from marble—opening up into a grand chamber that stretched as far as the eye could see. That they could see at all was due to the many torches mounted on the walls.

The trio walked forth with careful steps—at least until they saw that the chamber was already occupied.

“Pa!” Kohaku yelled, recognizing her father. Lord Nanbu was lying down upon a carpet complete in his samurai attire—minus his helmet—and he wasn’t alone. Nine of his companions were there as well, each of them only just starting to awake from a deep slumber.

They each exclaimed their surprise, questioning not just where they were but why. Kohaku and Susumu were overjoyed that they were alive at all, and the reunion between father and daughter was as heartfelt as they came. But Satsuma couldn’t stay.

ArROOAR

The lion that no one else could hear continued to roar, beckoning Satsuma further into the labyrinth. The main chamber was a heptagon in shape: it had seven sides, and—excluding the stairs leading down to it—there were six lengthy, unlit hallways that branched off from it. The source of the roar came from the second on the right.

With nothing but the light of his necklace, Satsuma walked alone through what could only be described as an ancient ruin. Odd designs coated the walls of which the boy had no hope of deciphering. The air was more stagnant here, too, and with no sound but a dull murmuring to keep him company, Satsuma was rightfully terrified.

It was almost a relief, then, when he reached a door at the end of it. This one wasn’t made of marble like the one outside but of ivory and was worth an immeasurable value. There were odd indentations on it, too, forming a circular pattern with odd shapes jutting out around it. Beneath it was a written inscription in a language Satsuma had never seen.

Taking a step back—likely in fear—the boy realized that the door itself was contained within a torii: a wooden gate, painted red, that was often found in Shinto shrines. It made the ominous atmosphere even moreso.

Every thought the boy had was to run away. His mind had formed about a hundred excuses during his approach to do just that. He was well and thoroughly convinced that he ought to return to the others, and yet...a voice that wasn’t his own—and yet at the same time, was—told him to go forth.

“Be brave, Satsuma. You are the Young Lion.”

The necklace glowed even brighter, then, as the future emperor realized that the necklace itself was the key. He raised the neckpiece—the gift his father had given his mother and his mother to him—and placed it into the door. It aligned perfectly with the indentations.

But nothing happened. Not for a while, anyway, until Satsuma tried to remove it. The then door began to vibrate. It lowered on its own accord, slowly and silently, revealing the smaller chamber inside.

The murmuring he had heard earlier was unmuffled, now, as the boy realized the speaker was inside. They were chanting a magic spell. It wasn’t a magical ward keeping Satsuma from entering inside—the

stench of death was enough to do that much. It was absolutely putrid in there, but with his lion to give him courage, he held his breath and stepped forth.

The chanting stopped when he entered. Satsuma took a peek over the corner to see a tall figure wrapped in silk and covered in bandages beneath. The man was kneeling down with his arms outstretched towards some sort of object the boy couldn't see. He spoke with a voice like his throat hadn't touched water in years.

"The ritual is complete. The Heavens remain unbroken for a generation more. Until we meet again, my brothers and sisters, fare—*guAK!*"

The cloaked figure began to gag as dust shot from out of his throat. His robes began to actively decay off his shoulders. He shrunk in height as his feet turned to dust beneath him, shortly followed by his hands and arms. A black gas forced itself from out of his mouth, spiralling into something Satsuma couldn't see.

But once the boy stepped forth, the figure—in its last, dying breath—turned to take notice of him. Its eye sockets opened wide as the crumbling corpse recognized him. Not as a frightened, little boy, but as the lion emperor that he was.

"No! You shall not stop us! You shall not cut the heavens!"

That was the last the corpse said before it was rendered into nothing but dust, ash and smoke. The fumes funneled out towards the sole object in the room, to which Satsuma could now see.

And when he did, he didn't believe it.

"This...this is..."

■■■■■

Doctor Etsuji was more than a little nervous inside Nobutoshi's tent while attending to the Kondo chieftain's daughter. The usually spacious tent was currently cramped as it was filled with warriors and wise women inspecting the procedure. Of the two groups, the latter was more frightening, criticizing and second-guessing every step the doctor made.

They quieted up quickly, though, when Toshie began to open her eyes. The painful gasps of air quieted from the sick girl, replaced instead by howls of joy and laughter from those in the room. The medicine man had done what they couldn't and was showered with praise. He was getting a feast as well as all the jerky and buckskin his horse could carry—whether he wanted it or not.

Satsuma had to wait an hour or more until the feast was underway before he could have a moment alone with his friend. Toshie was weak but alert enough to carry on a conversation.

"Can't believe...I owe my life to a sisam. Is it true dhat you found dhem in a castle beneath dhe sand, Satsu-kun?"

Satsuma nodded. Though in the years that followed, few would believe him: for after the group escaped from the canyon, great winds reburied the ruins as if done so by magic. No, there was no 'if' about it. It was magic, Satsuma knew. And that wasn't all he knew.

"I found more than just them, Toshie-chan. I found..." the future emperor paused, unsure of how to say it. There was so much to tell yet the six-year-old lacked the words to describe it. The best he could do...was this:

"I found out how the world ends."

[Side Story #28: Satsuma's Necklace \(Toshio Version\)](#)

[Nov 10, 2020](#)

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



Side Story 28: Satsuma's Necklace (Toshio Version)



■■ Western Hyuga ■■

"Please, Nobutoshi-dono, you must take me with you!"

The six-year-old Hyugan pleaded with his eyes bloodshot and the shadows beneath them growing. Satsuma hadn't left Toshio's side since late yesterday afternoon when the chieftain's son returned with his carving knife. The future emperor had lost it while fending off a coyote attack—an attack that may well prove fatal for his newest friend.

"Dhere's nothing left we can do," said one of the wise women before dawn. "His fever is growing worse. Dhe wound is infected...a rabid sand wolf's bite can take down a horse! All we can do now is pray."

Satsuma shook his fists. He had done plenty of praying at his friend's bedside watching him cry out in delirious pain. As his condition worsened, it became clear that no amount of pleading to the spirits was

going to save him. Nobu, the chieftain's oldest son, agreed, though he was more concerned about who to blame.

"Dhis is all dhe sisam's doing!" Nobu yelled, pushing through the crowded tent to reach Satsuma. The older boy towered over the future emperor, glaring down at him with eyes filled with rage. "It's your fault Toshio is dying! Pah!"

He spat on the younger boy and—with his fist raised overhead—was about to punch Satsuma when Nobutoshi intervened. Satsuma didn't understand much about Kondo culture or their family dynamics, but the intervention came in the form of a wicked kick that sent Nobu down to his knees gasping for breath.

"That is *not* how we treat guests in my home, Nobu! As for the rest of you," the chieftain turned to address his warriors, each standing stoically with their arms crossed, "prepare to ride. We make for Nanbu Ranch. Our scouts have confirmed that Kyō-Kyō and the others from the northern tribe are held captive there."

His words gave Satsuma an idea. For the Nanbu hadn't just captured the Kondos, but his mother and Fujibayashi as well. The latter of which was a ninja skilled with medicines, poisons and the like. When Satsuma tried to plead his case, however, he didn't get much further than the man's name before getting interrupted.

"Fujibayashi...the Warrior of the Wind. I wouldn't believe a child like you knew such a man, or that he would ever be out here in the Westlands, were it not for the necklace you're wearing," the chieftain said, gesturing to the ivory neckpiece encrusted with priceless jewels around Satsuma's neck. "I have many questions to ask him, but for now...I'll allow you to accompany us to the ranch. Hyugan medicine may be the only way to save Toshio now."

Satsuma jumped in excitement and was right about to take off to pack his things when the chieftain stopped him. He gave the boy one final warning. "Whatever it is you do, Young Lion...keep that necklace close to you. Understand?"

Satsuma nodded even though he thought his new nickname was rather strange: though his spirit animal was a lion—according to Ume-Ume, who had read his palm back in Yamato—he didn't recall ever mentioning it to Nobutoshi. Regardless, he had to hurry to fill up his knapsack with food and water for the trip.

He paid one last visit to Toshio before he left. To his surprise, the boy was awake and mostly cognizant. Enough to be in good humor, even.

"Dhink I'd rather die...dhan be saved be a sisam like you! Hehe," Toshio said between hoarse breaths. "Riding with Papa and his men...you'll never keep up with dhem. But take Kiso-chan with you. At least she...won't let you...fall off..."

That was the last Toshio spoke before he dozed off into sleep. Satsuma put his hand in his, which was burning hot, and squeezed tightly. Though they hadn't known each other for very long, and they came from entirely different worlds, he knew the two of them would become close friends.

"I won't let you down, Toshio-kun!"

■■■■

"Dhat's dhe most gentle mare I've ever seen," said a Kondo named Oku who was said to be the best horse breeder in the tribe. Though the rest of the squad riding to Nanbu Ranch kept their distance from the Hyugan, Oku couldn't help but be curious. It was obvious that Satsuma had no experience on horseback—yet he somehow managed to keep pace.

"Kisouma breeds like dhat tend to do poorly with unskilled riders, but dhis one is very kind. It seems very attached to you, too. You may have dhe gift, young one."

Just as Satsuma was about to ask what the gift was, Nobu trotted his horse in between them. The older son of the chieftain sneered as he inspected the Hyugan's horse. "Pft! A wimpy horse like dhat is useless. I bet it would run from dhe rain! Fitting for a sisam like—gaah?!"

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Kiso-chan latched out at Nobu's hand, coming from within an inch of biting it off. Flinching in fear, Nobu fumbled halfway off his horse—which was sent charging across the prairie. The other warriors looked on with laughter as the proud chieftain's son cursed and yelled while trying to remount his steed.

Nobutoshi raised a fist into the air which caused them to quiet, and after retrieving his embarrassed son, he spoke to the group as a whole. "Keep alert, each of you! The Nanbu Ranch is right up ahead. We do not wish to make enemies of them. We are here to retrieve Kyō-Kyō and the others."

True to his word, Satsuma soon found himself in awe as they crested over the hill. He had never seen a ranch before let alone the largest in the Westlands. Nanbu Ranch consisted of multiple stables, barns filled with hay as well as large, fenced-in grazing areas. And of course: hundreds of horses.

There was even an odd sort of track that wrapped around like a stretched-out ring, which Nobutoshi explained was used for racing. Visions of watching horse races filled Satsuma's head—at least until one of the warriors spotted something else.

"Chief! At the center of dhe track—look! It's dhem! Damn sisam have 'em tied up in chains!"

Hollers and warcries broke out from the bunch, led by Nobu who was working himself into a frenzy. He wielded a bow with an arrow already notched and ready to fire. Nobutoshi had to shout in order to silence them.

“Don’t be fools! Put those arrows back in your quivers! We’re here to negotiate their release—not to start a war!”

Though war was exactly what seemed to break out after a bell began to ring from the nearest watchtower. It was followed by several more and accompanied by shouts of “Kondos” and “dirtskins”. The noise was enough to frighten Kiso-chan, who ignored Satsuma’s orders and trotted over to a nearby field to graze.

While Kiso-chan was munching on an early lunch, every rancher before them mobilized: they hastily mounted their horses, readied their weapons and went into formation. They outnumbered the Kondos two-to-one, though many of them were field hands wielding little more than scythes and pitchforks.

There were a handful of samurai, however, yet they were nothing like the ones Satsuma had seen at the Capital. For starters, they wore an odd blanket over their armor. Their colors were green and their emblems gold, and instead of helmets they wore conical farmer’s hats made of straw. Each of them wielded either a bow or a spear, keeping their katanas sheathed at their hips.

Their steeds were perhaps more impressive than the riders: though they ranged in colors from spotted whites to browns, blacks and greys, their armor was of a uniform steel that ran from their snouts to their tails. It was in another league compared to the padded blankets the Kondo warriors used on theirs.

Though if the Kondos were at all intimidated, they made no sign of it. All Satsuma could say for certain was that he was glad Kiso-chan had decided to wander away. None of the ranchers were paying the two of them any mind as the negotiation started.

“Lady Nanbu, it’s a shame we have to meet under such circumstances,” Nobutoshi said to the small rider at the center of the samurai. Their leader was a middle-aged woman with greying hair and a steely gaze. A true wife of a samurai, she wielded a glaive and seemed more than capable of using it.

“I could say the same, Chieftain. I know why you’re here,” she said, before turning and pointing her glaive out towards the race track. “The bald one hasn’t stopped hollerin’ about you since we found ‘em. He’s enough of a sore that I’d almost pay you to take him off my hands, but it ain’t all that simple.”

“How so?”

“My husband’s gone,” Lady Nanbu replied, her words growing grim. “Headed out Ojita way on business. Ain’t no one heard from him or his group for a week now. Word is, one of the tribes got ‘em.”

“Not mine. We have no feud with the Nanbu. We’ve steered clear from your banners for years, and you ours. If Lord Nanbu and his company were taken,” Nobutoshi explained, “it was most likely an attack done by the Samku-Sainu. We have no relation with the Southern tribes in—”

“By the hells, why’s we listenin’ to this—*hiccup*—damned dirtskin?!” yelled the largest samurai of the group, mounted in the horse beside Lady Nanbu. He reeked of alcohol and introduced himself as Lord Nanbu’s brother, Nobunao. “We all know’s you’s a lyin’! Each an’ every...”

That was as much as Satsuma could overhear before Kiso-chan decided she was finished grazing on grass. For dessert, the mare wanted hay, and so she galloped over to the nearest stable in search of some. The boy atop her was helpless but to follow wherever the horse wanted to go.

“I’ve never been in a stable before,” Satsuma remarked. It was empty of horses—but that didn’t mean there wasn’t any evidence of them. He grimaced while covering his nose. “I never imagined it would...smell so foul!”

“You sayin’ our stables ain’t clean enough for ya?” a voice yelled from behind. It was young but tried its best to sound deep and bellowing; that combined with the odd Westlands accent made Satsuma giggle. “What? Quit laughin’!”

Minding his manners, the future emperor hopped down from his horse and bowed deeply to apologize. When he arose, he saw who he had insulted: a boy around his own age, though he was much brawnier than Satsuma was. His hair was short and untidy, and he wore a katana—though not at his hip. He wore it on his back instead, with a strap running across his chest.

“Gomenasai. I didn’t mean to insult the efforts of a stableboy. I only—”

“How dare ya!” the boy interrupted before pounding his chest. “I’m the son of a sam’rai—and not just any! My father is Lord Nanbu, and I’m gonna be the one who finds him! The name’s Kohaku.”

It was only after his introduction that Satsuma noticed the portly man accompanying Kohaku. He was a rancher by his attire and an officer of the law by his words. He introduced himself as Deputy Susumu, and from what Satsuma could understand through his accent, his job was to keep an eye on Lord Nanbu’s son.

“Koha-kun over here’s got a bad habit of rushin’ off after danger. I’m here to make sure he lives to outgrow it. Asides, your ma said she’d tan my hide if I let you take out one of the horses. I’m sure the sam’rai will find your pa all spit and span!”

Satsuma began to giggle before laughing outright. The phrases and sayings were so outrageous and colorful that the boy from Yamato couldn’t help but be amused. He had no idea people in the Westlands spoke this way—but he wanted to learn how to speak like them, too. Kohaku was many times less reserved and refined than his fellow students at the Capital.

The two kids talked about Fujibayashi and Satsuma’s mother, who Kohaku admitted were currently residing at his family’s house as guests—but only because the Nanbu were ‘hospitable folk’. Normally, they’d never trust a Hyugan who travelled alongside Kondos.

“But why?” Satsuma asked, perplexed. “They’ve been kind to me...oh, and they sing some great songs, too! Kyō-Kyō taught me one they only sing when they’re building a new house. They use the names of the future residents in—”

"I don't care what they told ya! All they do is lie—everyone knows that," Kohaku spat. He then gripped the hilt of the katana behind his neck and sneered. "You might be one of their spies, I reckon! Makes me sick to my stomach just thinkin' about working for 'em!"

Satsuma ignored the accusation altogether when Kohaku's words made him remember why he was there in the first place. "Sick! That's right...I need medicine! Please, my friend—he's been bitten by a coyote and has taken up a terrible fever!"

Kohaku and Susumu exchanged glances, the latter of which tilting his hat as if to offer his condolences. "Mighty poor timing, I'm afraid. Only doctor worth his salt this side of the Celestial Sea is Etsuji-san, and he's off ridin' with Lord Nanbu."

The samurai's son scratched his chin while looking Kiso-chan up and down. He slammed his fist into an open palm before grabbing a spare saddle and putting it on the young mare. To Satsuma's surprise, Kiso-chan didn't seem bothered in the slightest.

"Koha-kun! What in tarnation...you know what your mother said! You're forbidden to ride any of her horses outside the ranch!"

"*Her* horses," Kohaku clarified with a grin. He mounted Kiso-chan and then leaned over to offer Satsuma his hand. "Seems like you and I got the same goal. So hows about we go for a ride, er...what'd you say your name was, again?"

Satsuma smiled, introduced himself and took Kohaku's hand. He was well on his way to making a second friend!

■■■■

Lord Nanbu adjusted his farmer's hat as the glaring afternoon sun bounced off the dunes. He took another look at the parchment in his hand and the imperial seal planted upon it. This piece of paper was why he was here in the White Hills—the middle of nowhere—with nine of his best men.

It was also why he was escorting a leper covered head-to-toe in the most ornately designed and embroidered silk robes the samurai had ever seen. Though in contrast to his elegant wardrobe, the man's scent was downright putrid. Even after a week on the road together, the group still hadn't grown accustomed to the stench.

"Fought alongside—and against—a lot of your types in the war," Lord Nanbu remarked, trying to get his guest to speak. "A shugenja personally sent by the Emperor himself...I'm surprised you came to the Westlands alone! I would've expected a retinue of Shinsengumi, at least."

After what felt like a minute or longer, the hooded figure gave a toneless, muffled reply. It was the same he had given dozens of times before. "Take me to the crest of the White Hills, Son of Nanbu."

Whatever accent the stranger had, it wasn't one the samurai lord or his men had ever heard before. They each exchanged uncertain looks and tightened the reins on their horses. It was bad enough that they were deep in Kondo country; the shugenja had sent them riding all around the desert for the past week, planting a piece of paper—a talisman—at seemingly random locations during their journey.

The men were growing weary and low on rations. If this mission wasn't completed soon, he'd have to call it off and risk making an enemy of the Emperor. The aging samurai knew well the risks of having such an opponent: he still suffered from the wounds given to him in the many battles of the Golden Era, afterall.

"Hara-kun," whispered Etsuji, a doctor and childhood friend of the samurai. "I did as you asked. I inspected his wrappings last time we camped. He doesn't have leprosy. Moreover, those bandages he's wrapped in...they're a hundred years old at least! In all these days, we haven't seen his shoulders raise once. Whatever that thing is...it ain't breathin'."

Lord Nanbu nodded as he gripped his katana's hilt even tighter. His heart began racing, too, while a trickle of sweat came off from his brow. Whatever this creature was, he could no longer permit it to live. He got ready to unsheathe his katana and give the command.

That was when the shugenja dismounted from his horse, fell to his knees and clapped his hands together in prayer. He gazed upon the white dune before them as he muttered an arcane phrase:

"Byre onben ingefeallan, delfan!"

The world trembled and reshaped around them. Like a parting ocean, the sand around them shifted as if taken by an unknown tide while an almighty wind whipped across the dunes. The last Lord Nanbu and his men saw, in those final moments, were walls of sand twenty horses high forming up around them. They grew to such heights as to blot out the sky.

And then...they collapsed.

■■■■

"Hey! Wake up, already. Can't believe ya' fell asleep on the saddle!"

Satsuma was elbowed into consciousness by Lord Nanbu's son until he awoke from his mid-day nap. The heat on the prairie combined with his lack of sleep from the night before made it difficult for the future emperor to keep his eyes open.

What he had seen with them, closed, however, was too remarkable to bring to voice. He had had dreams before, of course, but none this lucid—with the exception, perhaps, of the one in which he was chased by a lioness and led by a sea eagle into a herd of bears.

In this most recent dream, he had been walking across an oasis with square plots ahead of him in a line that spanned well into the distance. They were garden plots, not unlike the ones he had passed by in

Yamato on his way to school. Each plot depicted a different arrangement: first was a bed of roses, then a sakura tree, a pair of pink tulips and so on. They were forty-eight in total, and thanks to a naturally gifted memory, Satsuma could recall every one.

After those plots was something even stranger: a sea of brass jars emerged onto the desert floor, rolling about the sand on their sides. They spun in circular patterns, making it near impossible to wade through them without stumbling. Once Satsuma did, he came upon something *truly* ridiculous.

"Your spirit animals," Satsuma asked his companions, "could it be that they are a horse and a frog?"

Susumu, the deputy, gave a snort. "Now I don't whose you heard it from, young feller, but mine's the stream toad—not a wee frog, so don't get it twisted! Still, heck and hell of a guess. Not too many toads like yours truly out here in the Westlands, I'd wager. Guess I'm just that special, I figure!"

Satsuma ignored the boasting, focusing instead on the last sight he had seen prior to waking up. Beyond the field of brass jars, a horse, lion and toad were wandering together through the desert. That alone was weird, but weirder still was what each of them were wearing: they were blindfolded and gagged. Raging sandstorms flailed around them, and...and that was the last Satsuma remembered before waking up.

"Sandstorms ain't as common as foreign folk like yourself would expect," Susumu said after the boy asked about them. "They're mostly tall tales: like when a rancher has to explain to the missus why one of their calves has gone missing. Course, real reason was losin' out on a bad bet. Speakin' of which, best gambling hall in all the Westlands is right up ahead: Salty's Saloon. Not a bad watering hole, either."

The trio had arrived in the frontier town of Ojita though it was unlike any town Satsuma had seen. The Yamato native was accustomed to large, imposing buildings standing side-by-side in rows that spanned as far as the eye could see. He was used to cobblestone streets, groups of women wearing the latest fashions of silk, and armored guardsmen at every corner.

Here, the buildings were mostly ramshackle: actively falling apart. They were spaced few and far between, each made in a different style than Satsuma had ever seen. Everything from the wood they were made out of to the swinging doors at their entrances were different.

By the time they reached Salty's, Satsuma was deeply confused. "I don't understand...where's the pond? This doesn't look like much of a watering hole to me."

Susumu couldn't help but laugh while Kohaku rolled his eyes. The son of Lord Nanbu clarified for him. "He didn't mean a real watering hole. It's just a saying for a place where men go to wet their whistles."

His explanation only confused Satsuma further. The future emperor was beginning to feel more in common with the tribal Kondos than these Westerners—at least they didn't speak in expressions all the time. In any case, according to the deputy, all news in the region reached Salty's ears. If anyone knew where Lord Nanbu was, it was him.

After ‘hitching’ Kiso-chan and Susumu’s horse to wooden stakes in front of the saloon, the trio made their way in. The twangs from a sanshin—a popular local instrument with three strings—met their ears as the lingering scent of tobacco reached their noses. The place was mostly empty, it still being the afternoon, but it was lively all the same. Satsuma had already fallen in love with it and was the first among them to take a seat at the bar.

That seat was a stool: the first the future emperor had ever sat upon. It felt wondrous to be high into the air, and though it was much less comfortable than a pillow, it was many times more fun. He spun around it and observed everything from the memorabilia on the walls to the odd-shaped bottles lined up on racks behind the bar. Satsuma had questions about each and everything he saw, but the most pressing one pertained to the odd brass jar in the middle of the room.

The one that looked no different than those he had seen in his dream.

“That there’s a spittoon, kid,” the barkeeper said while raising an eyebrow. He gave Kohaku a smile and Susumu a nod. “See you’re on babysittin’ duty today, ay Deputy?”

The two shared a chuckle before Salty poured the officer a cup of his ‘usual’. Satsuma got laughed at when he asked for the same, and instead was served a cup of stale sencha tea. Though to call it tea at all was a generous statement.

“My father,” Kohaku said, his voice deadly serious, “he ain’t returned to the ranch in a week. Need you to tell us everything you know, Salty-san.”

The barkeeper twirled his grey moustache while going deep into thought. According to him, Lord Nanbu and his men had passed through Ojita four days back, escorting a strange fellow covered head to toe in fancy silk robes. No one knew who he was or what he came to the Westlands for, only that he smelled horrendous.

“I don’t like this none at all,” Kohaku said, grimacing. “Did they say where they were go—”

The young rancher was cut short when the doors bursted open, creaking after being kicked in by a particularly unsavory fellow with a large grin on his face. He was accompanied by several more types with the same demeanor. Even as inexperienced in the world as Satsuma was, he could tell these men weren’t the type you wanted to associate with.

Aside from being all men and mostly unkempt, the only thing they all had in common were the giant gloves they wore: they were made of leather and flared upwards, far enough to reach their elbows. To Satsuma, they looked pretty silly. He was wise enough to keep that opinion to himself, however, as he watched them take a table and start yelling at Salty for drinks.

Susumu turned to the two boys and whispered, “Best we get a move-on. Them’s be the Glovers Gang: group of tanners from out Dry Ridges way. Known for gambling and roughhousing.”

Satsuma didn't know what a rough house was, but gambling had more of an interest to him—at least, he became reluctant to leave once one of the gang members pulled out a deck of cards. They were playing some sort of game involving stacks of ryō. Susumu had to pull the boy away from the bar, but not before the future emperor knocked over the brass spittoon with his foot.

"I know it's silly but...maybe my dream was trying to tell me something," Satsuma thought, though even the six-year-old thought it was childish. Regardless, the three of them left the saloon but didn't get very far before Kohaku froze in place.

He began to shake at the sight in front of her: a giant Nanbu stallion, black-coated with a black mane, that dwarfed the rest of the horses hitched at Salty's Saloon. Though it looked terrifying, its ears perked up upon the sight of Kohaku. It nuzzled against the boy's face even as he was frozen in place.

"Midnight...Father's horse..."

With a trembling hand, Kohaku unsheathed the katana on his back, gripping the hilt with knuckles white with rage. One of the gang members must've rode Midnight in, meaning Lord Nanbu was lost in the desert without his steed at best.

And at worst...

"Koha-kun! Don't do nothin' rash!" Susumu pleaded, though it was far too late. Kohaku ran into the saloon with his katana raised overhead, running straight towards the closest member of the Glovers Gang he could find. The target in this case was an older man leaning back in his chair, grinning at the cards he was holding. He was too focused on the game to realize that this would be the last hand he'd ever play!

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That was, until a brass spittoon got in the way. It rolled into the middle of Kohaku's warpath, sending the boy spiralling forward and sending his katana spiralling harmlessly into a nearby wall. He collided right into the back of the gang member, causing chaos but nothing fatal. Satsuma's eyes went wide with equal amounts of wonder and fear.

"Did I...change the future? Did I save that man's life?"

It was a thought for another time as 'that man' grabbed Kohaku and tossed him into a nearby table, sending glasses and chairs scattering everywhere. The boy cried out in pain as his forehead started bleeding.

"By the hells! What sort o' ship you runnin', Salty, havin' brats like these runnin' around? Lucky that sword of yours missed, boy, or I'd have tanned your hide with it!"

Kohaku spat a wad of blood in reply. He stood up and staggered back to his opponent. One of his eyes were shut closed from the blood running down it. "Midnight! You stole him from my father, didn't you?!"

That's Lord Nanbu's horse! What have you done to him?!"

The proud samurai's son charged forward once again though he was far less formidable without his sword; a knee to the gut was enough to send him down on his knees.

"Finders keepers—that's the way o' the Westlands, boy!" he spat, missing the spittoon on purpose, aiming the wad at Kohaku's face instead. "You damn Nanbu think you run this place just 'cause of your fancy armor and swords. Ain't no place for samurai here—or brats like you! Beat it!"

Deputy Susumu finally found the courage to intervene, stopping the fight after it was already over. Kohaku was bleeding and bruised, but the greatest wound he suffered was to his pride. The thought of losing his father's horse to this lowlife was unforgivable.

Throughout all this excitement, no one had paid attention to Satsuma; the boy had taken a seat at the table completely unnoticed. Surrounded by the burly members of the Glovers Gang, the boy spoke up in a polite and regal manner.

"Excuse me, sir, I'd like to play a game."

"What?! This here's a gamblin' game, boy, and you ain't got nothin' to wager!" the head of the gang said, growing frustrated by all this commotion. There was something akin to fear, too, seeing this strange child sitting among them without so much as an ounce of fear. He couldn't place the accent either, though the brat sure sounded rich.

"So if I win," Satsuma said with a sly smile, "I'll get the black Nanbu stallion out front, correct?"

One of the goons slammed the table with his fist while another raised Satsuma up by his collar, plucking him out of his chair. "I don't thinks you heard my boss. You ain't got nothin'...worth..."

The rancher was dumbfounded upon the sight of Satsuma's necklace. The boy rose it above his head and showed it off for everyone in the saloon to see. The jewels encrusted on the ivory band glistened even in the faint light of the dingy gambling hall. Its value was immense, and the men looked upon it with their mouths agape.

"I would like to wager this necklace for the horse," Satsuma said, taking back his seat at the table. "Is that a suitable bet? Or perhaps...you are scared?"

The boy's words quieted the entire room. The members of the Glover's Gang gave each other long, uncertain glances before they all broke out in laughter. The entire table was in agreement that this was all a grand joke—and that this kid was the easiest mark they'd ever find in Ojita.

Despite Susumu's protests, the gangsters were eager to play and were sporting enough to instruct Satsuma on how to play. The game was called hanafuda: it was a card with four different suits and twelve ranks. It was fairly complex as far as gambling games went, with varying card values and sets a player had to collect in order to score points.

Satsuma soaked in all the details like a sponge, however, asking questions that were far too insightful for a six-year-old.

"Alright, we playin' or what?" said the gang's leader and best player. "Let's get this over with. We're just gonna play one game: my horse for your necklace. You ready?"

"Satsuma-kun..." Kohaku whispered, tugging the future emperor's sleeve. "You don't gotta do this. This ain't your battle...it's mine."

Satsuma's eyes glistened as a smile crept onto his face, for as his opponent dealt out eight cards face-up on top of the table, the young lord noticed each to resemble the plots he had seen in his dream—and in the same order, too. When he received his cards, they were just as he imagined them to be...which meant he knew his opponent's hand, too.

As for the spectators, the rest of the Glover's Gang were having a jolly time cracking jokes and chugging bottles of saké, already celebrating their boss's victory. It made it difficult to concentrate, though Satsuma managed to flip through his memory all the same.

"This ribbon card has the highest value on the table, so I should...no! The next card he'll draw is the deer in the field of carnations...in that case I'll pick up the single carnation card—it'll block him from collecting the suit!"

Satsuma ended up picking up a low value card from the table, a move most players would consider a mistake. His opponent did as well, wearing a sneer on his face until he drew the next card and realized he was out on points. The game continued like that one hand after another, but while Satsuma was clearly enjoying himself...the same could not be said for his opponent.

"Shut up, you idiots! I'm concentratin' over here!" he shouted at his men to cease their merriment. Looking at the field of play, Satsuma was in a superior position: he had more and higher-scoring sets collected while the number of cards remaining in the deck grew fewer and fewer.

It wasn't until Satsuma put down a set including a crane perched atop a bed of lavenders that his opponent unleashed his frustration. When it became obvious that he'd lose, the gangster tossed the table over breaking half a dozen saké bottles in the process.

"To hells with this bet!" he yelled, pulling out his tanner's knife. It looked more like a saw than a dagger but it was dangerous just the same. "Ways I see it, I'll just *take* the necklace! Lord Nanbu's son, too! Tie 'em up, lads! I'm sure Lady Nanbu will pay a pretty price to get 'em back!"

Talk about being a sore loser.

■■■■

The late afternoon sun hung mercilessly up in the sky, beaming down at three figures marching through the desert. Satsuma, Kohaku and Susumu were captives of the Glovers Gang: a group of tanners-

turned-kidnappers after a game of hanafuda gone wrong. They were not the most professional group of bandits—having only recently joined the profession—and so there was plenty of debate among them as to what to do next.

“We’ll write ‘em a letter! Tell ‘em we got their son—stick a piece of his hair onto it too, make ‘em know we mean business!” one of them declared. While it was the best idea they had come up with yet, in the hour march to their encampment, there was one problem.

“Ain’t none of us can write,” the leader said, scowling as he fiddled with his new necklace. He kept it wrapped around his wrist instead of his neck—the latter had proven to be too large for it to fit around. That didn’t mean he hadn’t tried for the past hour to get it on, though.

Satsuma offered to write for them but was declined, not on the account that he would write something to betray them but that a boy’s handwriting would be too weak and effeminate to intimidate the samurai properly. That didn’t make much sense, but then again, little much they decided upon did.

The fact they forced the prisoners to march slowed the group down considerably, not to mention it made what they were doing all the more suspicious. More than a few ranchers had spotted them leaving the outskirts of Ojita.

Of the three captives, Satsuma was taking the kidnapping the best by far. Kohaku was sullen and fueled with frustration, struggling in vain against the rope that tied his hands behind him. As for Susumu, he begged for his life at every step. The fact that he was supposed to be an officer of the law was...embarrassing, really.

“Come on, fellas! I got me’s a whole family back home a’waitin’ for me! My ma’s heart will go out if she hears word of me being captured! You only need the boys, don’tcha? Let me go free—let bygones be bygones!”

The deputy’s betrayal earned him the ire of Kohaku who released his pent-up frustration by headbutting, biting and kicking Susumu. It took three of the Glovers Gang to get the boy off him. To put it mildly, the mood around the group was poor.

Satsuma was beginning to grow weary, too—at least until a strong wind pressed up across his back. He recalled the dream he had earlier of the lion, horse and toad walking through the desert with their faces covered in cloth. As the winds began to pick up, he knew what he had to do.

“We ought to be blindfolded,” the future emperor suggested, “otherwise we’ll be able to tell the samurai where your camp is. You’ll end up imprisoned, hanged or worse if that happened!”

The gang of tanners let out a collective gulp as they considered their potential fates. They quickly rushed to find whatever they could to cover their prisoners’ faces, settling on hemp sacks used to carry animal hides into Ojita. To say they were stinky was an understatement.

“Great! Just great!” Kohaku yelled, flailing about in vain. “I can’t see...can’t hardly breathe, neither! You’re just makin’ everything worse, Satsuma-kun!”

As much as the young lord wanted to apologize, a part of him knew that this had to be done. He couldn’t explain why, but soon he wouldn’t have to: the horses—including Kiso-chan and Midnight—start squealing as animals often recognized danger well before people did. They felt the tremor in the sands and the humidity in the air begin to rise; what few clouds there were in the sky whipped across the ocean of pale blue in a hurry.

When the wind came, it came crashing like a tsunami’s wave upon the desert travellers. It was enough to knock grown men off their horses, and it didn’t come empty handed: countless grains of sand flew every which way as the floor beneath them began to spin. The members of the Glovers Gang cried out, scratching their eyes as the sand grated against their pupils.

They then began to choke as the sand invaded their mouths, making a run down their throats. Though the three prisoners couldn’t see what was going on, the sounds alone painted a horrifying picture.

After a moment to recover his nerve, Satsuma freed his hands from his bindings, having managed to cut himself free with his carving knife over the past hour in secret. The would-be kidnappers should’ve been more thorough.

While the hemp bag made it near impossible to see, he managed to crawl over to Kohaku all the same before carefully cutting the rope around the boy’s hands. By the time he was finished, the initial gust had ended. The two boys wasted little time to retrieve their most prized possessions: a necklace, katana and two horses.

Though just as they mounted Kiso-chan and Midnight, they realized they had forgotten someone. Kohaku looked over at a Susumu with a grimace, but after mumbling a curse word or two under his breath, he asked Satsuma to help rescue him.

“W-wait just a cotton pickin’...untie me, won’t you?!” the deputy pleaded.

“There’s no time!” Kohaku said as he and Satsuma loaded Susumu on the back of Midnight. It took all their strength and then some to get the overweight officer over. “Hang on best you can, Susumu-san. Midnight—ya, ya!”

Lord Nanbu’s son spurred Midnight forward like lightning through the clouds of sand. The immense power of the Nanbu warhorse was on full-display, and Satsuma found himself in awe—at least until he got a mouthful of sand from leaving his mouth agape. He decided it best to hurry along after them.

“Let’s go, Kiso-chan! Our journey isn’t over yet!”

■■■■■

Satsuma's eyes stung as the group made their way to the White Hills. It turned out that weren't hills at all, but dunes whiter than any snow. The sand was made from gypsum: a mineral that made the landscape look like a sculpture carved out of alabaster. Though neither of his companions had ever seen snow before, Satsuma assured them that frozen water was nothing like this.

"It's pretty—I'll give it that much. Now how's about we bottle some up as a souvenir and hightail it outta here?" Susumu asked, looking around nervously. "We're deep in Kondo Country now, boys. When it comes to dirtskins, there's savages and then there's savages. The ones we're liable to cross 'round here are the latter."

"Quit bein' such a coward," Kohaku replied, his eyes never rising from the map. He had found it on Midnight and it chronicled the journey Lord Nanbu had taken over the past week. He and his men had traveled all across the region in what looked to be a hexagonal pattern, the last stop being at the dead center of the White Hills.

Which was exactly where the three of them were headed right now.

As much as Satsuma wanted to enjoy the scenery, he too was absorbed in a piece of parchment. Though instead of a map, his was a letter: one with the Imperial seal planted atop it instructing Lord Nanbu to accompany a shugenja for a matter of the utmost importance. The only issue was...

"...this handwriting, it's nothing like the one Father uses when he writes letters to Mother and me. Did he really write this?"

"Woah!" Susumu yelled, halting Midnight in his tracks. The deputy had a good reason to stop: an immense canyon opened up from behind the dune. His shout echoed within it and was joined by Kohaku and Satsuma's as the children gasped at the sight. "Now I ain't been 'round this area for years, but...pretty sure I'd recall somethin' like this!"

It looked like a chunk of Hyuga was missing—as if the gods had taken a giant shovel to the land. Kohaku was the first among them down, having spotted something in the distance. Excited for any sign of his father, he stumbled down the sandy cliffside with trails of sand rolling at his every step.

It was as dangerous as it looked.

"I'm checkin' on ahead! You two take the horses 'round where it's less steep. Oh, and make sure to zigzag down 'em so they don't stumble," Kohaku ordered. The two had little left to do but comply, though Susumu complained the entire way down. Getting down the canyon was easy enough—if a bit dangerous.

"We'll just have to worry about getting back up once we find Lord Nanbu and the others," Satsuma said to both the deputy and himself. Though his eyes had grown accustomed to the brightness, the ever present wind made the canyon shift around them. How Kiso-chan hadn't gotten dizzy was a testament to her resolve.

But even her resolve had its limit—especially when she started getting hungry. Susumu’s stomach growled just then to further emphasize the fact that they had no supplies. The grim reality was starting to kick in: they were deep in the middle of nowhere, likely lost and definitely going to be in danger soon.

All those concerns faded from Satsuma’s mind, however, when he caught up to Kohaku. The samurai’s son was on his knees with his back turned to him. Though he didn’t make a single sound, his shoulders heaved repeatedly. Almost as if...he was crying.

“This helmet...it belongs to my Pa,” he said between chokes of air. In his arms, clutched tightly to his chest, was a samurai’s helmet: a traditional kabuto that Satsuma was accustomed to seeing in Yamato. This one was green with an intricate golden trim and matching emblem at the front.

It was also coated in sand.

Looking around, there was no sign of the samurai, their horses, or anything else upon the white canyon floor. Midnight lowered his head up against his master’s helmet and nuzzled against it, a gesture that caused Kohaku to start weeping in earnest.

Susumu stepped forth and placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder, taking his hat off with the other. He placed it against his heart and spoke with the reverence of a priest.

“Haramusa Nanbu...we wouldn’t none of us be here without him. Us Westlanders were nothin’ but outcasts—dead ones at that, had he not come and shown us what true sam’rai are made out of! A rancher, a warrior...and a friend. They don’t make men like your father no more, Koha-kun.”

Watching Kohaku crying and hearing Susumu’s eulogy caused whatever composure Satsuma had to collapse. He didn’t know what to do: nothing in his life nor his dreams had prepared him for this, and in that moment, he felt very much like a six-year-old boy from Yamato who was well and truly far from home.

He missed playing alongside his classmates, trips with his mother to fancy teahouses, and stuffing himself full with taiyaki at festivals. It was such a comfortable and easy life compared to the one Satsuma lived now. A life in the Westlands where no one was safe, when you could lose the people closest to you from a sandstorm or a coyote’s bite...this life just wasn’t for him.

“I wanna go home,” Satsuma said as he clutched his carving knife—the last gift Emperor Seijirō had given him. It was a selfish wish, he knew, especially after witnessing Kohaku’s loss. He felt terrible about himself and how weak he was, becoming desperate to keep any and all thoughts away.

He meditated upon his father and what few memories they shared together back at the Capital. Dread began to fill Satsuma when he had trouble recalling his father’s face. The memories of man he so loved and respected were beginning to trickle away like sand off the top of a dune. In its place was the sight of his burning house and the cackling laughter of Lady Sakiko: the Lioness.

The despair of never being able to return home, to never see his father again, to be banished to this harsh and unforgiving wasteland...it hit Satsuma all at once. He realized that this wasn't just a trip or an extended vacation. *This* was a permanent change. He was trapped in this scary world where there was nothing he could do but close his eyes and pray.

Luckily for the future emperor, someone was paying attention.

"D-did you hear that?!" Satsuma asked, looking around with his eyes open wide. "There it is again! And once more! It's a lion's roar!"

His companions thought he had gone insane—not all that unusual for those left out in the sun for too long. The boy had gone delirious, they assumed, especially as he began to press his ear against the canyon's floor. At the very least, his antics gave Kohaku a momentary pause in his weeping.

"You, er, all right there laddie? You ain't been hit by heatstroke, have ya?" the deputy asked in growing concern. Satsuma was on all fours, now, though instead of the lion the boy claimed to hear, he was acting much more like a dog trying to find an old bone.

He dug into the sand feverously. No words could reach him as he seemed possessed to keep on digging. Soon, he wasn't alone: Kiso-chan began to prod the sand, too, with her front hoof. Kohaku joined in shortly after, using his father's helmet as a bucket to hasten the effort. Susumu grumbled but finally pitched in, too, and a minute later...they struck gold.

Or in this case, something even better.

"T-there's a chamber below! It's hollow!" Satsuma exclaimed. Someway and somehow, a large pocket of air had formed beneath the sand. It was pitch black down below and there wasn't a sound: save for the lion the boy insisted he could hear.

Kohaku was the first to volunteer to go down, lowered by a lasso tied around his waist. The chamber wasn't too deep and, according to the young rancher, the floor was made of stone. Yells for his father got no response, and while there seemed to be a structure ahead, it was impossible to tell in the darkness.

Satsuma jumped down after him and in doing so, alleviated the problem. He didn't carry a lantern or a torch—for they had none—but he did have something else: his necklace. Though he couldn't explain why, the jewels embedded into the ivory neckpiece began to glow, emanating faint lights each in their own shade. The walls of the cavern lit up as if swallowed by a dim rainbow.

It made for quite the lightshow as the boy moved about. After more than a little encouragement, Susumu joined them as well. They would need the grown man's strength soon enough as a large door made from marble blocked their path.

"Ain't never seen nothin' like this," Susumu said with a gulp. "Still not too late to turn back, you two."

Kohaku was far too determined and Satsuma was much too curious for that ever be an option, and so the three took up positions to push the door aside. It gave but just a little, and after no small amount of grunts, cursing and groaning they forced it open.

They were rewarded by a gust of stagnant air and lights from within; the immediate entry room was a short hallway with a set of stairs leading down—all of it made from marble—opening up into a grand chamber that stretched as far as the eye could see. That they could see at all was due to the many torches mounted on the walls.

The trio walked forth with careful steps—at least until they saw that the chamber was already occupied.

“Pa!” Kohaku yelled, recognizing his father. Lord Nanbu was lying down upon a carpet complete in his samurai attire—minus his helmet—and he wasn’t alone. Nine of his companions were there as well, each of them only just starting to awake from a deep slumber.

They each exclaimed their surprise, questioning not just where they were but why. Kohaku and Susumu were overjoyed that they were alive at all, and the reunion between father and son was as heartfelt as they came. But Satsuma couldn’t stay.

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The lion that no one else could hear continued to roar, beckoning Satsuma further into the labyrinth. The main chamber was a heptagon in shape: it had seven sides, and—excluding the stairs leading down to it—there were six lengthy, unlit hallways that branched off from it. The source of the roar came from the second on the right.

With nothing but the light of his necklace, Satsuma walked alone through what could only be described as an ancient ruin. Odd designs coated the walls of which the boy had no hope of deciphering. The air was more stagnant here, too, and with no sound but a dull murmuring to keep him company, Satsuma was rightfully terrified.

It was almost a relief, then, when he reached a door at the end of it. This one wasn’t made of marble like the one outside but of ivory and was worth an immeasurable value. There were odd indentations on it, too, forming a circular pattern with odd shapes jutting out around it. Beneath it was a written inscription in a language Satsuma had never seen.

Taking a step back—likely in fear—the boy realized that the door itself was contained within a torii: a wooden gate, painted red, that was often found in Shinto shrines. It made the ominous atmosphere even moreso.

Every thought the boy had was to run away. His mind had formed about a hundred excuses during his approach to do just that. He was well and thoroughly convinced that he ought to return to the others, and yet...a voice that wasn’t his own—and yet at the same time, was—told him to go forth.

“Be brave, Satsuma. You are the Young Lion.”

The necklace glowed even brighter, then, as the future emperor realized that the necklace itself was the key. He raised the neckpiece—the gift his father had given his mother and his mother to him—and placed it into the door. It aligned perfectly with the indentations.

But nothing happened. Not for a while, anyway, until Satsuma tried to remove it. The then door began to vibrate. It lowered on its own accord, slowly and silently, revealing the smaller chamber inside.

The murmuring he had heard earlier was unmuffled, now, as the boy realized the speaker was inside. They were chanting a magic spell. It wasn't a magical ward keeping Satsuma from entering inside—the stench of death was enough to do that much. It was absolutely putrid in there, but with his lion to give him courage, he held his breath and stepped forth.

The chanting stopped when he entered. Satsuma took a peek over the corner to see a tall figure wrapped in silk and covered in bandages beneath. The man was kneeling down with his arms outstretched towards some sort of object the boy couldn't see. He spoke with a voice like his throat hadn't touched water in years.

"The ritual is complete. The Heavens remain unbroken for a generation more. Until we meet again, my brothers and sisters, fare—*guAK!*"

The cloaked figure began to gag as dust shot from out of his throat. His robes began to actively decay off his shoulders. He shrunk in height as his feet turned to dust beneath him, shortly followed by his hands and arms. A black gas forced itself from out of his mouth, spiralling into something Satsuma couldn't see.

But once the boy stepped forth, the figure—in its last, dying breath—turned to take notice of him. Its eye sockets opened wide as the crumbling corpse recognized him. Not as a frightened, little boy, but as the lion emperor that he was.

"No! You shall not stop us! You shall not cut the heavens!"

That was the last the corpse said before it was rendered into nothing but dust, ash and smoke. The fumes funneled out towards the sole object in the room, to which Satsuma could now see.

And when he did, he didn't believe it.

"This...this is..."

■■■■■

Doctor Etsuji was more than a little nervous inside Nobutoshi's tent while attending to the Kondo chieftain's son. The usually spacious tent was currently cramped as it was filled with warriors and wise women inspecting the procedure. Of the two groups, the latter was more frightening, criticizing and second-guessing every step the doctor made.

They quieted up quickly, though, when Toshio began to open his eyes. The painful gasps of air quieted from the sick boy, replaced instead by howls of joy and laughter from those in the room. The medicine man had done what they couldn't and was showered with praise. He was getting a feast as well as all the jerky and buckskin his horse could carry—whether he wanted it or not.

Satsuma had to wait an hour or more until the feast was underway before he could have a moment alone with his friend. Toshio was weak but alert enough to carry on a conversation.

“Can’t believe...I owe my life to a sisam. Is it true dhat you found dhem in a castle beneath dhe sand, Satsu-kun?”

Satsuma nodded. Though in the years that followed, few would believe him: for after the group escaped from the canyon, great winds reburied the ruins as if done so by magic. No, there was no ‘if’ about it. It *was* magic, Satsuma knew. And that wasn’t all he knew.

“I found more than just them, Toshio-kun. I found...” the future emperor paused, unsure of how to say it. There was so much to tell yet the six-year-old lacked the words to describe it. The best he could do...was this:

"I found out how the world ends."

Which character should December's side story be about?

Nov 10, 2020

Reminder: there are 2 side stories remaining. The 30th one is reserved for Junko/Jun, which means **this is the last month** to decide the story you want to read next. Pick carefully!

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 (+18)

6%

Daisuke, the servant (+8)

2%

Keiko, the maid (+20)

2%

Kohaku, the samurai (+23)

52%

Kuniko, the farmer (+28)

6%

Nishi, the yakuza (+45)

19%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+24)

14%

Poll ended Nov 30, 2020 · 64 votes total

[MC #15's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Nov 11, 2020](#)



For these last few portraits: the gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #15 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Neutral, Calculated**

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

Short (+0)

27%

Long (+8)

29%

Chonmage (+0)

5%

Long bangs (+31)

38%

Poll ended Nov 15, 2020 · 55 votes total

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapter 3](#)

[Nov 15, 2020](#)

This was a heck of a chapter! Weighing in at over 30k words, it's as meaty as they come and possibly the largest chapter in Book 5! But more impressive (to me at least) isn't it's length but it's...girth?! (╯◡╯)

Chapter 3 has the largest branch in the series so far! SoH has never been known for being very branchy: the choices are more designed around customizing your experience rather than taking you off into entirely different ones. I find that big branches in choicegames usually come at the cost of narrative focus and writing quality, but I wanted to challenge myself and found that this was the perfect spot in the story to do so!

As far as how well I pulled it off...well, you tell me!

[MC #15 Face Art](#)

[Nov 30, 2020](#)

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 Tokiko220 ([twitter](#), [deviantart](#))!

This month's build: **Neutral, Calculated, Long bangs**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[Dec 2, 2020](#)

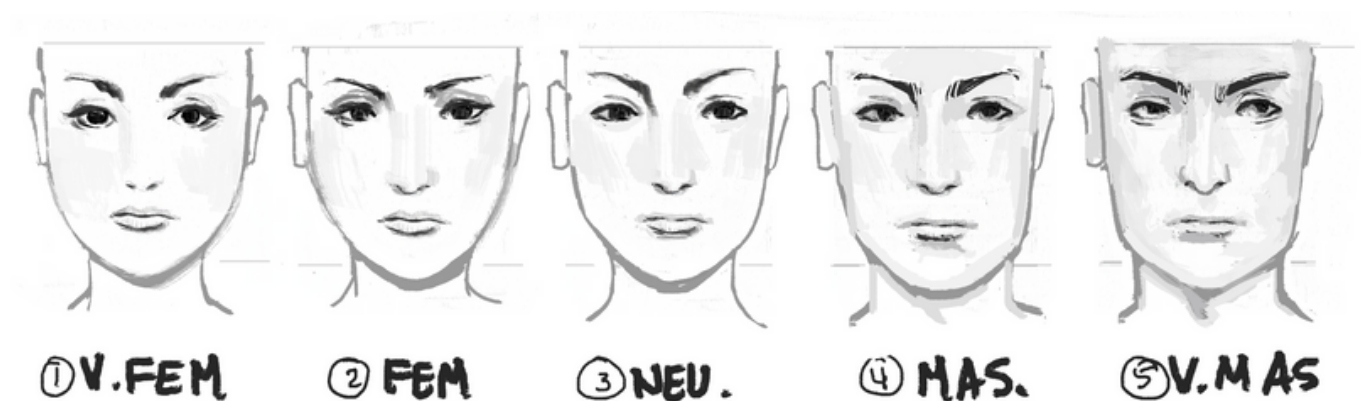
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+17)

36%

Feminine (+6)

10%

Neutral (+0)

2%

Masculine (+21)

32%

Very masculine (+22)

20%

Poll ended Dec 5, 2020 · 59 votes total

[MC #16's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Dec 6, 2020](#)



For these last few portraits: the gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #16 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 (+10)

7%

Calculated (+0)

2%

Perverted (+29)

23%

Chivalrous (+11)

16%

Charming (+11)

5%

Stoic (+5)

5%

Brutal (+25)

37%

Finesse (+2)

5%

Poll ended Dec 10, 2020 · 57 votes total

[Side Story #29: Nishi's Eulogy \(Masami Version\)](#)

[Dec 8, 2020](#)

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



Side Story 29: Nishi's Eulogy (Masami Version)



■■ Tonogasha ■■

"What the fuck happened here?"

Nishi could hardly believe the devastation before her. Tonogasha, the aesthetic town once known for its arts, poetry and outrageous cost of living, was now nothing but sewage and still water. The wreckage looked as bad as it smelled and it reeked of bloated corpses.

The yakuza captain had to wade through hip-high water and past several of such corpses to get further inside the city limits. The newly-homeless welcomed her with wails and pleas for help as some clung to makeshift rafts made from food stalls while others sat atop unsteady rooftops for dear life.

"Like rats on a sinkin' ship," Nishi noted, her scowl becoming a permanent feature. Her mood soured even further—which was saying something, considering what she had been through over the past couple weeks. To put it simply: everyone she knew and cared about in the Yamagata-gumi, her yakuza family, was murdered by a single ronin.

All save for one. "Keiko! Damn it, where are you?!"

Nishi was as desperate as she sounded, continuing to yell and swim through the polluted and murky waters. Keiko was the Yamagata-gumi's princess and sole heir to the criminal enterprise—especially now that Shiroyama was out of the picture. The new wife of the late Lord Yamagata had reorganized the yakuza and not in ways Nishi agreed with.

"That deceptive bitch...turned us into glorified fuckin' opium pushers! I'll be damned if Yama-sama's legacy dies with her!"

A rare stroke of luck came from a man who claimed to play shogi for a living and who had seen Keiko on stage at a kabuki theater. Nishi wasn't sure which claim was more unbelievable, yet she had little choice but to take him at his word and swim over to where the White Peach was.

Or rather, where it once had been. Tattered banners depicting men in far too much makeup drifted about the collapsed ruins of the theater. The walkway for the actors to enter had somehow survived, and Nishi found herself making the same approach so many famed performers had made before her.

The stage itself was nothing but a heap of rubble—at least at first glance. Upon a second, a desk and table could be found as well as other signs of life. Someone was still living there. Nishi held up her spiked club—a kanabō—over her shoulder in case the occupant wasn't friendly.

And they weren't. Though they were more crabby than dangerous.

"That slouch of yours won't do, sister. And quit with the swagger—unless walking like a man twice your size is part of some comedy routine."

Nishi jumped back and swung her club on instinct. From out of the corner of the room—or the remains of one, anyway—approached a mess of a middle-aged woman. Her makeup had run, mixed and dried, revealing an elaborate series of wrinkles beneath. She had a pair of warts, too, under a mess of hair that had more tangles in it than a Jijinto sailor's knot.

"Repulsive, am I?" she asked in a flat tone before taking a seat behind the desk. "That makes two of us. I'm the Headmistress of the White Peach. So tell me: what's a yakuza doing in *my* theater?"

"Keiko. Where is she?" Nishi asked, not in the mood to mince words.

The Headmistress didn't reply right away. Instead, she picked up a paper fan that was riddled with holes and began fanning herself. "Oh yes, *that* girl. When she first came here, I took her as a strumpet who had gotten lost. Whether all that cuteness and ditziness was an act or the real deal...suppose I'll never

know. Not that it matters, either way. She was hired as somebody's maid, if I recall. Ige and her exchanged letters—I'm certain he'd know where you could find her."

"Ige? I'm gonna need more than just his damn name. What does he look like? And how do I know he's not a fuckin' corpse right now?"

"Vulgarity," the Headmistress replied, "is a tool for the lazy and uneducated. Those who fail to convey their meanings through tone and diction...I shall not validate with a response. Ask me again properly and I *may* see fit to give you an answer."

Nishi began to chuckle. It grew into a back-buckling laugh as she stood there beneath the pouring rain in the ruined theater getting lectured on the way she spoke. It reminded her of the past—of years ago, when she went by the name Noriko and lived as a samurai's daughter in Yamato.

"Don't like how I fuckin' talk, huh? Here's what I think about that!"

WHACK

In a single, overhead swing, Nishi demolished the desk with her kanabō. The Headmistress cried out as she frantically tried to pull her lower half out from under it, but the weight was too much. She grimaced in pain as the yakuza asked her once more about Ige.

"If he's alive...he's most likely gone with the refugees heading North to Hokusei. Now help me out from this rubble at once—you accursed, sadistic brute!"

Nishi cracked her neck and then a smile. "Watch your language."

■■■■

"Just my fuckin' luck."

The yakuza cursed as a fresh downpour of bone-chilling rain fell from the sky. She was woefully ill-equipped to be backpacking across the forests of eastern Hyuga. For starters, she didn't have a backpack to begin with: she had little more than the sleeveless haori on her back and a map that would've served her better as a fire starter.

And though she blamed the map and claimed to have been ripped off by the traveler who sold it to her, she knew—deep down—that the navigator herself was the one at fault.

Nishi was painfully out of her element and hopelessly lost. No amount of cursing was going to fix that, but since it made her feel better she found no reason to stop. The reality was, having grown up in Yamato and spending the rest of her life in Jijinto, living in big cities was all she knew. The yakuza was comfortable around people: crowded streets, noisy vendors and alleyway violence.

Nature was another story.

“Bunch of nothin’ in this backwater shithole,” she grumbled as she huddled under a large oak for cover from the rain. She was no closer to finding Ige—and thus, reuniting with Keiko—than she had been a week ago. All that had changed was that she was many times more hungry, cold, and in need of a bath. She had gotten herself a toothache, too, from clenching her jaw so much.

“Woah, Tatsuya. This should be far enough,” said a voice from nearby. Nishi froze in place before peering over the tree she was braced beside. What she saw was the largest horse she’d ever seen: a chestnut-colored stallion with a black mane. It chewed at some nearby stiltgrass while its rider dismounted.

“*A samurai...armored from head to fuckin’ toe,*” Nishi observed as the warrior walked towards a pair of bushes for cover. It was hardly a surprise as to what he intended to do back there. Though the yakuza wasn’t much of a rider, she knew having a horse was better than huffing it on foot, and so she sneaked up to the warhorse and mounted it.

She attempted to, anyway. Nishi didn’t know how to use stirrups, and instead heaved herself over like a sack of potatoes. It took quite the effort—especially to do so in relative silence—though the horse didn’t seem to mind. That grass must’ve been particularly tasty.

“Er, um...go,” Nishi whispered, trying to get Tatsuya to move. “Come on—get going. Giddiup, you stupid horse!”

No amount of slapping, kicking or cursing seemed to affect the warhorse, who seemed—at most—mildly irritated. Desperation began to set in as the samurai finished his dump in the woods, and with a whistle the stallion came trotting over to his position.

Spotting the intruder on his mount, the samurai unsheathed his katana and yelled out an order. Not to Nishi but to the beast she was desperately trying to hang on to. “Ayup, Tatsuya!”

“Whaaa?!” the yakuza cried out as the horse beneath her reared up on its hind legs. Nishi was thrown off, falling backwards from a significant height and landing on the back of her neck. She didn’t blackout but was seeing triple long enough for the samurai to disarm her.

Yet even without her club and in the midst of a concussion, Nishi wasn’t a pushover. She reeled back her fist and whipped it across the samurai’s helmet, hoping to break something.

“Shit! Fuck, that hurts!”

The yakuza succeeded—in a sense—breaking her thumb and forefinger. While it was hardly a worthwhile exchange, the attack seemed to daze the samurai long enough for Nishi to make her escape. She ran as quickly as her legs could take her...which was never a good idea in a forest.

She stubbed her toe on a root and was forced down once more, this time coating her arms and legs in mud. The proud yakuza captain knew she looked absolutely pathetic, though that knowledge only

served to enrage her further. She bit her tongue hard enough to draw blood as she forced herself on her feet once more.

Though she didn't make it one step before a circle of rope fell over her shoulders. Before she realized it was a lasso, it tightened and forced her arms against her sides, straightening her out like a limbless tree. She fell as hard as one, too, eating a facefull of mud.

The yakuza, outraged and disgraced, became like a piranha that had been tossed from a river: she flailed, flopped and snatched at the air with her teeth. Tatsuya was afraid to get close to her, but with a solid kick and some talented rope work, the samurai soon had her tied like a hog fit for roasting.

"Keep the damn horse for all I care! Just untie me before you *really* start pissin' me off!"

The threat was far from effective and went completely ignored as the armored samurai began to inspect her. As usual, it was the tattoos across her arm that warranted the most attention.

"Are you a spy?" the samurai asked, though his voice was muffled behind his visor. "No...even if you aren't, these markings brand you as a criminal nonetheless. I shall present you to Lord Shatao at once."

"Sure, take me to your leader—you talkin' tin can!"

The samurai obliged her by packing her on the back of his horse. As much as the yakuza wanted to fuss and fight, the idea of falling off the horse a second time had little appeal. Nishi's defiance was limited to her mouth, which ran through a series of insults until the two of them made it to an encampment.

A perimeter of freshly-cut logs made for a miniature wall around a collection of tents. Men with armor clanked about as they patrolled, bickered and fought amongst themselves, while their horses were never far away. The evidence of *their* presence littered the ground.

"So you boys are on a little camping trip, is that it? That's real fuckin' cute," Nishi remarked. "Bunch of prickless tin cans rusting away in the rain out in the middle of nowhere."

The yakuza's commentary garnered quite a bit of attention, and by the time her escort had arrived at the largest tent in the group, several dozen samurai were in attendance. Among them was a large, bald and bearded man who wore a sinister grin.

"Well, well, Koha-chan. Didn't think you had it in ya! Your catch ain't much to look at...but she's got quite the mouth on her. Make sure you put it to good use!" he laughed along with the samurai flanking him on either side.

"Stand aside, Captain Goro. This criminal is a yakuza, a horsethief, and a potential spy. I am here to present her to General Shatao-sama for sentencing," the samurai replied. After a stare off between the two, the captain finally yielded and walked away. It was a cue for the crowd to disperse, and once they did, the samurai called 'Koha-chan' picked up Nishi and dragged her inside the tent.

The portable shelter looked even larger inside than it did out—though that was perhaps because it was so sparsely decorated. Aside from a rug, a throne and a tea set, there was little more than the fearsome visage of the samurai general inside.

With a white mane from out of his helmet and a matching jinbaori atop his gleaming, crimson armor, General Shatao was formidable indeed. Though he was more than just that to Nishi. There was something about him that put the yakuza at unease—the exact sort of unease she had felt around Shiroyama, the woman who had taken over the Yamagata-gumi.

After a brief introduction was given, Shatao ordered a pair of his guards to untie her. Nishi thanked them by headbutting the first and kicking the other between the legs, before grabbing one of their katanas and flailing about with it wildly. It took eight men to take her down in the end, and even then, she gave half of them cuts and the other half lingering bruises.

Just when one samurai was about to execute her with a katana raised over her neck, Shatao held up his hand. His soldiers each froze in place as their general rose from his throne. He was making some sort of odd, guttural sound that echoed both through his helmet and the skulls of everyone in attendance.

It was laughter, Nishi realized.

“Your tenacity...it’s impressive,” he said, slowly making his approach. Each footstep seemed to break the earth beneath it. “I have a plan...a tournament...for each village in my domain. You would serve well...in such a competition. You may join it...on your own terms...or on mine. The choice is yours.”

Nishi—to her credit—thought about it for a good, long second before looking up at the looming, imposing samurai and cracking a smile.

“Here’s an even...better idea. How about you...go fuck yourself!”

■ ■ Tanimura Village ■ ■

“Smell that shit? It’s everywhere! One of you prickless clowns better take this damn blindfold off me, or your mother will wish she’d have...”

Nishi had spent the past couple days blindfolded and gagged. Now she was only the former, though the stench of dried horse droppings made her gag all the same. The Shima samurai had dumped her off in a village called Tanimura, where she was—supposedly—supposed to help out the villagers fight in some sort of tournament.

“To hell with that! Once these idiots get these bindings off me, I’m hittin’ the road!”

And that was the idea, anyway, until she heard a familiar accent. One of these clowns—the one that had recently faced off against General Shatao and lost decidedly—was from the South. It reminded her of

someone she swore to kill. Though the chance of this being the same ronin who had slayed her fellow yakuza was...

"How can you speak down to anyone—you're ink-branded by Shiroyama."

...it was more likely than Nishi expected. The yakuza kept quiet and kept her breathing steady as she stood still and waited. No ronin aside from her eternal enemy would know Shiroyama by name. Nishi's chance at revenge for her fellow yakuza was standing just outside arm's reach.

"You two and your playful banter! I got a feelin' you'll be best pals in no time!" said a man called Hatch in a cheerful voice. He was oddly familiar—though Nishi couldn't place him. It didn't matter. All that did was that he got rid of her bindings. "Ah, a Jijinto sailor's knot. Hold still, and I'll get this off you in a jiffy."

Nishi did hold still, until the moment her arms were free. Once they were, she took off the blindfold and came face-to-face with her enemy: the dead-eyed assassin who had ruined her life.

"Ronin scum! For my boys—I'll kill you, you samurai bastard!"

glok* *sching

Nishi wedged her foot into the weakest of the lot—a young man she'd find out later was Ige—and yanked his katana free. She wasn't a swordfighter but she could swing as strong as a man twice her size, and did so against the ronin who was caught completely off-guard.

Wielding nothing more than a wooden training sword, the would-be sword instructor was put on the defensive. One mighty, reckless blow after another sent them spinning, and it was all they could do to brace themselves against Nishi's relentless onslaught.

The yakuza wanted blood and was going to get it: a failed attempt to dodge away from her bull rush ended up with the ronin caught between Nishi's shoulder and the barn door—the latter of which broke open, sending the two of them out of the shed and into the village proper.

Bloodied, dazed, and covered in mud, the ronin could hardly find their footing as a crowd of villagers rushed in. Not to stop them, but to spectate.

"Come look, you goat-shagging rice-pickers!" Nishi yelled, stirring up the crowd. "Not every day you get to watch a samurai die!"

To make well on her claim, she charged forth and swung her katana—though she was holding it upside down. This turned a lethal slash into a non-fatal one instead, as she hit the ronin with the back end of the blade. It broke a rib but little more, and Nishi was far from satisfied.

The faces of all her yakuza companions ran through her mind as she prepared the finishing blow. Though among them, most clear of all was Keiko's. In fact, it was so clear that she could've sworn one

of the women from the crowd looked just like her. And of all the faces in Hyuga, Keiko's—inlaid up in cherry blossoms as it was—wasn't the sort to get lost in the crowd.

"Nini-chan?!" Keiko cried out to her dearest friend.

"Keke-chan!" Nishi replied, her voice shifting into something softer. Almost pleasant. "I thought you were dead! What are you doing here—and what are you wearing?!"

As the two embraced, kissed and cried, the yakuza's adrenaline faded. The battle wasn't over: it was put on a temporary pause. Revenge would have to wait until after the two sisters caught up with each other. While Nishi was the same as she had always been, Keiko had changed—and not just in appearance, though that frilly, foreign black dress with a white apron was certainly a fashion statement.

"With Shiroyama dead, it's time to come back home," Nishi said as the two took a walk around a flooded rice paddy. It wasn't much to look at but not much was out in the country. "We have to get our asses back there before the other gangs start takin' our turf. Damn Shinto monks already picked the place clean...we've got a lot of rebuilding to do."

Keiko had been mostly silent during their stroll thus far—at least when it came to plans for the future. She had spoken at length about her time in Tonogasha and her stint as an actress, and even more of her time as maid to a foreign lord called Roderico. Apparently there had been an entire murder mystery involved, too, though Nishi wasn't interested in that.

"Well, say something, would'ya? You're the princess of the Yamagata-gumi! The future of our family rests on your—"

"Gomenasai," Keiko said, bowing low with her eyes glistening. Several teardrops fell into the mud before she raised her head once more. "It's just...in my time away from Jijinto, though it's been odd and sometimes scary...the experiences I've had, working with others like Ige-kun and Borgia, I...I don't want to be a yakuza anymore, Nini-chan! I don't want to sell drugs and run whorehouses! I want to help people!"

"The hell are you talkin' about?! Being a yakuza ain't just about business and you know that! We're a family, and we're—"

"I'm sick of it!" Keiko yelled. "I wish to be a proper lady someday...an upstanding citizen, who others can look up to and adore! I don't want to be some feared queen of the underworld! The ronin...regardless of what you think of them, they're proof that no matter who I am or where I come from, I can change! We don't have to go back to being criminals, Noriko!"

Being called by her birth name flipped a switch in Nishi. Rage enveloped her as she felt betrayed by the one she loved the most. Keiko was more than just a princess: she was Nishi's one and only friend.

And now she was a foot off the ground and struggling for breath as the yakuza captain raised her by the neck. "Don't you *dare* call me that name! What's this ronin done to you, Keke-chan?! You screwing 'em,

is that it? Fucking the samurai bastard who killed Daisuke and the others?!"

Keiko wouldn't get a chance to respond before Nishi tossed her into the rice paddy. Disgusted, angry and heartbroken, Nishi stomped off not unlike the angry teenager she once was. She felt once more like the daughter of a samurai in a family she didn't belong in.

And the family where she thought she did—the Yamagata-gumi—was gone.

■■■■

There were all manners of ways to handle grief: drinking was certainly one of them. Though it was a far cry from The Canary, Nishi found a reserve of rice wine in one of warehouses. After convincing a farmer to let her have some, she quickly proceeded to get drunk at a record pace.

No one seemed to mind her public intoxication, or if they did, they were too fearful of her to say something. The one exception was a girl in a red silk kimono. She approached the yakuza with a look of concern.

"You're Nishi-san, aren't you? My name is Masami Hashimoto. I wanted to...to apologize on that baka's behalf," she said, bowing deeply. "What they did in Jijinto...I know it was unforgivable, but the yakuza...they were under a spell of Shiroyama's! She is—or rather, was a demon! She was using magic to twist their minds under her control!"

"Magic spells, huh? Am I supposed to believe you're—**hiccup**—some kinda shugenja? Little young to have graduated from the Academy, ain't ya?"

Masami's ears perked up. "Why yes, I did graduate under some unusual circumstances! To be honest...I can't quite recall my graduation well at all...but I do miss my friends very much! But I'm surprised you know of the Academy, Nishi-san. Could it be that a relative of yours is—"

"Forget about it," Nishi said, quick to change the subject. Though she was drunk, she wasn't about to ask about Fumihiko, her younger brother who had gone to the Academy to become a shugenja. That was a different life...one where a samurai sold off his daughter to pay for his son's tuition.

"Is something the matter?" Masami asked, oddly intuitive for a girl her age. She took a seat beside the yakuza, surprising Nishi with her courage. As desperate for someone to talk to as the drunk yakuza was, she wasn't about to shoo her away. Instead, she offered the bottle—which the underaged shugenja was quick to refuse.

"Eh, stuff's no good anyway," Nishi grinned as she downed the rest of it in a single gulp. She tossed the empty bottle into a nearby tree, shattering it, before popping open the cork in a fresh one. "Keke-chan...I mean, Keiko told me about you. Apparently that ronin is your bodyguard, and you're all on some special, secret quest—somethin' like that. Sounds like a bunch of bullshh..."

Nishi wasn't sure why, but she found it hard to curse in the kid's presence. There was something about Masami—a mixture of optimism and innocence, probably—that made her keep her 'bullshit' to herself. The shugenja seemed to have noticed this, too, and began giggling.

"You two are very similar, in a way. Neither of you are as bad a person as you'd like to believe."

The pair continued to chat for a while longer, mostly about the ronin and what it meant to be a bodyguard. It was during one of Masami's many complaints on their companion's behavior that Nishi noticed a cut across the shugenja's chin.

She grabbed her by the collar and brought her in closer to inspect it, letting out a rancid, alcoholic breath into Masami's face. "This sure ain't 'ah paper cut, kiddo," Nishi said, slurring her words. "That's from a katana...did *they* do this to you?! Told ya' that ronin's no good! I'll gut 'em as soon as I sober up!"

"No, please don't! This isn't their fault. It was someone else who...what I mean to say is, please don't mention this cut to them, Nishi-san! It would only upset them, so please—don't say anything!"

The yakuza didn't understand what the shugenja was going on about and being five bottles in on fermented rice water sure didn't help. But she knew enough to hold back a grin and give the kid a promise. Even if it was an empty one.

"Why, your secret's safe with me, kid."

■■■■

"Great job, Nishi," the ronin shouted from across the dojo. "You made Ige cry. Again."

In the yakuza's defense, it didn't take much for the kabuki stagehand to start shedding water. Nishi wasn't entirely sure what she was still doing in Tanimura—'practicing' with this ragtag group of idiots—but keeping Keiko safe through this tournament seemed as good a reason as any to stay.

Venting her frustration on Ige was just an added bonus. The brat had an obvious crush on Keiko that made Nishi want to crush his skull in, so she held nothing back during their training bout.

"Of course I made him cry," Nishi laughed. "I want a challenge, not a bedwetter!"

And while it was true that the yakuza enjoyed challenges, there was something else she enjoyed even more: revenge. Even if it had to be served with a wooden practice sword.

"Hatch and Keiko, pair off," the ronin-turned-teacher ordered. "Kohaku, help Ige. And Nishi...we're having a rematch."

The so-called sensei could hardly finish their sentence before the yakuza barreled towards them. Though her rage didn't burn quite as hot as it had before, Nishi's swings came just as fast. The difference was that—this time—the ronin was ready for her.

“Your swings are too wide and obvious,” they lectured while dodging her strikes. “You need to place that left hand lower, to use it for leverage. This isn’t a club to smack people with.”

“Fuck you!” Nishi yelled and redoubled her swings. Her frustration was evident in her fury. “You weren’t this fast yesterday. Masa-chan gave you some shugenja magic to help, I bet!”

It would seem that the shugenja’s name was the magic word to break the ronin’s composure. Though the glare it earned her was downright frightening, Nishi much preferred fighting *this* version of the ronin: the heartless assassin who killed her men.

Not the one that pretended to be a teacher who cared about their students.

“Stay away from Masami,” the ronin said, backing their words with a knee strike to Nishi’s gut. The yakuza could only grin as any and all illusion of a ‘sparring match’ was thrown out the window.

“I got between a bear and their cub, did I? The kid said you were her bodyguard—pft! Give me a fuckin’ break.”

“Shut up,” the ronin replied, the two clashing once more. Though the swordmaster had better technique and superior foot placement, Nishi’s brute strength made it a fair fight. At least until after what she said next.

“Masa-chan has a cut around her neck, said it was from a katana. Made me promise not to tell you.” Nishi shook her head and yelled, “You’ll be the death of that girl, ronin!”

Something snapped—and it wasn’t just the bokken. Nishi was well accustomed to losing one’s temper, but what the ronin lost in that moment was something far greater. It was as if every ounce of humanity her opponent had vanished in a single moment; in its place was a beast that pounced on her and tore her apart like a starving wolf atop its prey.

Nishi was pinned, helpless and—though she would never admit it—scared. She took a punch to the teeth, to the jaw, and to the eye before Kohaku was able to pull them off her. The diligent samurai brandished their katana and pointed it down at the beast with a look one would give a monster—not a sword instructor.

“Class is dismissed!”

And while it was, Nishi was in no condition—physically or mentally—to leave. Her eye was certain to be blackened and her tooth—the one that had ached her earlier—was hanging on by a painful nerve ending. ‘Sensei’ had taught her something, all right.

“Fuck,” Nishi spat, a wad of blood shooting out of her. “So that’s what you really are. That’s the monster who cut my boys to ribbons!”

The ronin had since been taken away by Hatch and Kohaku, while Keiko had run off in search of medical supplies. Nishi found herself alone with Ige, who had the unenviable role of consoling her.

“Ah, Sensei can be scary sometimes, can’t they?” he said, breaking into a nervous laugh. “But you’re scary, too...I mean, in a good way! No duel on the kabuki stage is half as intense as your battles, Nishi-senpai!”

The yakuza winced—both from the pain of her nearly-dislodged tooth and from being called this brat’s ‘senpai’. As if *she* was his upperclassman. “Look, Ige. Take your pity party somewhere else. So I got my ass beat, so what? Shit happens. This ain’t the White Peach.”

Mentioning the kabuki theater had turned out to be a mistake as it prompted Ige to recount a story of hardship and overcoming obstacles. It was as sappy as it sounded.

“...the financial situation being as dire as it was, all us stagehands, the staff—even the actors and actresses, too—had to work late nights making masks to help sell tickets for the performance. None of us could do it alone, so we had to work together like a family in order to save the theater. When it was time for...ah, I’m sorry, I’ve gone on for awhile, haven’t I? But us students...in this tournament, we’re sort of like a family too, aren’t we?”

“The hell do you think you know about family?!” Nishi yelled, her patience well past its limit. “I’m the captain of the Yamagata-gumi, you prickless brat, or at least I was until your precious Sensei fuckin’ slaughtered ‘em! *They* were my family—and they ain’t comin’ back. And let me tell you somethin’ about yakuza skins.”

Nishi proceeded to strip, causing Ige to blush and look away in embarrassment. The yakuza grabbed him by the hair and forced him to look. “Plenty of collectors out there would pay a handsome bit of ryō to have this up on their mantle,” she said, showing off a dragon in a field of cherry blossoms. It was a beautiful tattoo that must’ve taken weeks to get finished.

“The corpses of each of my brothers...I had to burn ‘em myself—had to rent out a whole fuckin’ wagon to get them out of the city. Then I had make a fuckin’ fire and turn ‘em in to ashes—in the pouring rain! So don’t you tell me about sacrifices for your family! And don’t you *dare* pretend that I’m part of yours!”

Ige gulped and apologized fiercely, tears welling within his eyes. Keiko arrived just in time to misinterpret the scene, and scolded Nishi for bullying the stagehand.

“Whatever,” Nishi said, spitting out a second wad of blood. This time, her tooth came out. She picked it up and clenched it within her fist. “Mark my words: this whole tournament’s a mess. And I ain’t got no intention of getting roped up into it. You hear me?”

■■■■

“Quit jerkin’ around and untie me, you prickless rice pluckers! Chikushō!”

Nishi was at the bottom of a dogpile consisting of her fellow classmates: Hatch, Keiko and Ige to be precise. They were tied up around the ankles in some half-witted training exercise courtesy of their interim instructor, Kohaku. The drill was supposed to help with their teamwork—which was sorely lacking.

Though that wasn't the only thing that was sore. Bruises aside, everyone's feelings were raw after what had happened last night to Kuniko. The quintessential village girl with a gentle smile and an even softer demeanor...Nishi had never liked her, yet she wouldn't wish what that young woman went through upon her greatest foe.

The Shima samurai were bastards who were going to pay for their crime: Captain Goro chief among them. This had become personal, not just to Nishi but to everyone in Tanimura. Hatch was the first one up from the pile, the most serious and hellbent to improve. His resolve—even though his hands were cut to shreds and his katana had to be tied to his palms—was a source of inspiration to the rest of them.

That didn't mean Nishi had to enjoy the lesson, though. Especially when the farmers started hitting her with sticks each time she fell.

"Hit me again and I'll shove that stick right up your ass! Gah!" Nishi swung at one of the men with all of her might. The momentum took the group down once more, this time prompting Kohaku to call for a pause in training.

"Not out of mercy," Nishi observed as the prudish samurai headed off on a stroll with the ronin. He was all but skipping even under all that armor. *"Got it bad for the teacher, huh? Talk about boardin' a sinking ship."*

The yakuza shook her head as the farmers undid the knots around her ankles, thanking them with a foot to the face. Masami arrived with a set of tea and a forced smile. She exchanged pleasantries and her stomach did, too—it was growling.

Nishi's followed suit, as did Hatch and Ige's. Everyone was hungry. The tournament was tomorrow and yet none of them could take their minds off food. The shugenja gave a sly, smug look when Nishi said as much, which prompted the yakuza to interrogate her further.

Turned out Masami was weak to tickles.

"Ah-haha, ah—okay, okay! But you mustn't mention this to that baka. Promise, this time!" the shugenja said, suddenly becoming stern and outstretching her pinky finger. As silly as such a promise was, Nishi was proven to be untrustworthy and was compelled to do likewise.

Once the two shook fingers, Masami revealed that the farmers had a plan in the works for an early, overnight harvest, complete with a party the next morning to send off their heroes. Apparently, she, Kuniko, Borgia and Ige had been conspiring about this idea in secret for the past several days. Now, after what had happened to the farmer's daughter, raising each other's spirits was more important than ever.

“So this party you’re puttin’ on...” Nishi said, cracking her neck, “...anything I can do to help?”

■■■■

The yakuza captain may have never regretted anything more than offering to help. Instead of putting up tables or streamers—you know, like what you did for any normal sort of celebration—she had been tasked with helping the farmers for the harvest. She gained both a newfound respect and a crack in her back from bending over and cutting stalks for the better part of a night.

But to be honest, Nishi appreciated a chance to get her mind off the tournament. She wouldn’t have been able to sleep, anyway, not with her nerves on end as they were. While she was no stranger to combat, she had grown attached to her fellow students all the same.

She had gotten closer to the farmers as well—at least in a physical sense, as all one-hundred and fifty-three occupants of Tanimura were crammed shoulder-to-shoulder into the barn-turned-dining hall. Ige had gone to great lengths to fashion it into a kabuki stage, with production values far beyond anything the yakuza expected.

PON

PON* *PON* *PON

The stagehand thumped a makeshift drum before shouting in a booming voice fit for theater.

“Introducing...the hope and pride of Tanimura—the students of the Ronin School of Swordfighting!”

The door to the front of the shed was opened, and behind it was a very sleep-deprived and bewildered sensei. The ronin was as rattled as a skeleton—and was beginning to look like one, too, though that issue was soon to be resolved. On the table in front of the farmers were bowls stacked with rice, freshly harvested, heated, and smelling like heaven.

Even if they were a tad unripened, it was going to be the best rice Nishi and the rest of the ‘Tanimura Champions’ had ever eaten.

Though before they dug in, there was a ritual to perform. Nishi put on her tailor-made haori jacket with the team’s name stitched on the back of it, the cloth dyed in an indigo shade of blue. The tailor in this case was none other than Kuniko who looked upon the champions with eyes red from fresh tears on a face rigid with determination.

Her presence was a reminder of what they were fighting for.

Each student took turns being introduced and paraded around like a hero. Ige’s skills in kabuki were on full display as he embellished each of them—as if they were renowned samurai from the Golden Era. Even Nishi got an applause, albeit a muted one.

When it was her turn to speak to ‘Sensei’, however, her words were far from flattering.

“Don’t get it twisted, ronin. I’m only here for the rice,” she said, before grabbing the sword instructor by the collar and bringing them in close. Her next words were meant for them and them alone. “I’ll make this clear. There’s only two fucked-up killers on this team, and *they’re looking at each other.*”

The ronin nodded. “Then let’s do what we do best.”

■■■■

“Sensei,” Ige asked, “is...that them?”

The kabuki stagehand’s uncertainty was warranted as the Tanimura Champions watched a group of old men wielding pitchforks wobble up to the fighting platform. Hatch thought it was a joke and said as much, though Nishi had seen enough dead men walking to recognize the look on their faces.

These old geezers had accepted death.

“Our village is Aokimura, up the river from yours and a week’s walk from...ah, I suppose it doesn’t matter,” said their leader. He wore a regretful, wistful smile. “We can’t afford to lose our young men, and we refuse to let our children die in our place. All we ask is that you remember us as sacrifices for them.”

The ronin nodded to acknowledge their nobility—if not in standing, then in character—and unsheathed their sword. That was when Nishi realized something was off: the sword instructor’s hands were shaking while their eyes...

“..they’ve gone soft. Somethin’ ain’t right here,” Nishi thought, feeling a fresh sense of unease. That sensation would only grow as the ronin failed to execute their opponent; instead of a quick, clean kill, their right arm had gone numb at the last possible second. They tripped backwards much to the audience’s entertainment, while the farmer twisted about on floor like a worm squirming in its own blood.

“Nishi!” the ronin yelled, and it was all they had to say for the yakuza to swoop in and send her spiked club across the farmer’s jaw. Though his brains were scattered across the combat arena, at least he was out of his misery.

Her next target was her so-called sensei, who she grabbed by the haori and pulled in forehead-to-forehead. “Where the *hell* is the ronin who killed all my boys in Jijinto? We sure could use ‘em right now!”

“I...I just couldn’t! My arm, it wouldn’t move, I—”

Nishi tossed them to the ground. She couldn’t stand weakness, and seeing it in the face of the one who had single-handedly ended the Yamagata-gumi...it shamed their memory. She didn’t know what was wrong with the ronin—only that the monster inside them was nowhere to be found.

“This is pathetic!” Shatao roared. He wasn’t referring to them, but to the farmers who were kneeling in prayer for their fallen comrade. “If you do not fight, Aokimura, I will salt your fields...and drench them

with blood!”

The battle ensued even though it could hardly be considered one. Of the few highlights was Keiko’s spear technique—in particular, her throwing accuracy. Her toss had landed...well beneath the navel of one of the farmers. It prompted a roar of laughter from the crowd who watched the old man flail about with a lance where his crotch ought to be.

The rest of the fight was just as vulgar. While Nishi, Keiko and Kohaku were hardened against bloodshed, the same couldn’t be said for Hatch and Ige. The former knocked his opponent out with an elbow to the neck—but the crowd wanted more. General Shatao ordered that he execute the farmer.

He hesitated. At least until the ronin nodded their head.

Nishi didn’t have to ask whether or not that was the first man Hatch had killed: the evidence was on his face. He looked dead inside and out, with only thoughts of Kuniko to keep him on his feet. No doubt the scenes of that night were replaying through his head over and over. Nishi could sympathize; that fight at the yakuza mansion was never far from her mind.

As if the ordeal wasn’t traumatizing enough, when there was just one farmer remaining, Shatao made it even worse.

“The boy with the Shinsengumi blade. He must fight alone...or Tanimura is disqualified!”

Every samurai in the Shima barracks began to chant for Ige—in mockery more so than encouragement. The young man was shaking in his sandals, needing a few private words from his teacher to settle him down. Nishi wasn’t sure what advice the ronin gave, but sure enough, the yakuza stagehand performed for all to see.

“AhhhhH!”

And what a bloody performance it was. It was a clumsy series of strikes paired with howling screams as if Ige himself was the one being stricken. Any and all semblance of proper form and technique was thrown out the window as the young man’s fear transformed into a furious barrage of slashes.

His opponent was mauled; cut a hundred different ways, he could do nothing but spout blood all over his assailant. The unfortunate farmer likely died from blood loss before any fatal strike had landed. Nishi and Kohaku shared a glance and a nod before pulling Ige off him.

The kabuki stagehand-turned-killer was still drunk on adrenaline and high on bloodlust, and rammed his head into Nishi to get himself free. Ige looked around in search of another opponent, and when there wasn’t any, he hurried over to his sensei and shouted with glee.

“Hah, Sensei! I did it! And it was so easy! Haha!”

■■■■

Handling grief with liquor was a recurring theme with Nishi, who found that the samurai stationed at the base had a far better supply of the stuff than the farmers in Tanimura had. It also helped that the samurai took to her as some sort of celebrity—they actually seemed to enjoy it when she cursed at them, so she obliged them all they wanted so long as they kept the saké flowing.

She had the blood of several farmers on her hands, both literally and figuratively. Nishi hadn't expected to be so affected by off-ing a few old geezers, but she was. Watching the naive and gentle stagehand devolve into a psychotic murderer sure didn't help her mood, either.

"Takes after his sensei all too well," she thought, as she downed another gulp. And as if thinking about them was enough to summon them, the ronin appeared in her presence. They were hardly a sight for sore eyes...but even still, it was a relief to see them all the same.

"Nice of ya' to join my fan club, Sensei! You'll fit right in with the—**hic**—rest of these pathetic virgins!" Nishi downed a swig and threw the bottle. "Even Ige-kun popped a cherry back there. He's a real—**hic**—man now!"

"How about you stop being lewd and tell me what you actually mean. And don't waste my time pretending to be drunk."

Nishi cursed under her breath. It took an alcoholic to know one, and—sure enough—with the yakuza's tolerance it would take a lot more than this for her to be acting so tipsy. With a shrug and a sigh, she decided to drop the act.

"All right, everyone fuck off!" she yelled, then had to do so once more before the crowd dispersed. It was rather odd for the samurai to be taking orders from an outsider—let alone a yakuza—but that was the sort of presence Nishi had.

After they were gone, she flipped her teacher a rude gesture with her finger. "I ain't talking about pricks getting wet, ronin. I'm talking about hands getting bloody—you know, *killing*. Somethin' I thought you were good at!"

Nishi's intention was to rile the ronin up. In that regard, her words backfired. The ex-assassin slumped and lowered their head. Regret was laced in their every word.

"I'm sorry I got you into this mess."

"Pft! I stepped in this shit myself, but you can be damn sure I'll ram my foot into any bastard who gets in my way. That includes a useless sensei like you!" Nishi spat, again trying to provoke her sword instructor. Anything sort of emotion would be an improvement from the mopey sap standing in front of her.

"I've lost the Jigoku Ittō-ryū, my sensei's style. Ever since I was young, I relied upon that inhuman power. It was the source of my strength and skill, and without it, I—"

"Your sob story got an ending?" Nishi yawned. "I don't give a shit-and-a-half about your style—hah! You sound like a woman off looking for clothes! *Style*, give me a break!"

Nishi stepped forward and grabbed the ronin by the collar. "Here's your *style*! It's a smelly old haori that's a size too big for you! It looks like crap, but you can be damn sure that freckled broad back home put her heart into the stitches, you, you..."

For the first time in her life, the yakuza hadn't any words to say. She wouldn't dare let any out for fear of sobs coming out along with them. Her eyes began to burn as she thought about Kuniko and the other farmers, too. Decent, suffering folk who put on a party on their behalf. Who celebrated *her*—a yakuza who had considered herself alone in the world.

But she wasn't alone. She was fighting alongside those who cared about her. And hell—even if they didn't, they *needed* her. And that...that was more than Nishi thought she would ever have, after burning her comrades and watching their faces melt upon the pyre. She had to be strong, and she'd be damned if this ronin—of all people—would see her cry.

"Thanks, Nishi."

■■■■

The fight against General Shatao's best samurai was the worst battle Nishi had ever been a part of. There were a multitude of reasons for this, all of which blurred into a single, waking nightmare. Getting riddled with arrows—including one that had lodged itself into her leg—amidst the thickest fog the yakuza had ever seen...all while hearing the disembodied screams of her comrades...it was too much.

And as for the finale: the fog had lifted just in time for them all to watch Ige plead for his life. He got no mercy from Captain Goro, who decapitated him while the boy cried for his sensei in his final breath.

It was enough to haunt Nishi for the rest of her life. However long that would be, she didn't know, as she stood bruised and battered in the samurai general's throne room. It wasn't at all like Shiroyama's—there wasn't a golden saké fountain, for starters—but the feeling of dread was just the same.

Keiko was in the infirmary, with wounds Nishi could only pray she'd recover from. The remaining 'Tanimura Champions' hardly fared any better: Hatch struggled to stay on his feet as his hands bled along with the large, nasty cut across his face. It was a wound given to him not by any samurai, but a ronin. *The* ronin, who stood like a specter—an empty husk—over Kohaku's body.

The proud samurai wasn't dead, but he was certainly humbled as his sensei kicked him relentlessly, sparing him not an ounce of mercy. This was all done at the behest of General Shatao, who looked upon his new subjects while gurgling out the same, guttural laughter Nishi had heard when they first met.

The only one who dared to stop them was a girl in a red silk kimono. Masami had entered the competition in disguise as Borgia thanks to a magical spell. But now, all illusions were shattered—

including the shugenja's relationship with her bodyguard.

"S-stop this immediately, you baka! That's an order! I—" she was cut short when her once-protector shoved her away, hard enough to reel her backwards into a fall. It didn't sting nearly as much as the betrayal did.

When the ronin spoke, their words were colder than ice. "I don't...take orders from a kid."

"You heartless bastard, how dare you hurt Masa-chan!" Nishi yelled and charged at the ronin, forgetting about the arrow wound to her leg. She collapsed in a furious yet pathetic heap, at the mercy of the one who she dared hope was worthy of redemption.

"You should've...died in Jijinto," they replied, as if to prove her wrong.

That was the last Nishi could hear and all she could think before a searing pain made her mind go blank in agony. The ronin had plunged the scabbard of their katana into her arrow wound, adding insult to injury. The yakuza was in such pain that she couldn't even begin to form the right curses—let alone shout them.

What happened next, Nishi only knew from hearing about it from the others afterwards. Apparently, Shatao was so pleased at the ronin's obedience that he summoned them forward to kneel before him. He even took off his helmet, revealing some sort of mutation involving a bird's beak and feathers.

To be honest, Nishi thought they had all gone crazy, but the result was the same regardless of her opinion: Shatao was dead, betrayed by the ultimate betrayer. Victory was theirs...if you stretched the definition of 'victory' far enough. Hatch now wore the armor and name of the deceased general while a wounded Kohaku stood at his side.

The yakuza wouldn't forget the look on the ronin's face as they passed her by, nor would she forgive them for all they had done. Nishi had every right and reason to hate them—to despise them, and yet at that moment she saw in those eyes a look she had so often seen in herself.

"You're tryin' real hard to be the villain here, aren't ya? Well...consider it a fuckin' success!"

■■■■

When the group returned to Tanimura the day after, the reception was as mixed as the group itself. Hatch and Kohaku had to stay behind while Keiko remained bed-ridden at the infirmary to heal. Their sensei was gone—which meant only Nishi was there to represent the Tanimura Champions.

Though that wasn't entirely true.

"Ige...didya' want one last look at this shithole you helped save?" Nishi asked to the hemp sack she was holding. It didn't contain a pound of potatoes but the head of the fallen champion. "No, wouldn't want to scare them, would ya? Considerate to a fuckin' fault, I swear."

“What the fuck happened here?”

Nishi could hardly believe the devastation before her. Tonogasha, the aesthetic town once known for its arts, poetry and outrageous cost of living, was now nothing but sewage and still water. The wreckage looked as bad as it smelled and it reeked of bloated corpses.

The yakuza captain had to wade through hip-high water and past several of such corpses to get further inside the city limits. The newly-homeless welcomed her with wails and pleas for help as some clung to makeshift rafts made from food stalls while others sat atop unsteady rooftops for dear life.

“Like rats on a sinkin’ ship,” Nishi noted, her scowl becoming a permanent feature. Her mood soured even further—which was saying something, considering what she had been through over the past couple weeks. To put it simply: everyone she knew and cared about in the Yamagata-gumi, her yakuza family, was murdered by a single ronin.

All save for one. “Keiko! Damn it, where are you?!”

Nishi was as desperate as she sounded, continuing to yell and swim through the polluted and murky waters. Keiko was the Yamagata-gumi’s princess and sole heir to the criminal enterprise—especially now that Shiroyama was out of the picture. The new wife of the late Lord Yamagata had reorganized the yakuza and not in ways Nishi agreed with.

“That deceptive bitch...turned us into glorified fuckin’ opium pushers! I’ll be damned if Yama-sama’s legacy dies with her!”

A rare stroke of luck came from a man who claimed to play shogi for a living and who had seen Keiko on stage at a kabuki theater. Nishi wasn’t sure which claim was more unbelievable, yet she had little choice but to take him at his word and swim over to where the White Peach was.

Or rather, where it once had been. Tattered banners depicting men in far too much makeup drifted about the collapsed ruins of the theater. The walkway for the actors to enter had somehow survived, and Nishi found herself making the same approach so many famed performers had made before her.

The stage itself was nothing but a heap of rubble—at least at first glance. Upon a second, a desk and table could be found as well as other signs of life. Someone was still living there. Nishi held up her spiked club—a kanabō—over her shoulder in case the occupant wasn’t friendly.

And they weren’t. Though they were more crabby than dangerous.

“That slouch of yours won’t do, sister. And quit with the swagger—unless walking like a man twice your size is part of some comedy routine.”

Nishi jumped back and swung her club on instinct. From out of the corner of the room—or the remains of one, anyway—approached a mess of a middle-aged woman. Her makeup had run, mixed and dried, revealing an elaborate series of wrinkles beneath. She had a pair of warts, too, under a mess of hair that had more tangles in it than a Jijinto sailor's knot.

"Repulsive, am I?" she asked in a flat tone before taking a seat behind the desk. "That makes two of us. I'm the Headmistress of the White Peach. So tell me: what's a yakuza doing in *my* theater?"

"Keiko. Where is she?" Nishi asked, not in the mood to mince words.

The Headmistress didn't reply right away. Instead, she picked up a paper fan that was riddled with holes and began fanning herself. "Oh yes, *that* girl. When she first came here, I took her as a strumpet who had gotten lost. Whether all that cuteness and ditziness was an act or the real deal...suppose I'll never know. Not that it matters, either way. She was hired as somebody's maid, if I recall. Ige and her exchanged letters—I'm certain he'd know where you could find her."

"Ige? I'm gonna need more than just his damn name. What does he look like? And how do I know he's not a fuckin' corpse right now?"

"Vulgarity," the Headmistress replied, "is a tool for the lazy and uneducated. Those who fail to convey their meanings through tone and diction...I shall not validate with a response. Ask me again properly and I *may* see fit to give you an answer."

Nishi began to chuckle. It grew into a back-buckling laugh as she stood there beneath the pouring rain in the ruined theater getting lectured on the way she spoke. It reminded her of the past—of years ago, when she went by the name Noriko and lived as a samurai's daughter in Yamato.

"Don't like how I fuckin' talk, huh? Here's what I think about that!"

WHACK

In a single, overhead swing, Nishi demolished the desk with her kanabō. The Headmistress cried out as she frantically tried to pull her lower half out from under it, but the weight was too much. She grimaced in pain as the yakuza asked her once more about Ige.

"If he's alive...he's most likely gone with the refugees heading North to Hokusei. Now help me out from this rubble at once—you accursed, sadistic brute!"

Nishi cracked her neck and then a smile. "Watch your language."

■■■■

"Just my fuckin' luck."

The yakuza cursed as a fresh downpour of bone-chilling rain fell from the sky. She was woefully ill-equipped to be backpacking across the forests of eastern Hyuga. For starters, she didn't have a backpack to begin with: she had little more than the sleeveless haori on her back and a map that would've served her better as a fire starter.

And though she blamed the map and claimed to have been ripped off by the traveler who sold it to her, she knew—deep down—that the navigator herself was the one at fault.

Nishi was painfully out of her element and hopelessly lost. No amount of cursing was going to fix that, but since it made her feel better she found no reason to stop. The reality was, having grown up in Yamato and spending the rest of her life in Jijinto, living in big cities was all she knew. The yakuza was comfortable around people: crowded streets, noisy vendors and alleyway violence.

Nature was another story.

"Bunch of nothin' in this backwater shithole," she grumbled as she huddled under a large oak for cover from the rain. She was no closer to finding Ige—and thus, reuniting with Keiko—than she had been a week ago. All that had changed was that she was many times more hungry, cold, and in need of a bath. She had gotten herself a toothache, too, from clenching her jaw so much.

"Woah, Tatsuya. This should be far enough," said a voice from nearby. Nishi froze in place before peering over the tree she was braced beside. What she saw was the largest horse she'd ever seen: a chestnut-colored stallion with a black mane. It chewed at some nearby stiltgrass while its rider dismounted.

"*A samurai...armored from head to fuckin' toe,*" Nishi observed as the warrior walked towards a pair of bushes for cover. It was hardly a surprise as to what he intended to do back there. Though the yakuza wasn't much of a rider, she knew having a horse was better than huffing it on foot, and so she sneaked up to the warhorse and mounted it.

She attempted to, anyway. Nishi didn't know how to use stirrups, and instead heaved herself over like a sack of potatoes. It took quite the effort—especially to do so in relative silence—though the horse didn't seem to mind. That grass must've been particularly tasty.

"Er, um...go," Nishi whispered, trying to get Tatsuya to move. "Come on—get going. Giddiup, you stupid horse!"

No amount of slapping, kicking or cursing seemed to affect the warhorse, who seemed—at most—mildly irritated. Desperation began to set in as the samurai finished his dump in the woods, and with a whistle the stallion came trotting over to his position.

Spotting the intruder on his mount, the samurai unsheathed his katana and yelled out an order. Not to Nishi but to the beast she was desperately trying to hang on to. "Ayup, Tatsuya!"

“Whaaa?!” the yakuza cried out as the horse beneath her reared up on its hind legs. Nishi was thrown off, falling backwards from a significant height and landing on the back of her neck. She didn’t blackout but was seeing triple long enough for the samurai to disarm her.

Yet even without her club and in the midst of a concussion, Nishi wasn’t a pushover. She reeled back her fist and whipped it across the samurai’s helmet, hoping to break something.

“Shit! Fuck, that hurts!”

The yakuza succeeded—in a sense—breaking her thumb and forefinger. While it was hardly a worthwhile exchange, the attack seemed to daze the samurai long enough for Nishi to make her escape. She ran as quickly as her legs could take her...which was never a good idea in a forest.

She stubbed her toe on a root and was forced down once more, this time coating her arms and legs in mud. The proud yakuza captain knew she looked absolutely pathetic, though that knowledge only served to enrage her further. She bit her tongue hard enough to draw blood as she forced herself on her feet once more.

Though she didn’t make it one step before a circle of rope fell over her shoulders. Before she realized it was a lasso, it tightened and forced her arms against her sides, straightening her out like a limbless tree. She fell as hard as one, too, eating a facefull of mud.

The yakuza, outraged and disgraced, became like a piranha that had been tossed from a river: she flailed, flopped and snatched at the air with her teeth. Tatsuya was afraid to get close to her, but with a solid kick and some talented rope work, the samurai soon had her tied like a hog fit for roasting.

“Keep the damn horse for all I care! Just untie me before you *really* start pissin’ me off!”

The threat was far from effective and went completely ignored as the armored samurai began to inspect her. As usual, it was the tattoos across her arm that warranted the most attention.

“Are you a spy?” the samurai asked, though his voice was muffled behind his visor. “No...even if you aren’t, these markings brand you as a criminal nonetheless. I shall present you to Lord Shatao at once.”

“Sure, take me to your leader—you talkin’ tin can!”

The samurai obliged her by packing her on the back of his horse. As much as the yakuza wanted to fuss and fight, the idea of falling off the horse a second time had little appeal. Nishi’s defiance was limited to her mouth, which ran through a series of insults until the two of them made it to an encampment.

A perimeter of freshly-cut logs made for a miniature wall around a collection of tents. Men with armor clanked about as they patrolled, bickered and fought amongst themselves, while their horses were never far away. The evidence of *their* presence littered the ground.

"So you boys are on a little camping trip, is that it? That's real fuckin' cute," Nishi remarked. "Bunch of prickless tin cans rusting away in the rain out in the middle of nowhere."

The yakuza's commentary garnered quite a bit of attention, and by the time her escort had arrived at the largest tent in the group, several dozen samurai were in attendance. Among them was a large, bald and bearded man who wore a sinister grin.

"Well, well, Koha-chan. Didn't think you had it in ya! Your catch ain't much to look at...but she's got quite the mouth on her. Make sure you put it to good use!" he laughed along with the samurai flanking him on either side.

"Stand aside, Captain Goro. This criminal is a yakuza, a horsethief, and a potential spy. I am here to present her to General Shatao-sama for sentencing," the samurai replied. After a stare off between the two, the captain finally yielded and walked away. It was a cue for the crowd to disperse, and once they did, the samurai called 'Koha-chan' picked up Nishi and dragged her inside the tent.

The portable shelter looked even larger inside than it did out—though that was perhaps because it was so sparsely decorated. Aside from a rug, a throne and a tea set, there was little more than the fearsome visage of the samurai general inside.

With a white mane from out of his helmet and a matching jinbaori atop his gleaming, crimson armor, General Shatao was formidable indeed. Though he was more than just that to Nishi. There was something about him that put the yakuza at unease—the exact sort of unease she had felt around Shiroyama, the woman who had taken over the Yamagata-gumi.

After a brief introduction was given, Shatao ordered a pair of his guards to untie her. Nishi thanked them by headbutting the first and kicking the other between the legs, before grabbing one of their katanas and flailing about with it wildly. It took eight men to take her down in the end, and even then, she gave half of them cuts and the other half lingering bruises.

Just when one samurai was about to execute her with a katana raised over her neck, Shatao held up his hand. His soldiers each froze in place as their general rose from his throne. He was making some sort of odd, guttural sound that echoed both through his helmet and the skulls of everyone in attendance.

It was laughter, Nishi realized.

"Your tenacity...it's impressive," he said, slowly making his approach. Each footstep seemed to break the earth beneath it. "I have a plan...a tournament...for each village in my domain. You would serve well...in such a competition. You may join it...on your own terms...or on mine. The choice is yours."

Nishi—to her credit—thought about it for a good, long second before looking up at the looming, imposing samurai and cracking a smile.

"Here's an even...better idea. How about you...go fuck yourself!"

■■ Tanimura Village ■■

“Smell that shit? It’s everywhere! One of you prickless clowns better take this damn blindfold off me, or your mother will wish she’d have...”

Nishi had spent the past couple days blindfolded and gagged. Now she was only the former, though the stench of dried horse droppings made her gag all the same. The Shima samurai had dumped her off in a village called Tanimura, where she was—supposedly—supposed to help out the villagers fight in some sort of tournament.

“To hell with that! Once these idiots get these bindings off me, I’m hittin’ the road!”

And that was the idea, anyway, until she heard a familiar accent. One of these clowns—the one that had recently faced off against General Shatao and lost decidedly—was from the South. It reminded her of someone she swore to kill. Though the chance of this being the same ronin who had slayed her fellow yakuza was...

“How can you speak down to anyone—you’re ink-branded by Shiroyama.”

...it was more likely than Nishi expected. The yakuza kept quiet and kept her breathing steady as she stood still and waited. No ronin aside from her eternal enemy would know Shiroyama by name. Nishi’s chance at revenge for her fellow yakuza was standing just outside arm’s reach.

“You two and your playful banter! I got a feelin’ you’ll be best pals in no time!” said a man called Hatch in a cheerful voice. He was oddly familiar—though Nishi couldn’t place him. It didn’t matter. All that did was that he got rid of her bindings. “Ah, a Jijinto sailor’s knot. Hold still, and I’ll get this off you in a jiffy.”

Nishi did hold still, until the moment her arms were free. Once they were, she took off the blindfold and came face-to-face with her enemy: the dead-eyed assassin who had ruined her life.

“Ronin scum! For my boys—I’ll kill you, you samurai bastard!”

glok* *sching

Nishi wedged her foot into the weakest of the lot—a young man she’d find out later was Ige—and yanked his katana free. She wasn’t a swordfighter but she could swing as strong as a man twice her size, and did so against the ronin who was caught completely off-guard.

Wielding nothing more than a wooden training sword, the would-be sword instructor was put on the defensive. One mighty, reckless blow after another sent them spinning, and it was all they could do to brace themselves against Nishi’s relentless onslaught.

The yakuza wanted blood and was going to get it: a failed attempt to dodge away from her bull rush ended up with the ronin caught between Nishi’s shoulder and the barn door—the latter of which broke open, sending the two of them out of the shed and into the village proper.

Bloodied, dazed, and covered in mud, the ronin could hardly find their footing as a crowd of villagers rushed in. Not to stop them, but to spectate.

“Come look, you goat-shagging rice-pickers!” Nishi yelled, stirring up the crowd. “Not every day you get to watch a samurai die!”

To make well on her claim, she charged forth and swung her katana—though she was holding it upside down. This turned a lethal slash into a non-fatal one instead, as she hit the ronin with the back end of the blade. It broke a rib but little more, and Nishi was far from satisfied.

The faces of all her yakuza companions ran through her mind as she prepared the finishing blow. Though among them, most clear of all was Keiko’s. In fact, it was so clear that she could’ve sworn one of the women from the crowd looked just like her. And of all the faces in Hyuga, Keiko’s—inked up in cherry blossoms as it was—wasn’t the sort to get lost in the crowd.

“Nini-chan?!” Keiko cried out to her dearest friend.

“Keke-chan!” Nishi replied, her voice shifting into something softer. Almost pleasant. “I thought you were dead! What are you doing here—and what are you wearing?!”

As the two embraced, kissed and cried, the yakuza’s adrenaline faded. The battle wasn’t over: it was put on a temporary pause. Revenge would have to wait until after the two sisters caught up with each other. While Nishi was the same as she had always been, Keiko had changed—and not just in appearance, though that frilly, foreign black dress with a white apron was certainly a fashion statement.

“With Shiroyama dead, it’s time to come back home,” Nishi said as the two took a walk around a flooded rice paddy. It wasn’t much to look at but not much was out in the country. “We have to get our asses back there before the other gangs start takin’ our turf. Damn Shinto monks already picked the place clean...we’ve got a lot of rebuilding to do.”

Keiko had been mostly silent during their stroll thus far—at least when it came to plans for the future. She had spoken at length about her time in Tonogasha and her stint as an actress, and even more of her time as maid to a foreign lord called Roderico. Apparently there had been an entire murder mystery involved, too, though Nishi wasn’t interested in that.

“Well, say something, would’ya? You’re the princess of the Yamagata-gumi! The future of our family rests on your—”

“Gomenasai,” Keiko said, bowing low with her eyes glistening. Several teardrops fell into the mud before she raised her head once more. “It’s just...in my time away from Jijinto, though it’s been odd and sometimes scary...the experiences I’ve had, working with others like Ige-kun and Borgia, I...I don’t want to be a yakuza anymore, Nini-chan! I don’t want to sell drugs and run whorehouses! I want to help people!”

"The hell are you talkin' about?! Being a yakuza ain't just about business and you know that! We're a family, and we're—"

"I'm sick of it!" Keiko yelled. "I wish to be a proper lady someday...an upstanding citizen, who others can look up to and adore! I don't want to be some feared queen of the underworld! The ronin...regardless of what you think of them, they're proof that no matter who I am or where I come from, I can change! We don't have to go back to being criminals, Noriko!"

Being called by her birth name flipped a switch in Nishi. Rage enveloped her as she felt betrayed by the one she loved the most. Keiko was more than just a princess: she was Nishi's one and only friend.

And now she was a foot off the ground and struggling for breath as the yakuza captain raised her by the neck. "Don't you *dare* call me that name! What's this ronin done to you, Keke-chan?! You screwing 'em, is that it? Fucking the samurai bastard who killed Daisuke and the others?!"

Keiko wouldn't get a chance to respond before Nishi tossed her into the rice paddy. Disgusted, angry and heartbroken, Nishi stomped off not unlike the angry teenager she once was. She felt once more like the daughter of a samurai in a family she didn't belong in.

And the family where she thought she did—the Yamagata-gumi—was gone.

■■■■

There were all manners of ways to handle grief: drinking was certainly one of them. Though it was a far cry from The Canary, Nishi found a reserve of rice wine in one of warehouses. After convincing a farmer to let her have some, she quickly proceeded to get drunk at a record pace.

No one seemed to mind her public intoxication, or if they did, they were too fearful of her to say something. The one exception was a boy in a red silk kimono. He approached the yakuza with a look of concern.

"You're Nishi-san, aren't you? My name is Masashi Hashimoto. I wanted to...to apologize on that baka's behalf," he said, bowing deeply. "What they did in Jijinto...I know it was unforgivable, but the yakuza...they were under a spell of Shiroyama's! She is—or rather, was a demon! She was using magic to twist their minds under her control!"

"Magic spells, huh? Am I supposed to believe you're—**hiccup**—some kinda shugenja? Little young to have graduated from the Academy, ain't ya?"

Masashi's ears perked up. "Why yes, I did graduate under some unusual circumstances! To be honest...I can't quite recall my graduation well at all...but I do miss my friends very much! But I'm surprised you know of the Academy, Nishi-san. Could it be that a relative of yours is—"

"Forget about it," Nishi said, quick to change the subject. Though she was drunk, she wasn't about to ask about Fumihiro, her younger brother who had gone to the Academy to become a shugenja. That

was a different life...one where a samurai sold off his daughter to pay for his son's tuition.

"Is something the matter?" Masashi asked, oddly intuitive for a boy his age. He took a seat beside the yakuza, surprising Nishi with his courage. As desperate for someone to talk to as the drunk yakuza was, she wasn't about to shoo him away. Instead, she offered the bottle—which the underaged shugenja was quick to refuse.

"Eh, stuff's no good anyway," Nishi grinned as she downed the rest of it in a single gulp. She tossed the empty bottle into a nearby tree, shattering it, before popping open the cork in a fresh one. "Keke-chan...I mean, Keiko told me about you. Apparently that ronin is your bodyguard, and you're all on some special, secret quest—somethin' like that. Sounds like a bunch of bullshh..."

Nishi wasn't sure why, but she found it hard to curse in the kid's presence. There was something about Masashi—a mixture of optimism and innocence, probably—that made her keep her 'bullshit' to herself. The shugenja seemed to have noticed this, too, and began giggling.

"You two are very similar, in a way. Neither of you are as bad a person as you'd like to believe."

The pair continued to chat for a while longer, mostly about the ronin and what it meant to be a bodyguard. It was during one of Masashi's many complaints on their companion's behavior that Nishi noticed a cut across the shugenja's chin.

She grabbed him by the collar and brought him in closer to inspect it, letting out a rancid, alcoholic breath into Masashi's face. "This sure ain't ah paper cut, kiddo," Nishi said, slurring her words. "That's from a katana...did *they* do this to you?! Told ya' that ronin's no good! I'll gut 'em as soon as I sober up!"

"No, please don't! This isn't their fault. It was someone else who...what I mean to say is, please don't mention this cut to them, Nishi-san! It would only upset them, so please—don't say anything!"

The yakuza didn't understand what the shugenja was going on about and being five bottles in on fermented rice water sure didn't help. But she knew enough to hold back a grin and give the kid a promise. Even if it was an empty one.

"Why, your secret's safe with me, kid."

■■■■

"Great job, Nishi," the ronin shouted from across the dojo. "You made Ige cry. Again."

In the yakuza's defense, it didn't take much for the kabuki stagehand to start shedding water. Nishi wasn't entirely sure what she was still doing in Tanimura—'practicing' with this ragtag group of idiots—but keeping Keiko safe through this tournament seemed as good a reason as any to stay.

Venting her frustration on Ige was just an added bonus. The brat had an obvious crush on Keiko that made Nishi want to crush his skull in, so she held nothing back during their training bout.

"Of course I made him cry," Nishi laughed. "I want a challenge, not a bedwetter!"

And while it was true that the yakuza enjoyed challenges, there was something else she enjoyed even more: revenge. Even if it had to be served with a wooden practice sword.

"Hatch and Keiko, pair off," the ronin-turned-teacher ordered. "Kohaku, help Ige. And Nishi...we're having a rematch."

The so-called sensei could hardly finish their sentence before the yakuza barreled towards them. Though her rage didn't burn quite as hot as it had before, Nishi's swings came just as fast. The difference was that—this time—the ronin was ready for her.

"Your swings are too wide and obvious," they lectured while dodging her strikes. "You need to place that left hand lower, to use it for leverage. This isn't a club to smack people with."

"Fuck you!" Nishi yelled and redoubled her swings. Her frustration was evident in her fury. "You weren't this fast yesterday. Masa-kun gave you some shugenja magic to help, I bet!"

It would seem that the shugenja's name was the magic word to break the ronin's composure. Though the glare it earned her was downright frightening, Nishi much preferred fighting *this* version of the ronin: the heartless assassin who killed her men.

Not the one that pretended to be a teacher who cared about their students.

"Stay away from Masashi," the ronin said, backing their words with a knee strike to Nishi's gut. The yakuza could only grin as any and all illusion of a 'sparring match' was thrown out the window.

"I got between a bear and their cub, did I? The kid said you were his bodyguard—pft! Give me a fuckin' break."

"Shut up," the ronin replied, the two clashing once more. Though the swordmaster had better technique and superior foot placement, Nishi's brute strength made it a fair fight. At least until after what she said next.

"Masa-kun has a cut around his neck, said it was from a katana. Made me promise not to tell you." Nishi shook her head and yelled, "You'll be the death of that boy, ronin!"

Something snapped—and it wasn't just the bokken. Nishi was well accustomed to losing one's temper, but what the ronin lost in that moment was something far greater. It was as if every ounce of humanity her opponent had vanished in a single moment; in its place was a beast that pounced on her and tore her apart like a starving wolf atop its prey.

Nishi was pinned, helpless and—though she would never admit it—scared. She took a punch to the teeth, to the jaw, and to the eye before Kohaku was able to pull them off her. The diligent samurai

brandished their katana and pointed it down at the beast with a look one would give a monster—not a sword instructor.

“Class is dismissed!”

And while it was, Nishi was in no condition—physically or mentally—to leave. Her eye was certain to be blackened and her tooth—the one that had ached her earlier—was hanging on by a painful nerve ending. ‘Sensei’ had taught her something, all right.

“Fuck,” Nishi spat, a wad of blood shooting out of her. “So that’s what you really are. That’s the monster who cut my boys to ribbons!”

The ronin had since been taken away by Hatch and Kohaku, while Keiko had run off in search of medical supplies. Nishi found herself alone with Ige, who had the unenviable role of consoling her.

“Ah, Sensei can be scary sometimes, can’t they?” he said, breaking into a nervous laugh. “But you’re scary, too...I mean, in a good way! No duel on the kabuki stage is half as intense as your battles, Nishi-senpai!”

The yakuza winced—both from the pain of her nearly-dislodged tooth and from being called this brat’s ‘senpai’. As if *she* was his upperclassman. “Look, Ige. Take your pity party somewhere else. So I got my ass beat, so what? Shit happens. This ain’t the White Peach.”

Mentioning the kabuki theater had turned out to be a mistake as it prompted Ige to recount a story of hardship and overcoming obstacles. It was as sappy as it sounded.

“...the financial situation being as dire as it was, all us stagehands, the staff—even the actors and actresses, too—had to work late nights making masks to help sell tickets for the performance. None of us could do it alone, so we had to work together like a family in order to save the theater. When it was time for...ah, I’m sorry, I’ve gone on for awhile, haven’t I? But us students...in this tournament, we’re sort of like a family too, aren’t we?”

“The hell do you think you know about family?!” Nishi yelled, her patience well past its limit. “I’m the captain of the Yamagata-gumi, you prickless brat, or at least I was until your precious Sensei fuckin’ slaughtered ‘em! *They* were my family—and they ain’t comin’ back. And let me tell you somethin’ about yakuza skins.”

Nishi proceeded to strip, causing Ige to blush and look away in embarrassment. The yakuza grabbed him by the hair and forced him to look. “Plenty of collectors out there would pay a handsome bit of ryō to have this up on their mantle,” she said, showing off a dragon in a field of cherry blossoms. It was a beautiful tattoo that must’ve taken weeks to get finished.

“The corpses of each of my brothers...I had to burn ‘em myself—had to rent out a whole fuckin’ wagon to get them out of the city. Then I had make a fuckin’ fire and turn ‘em in to ashes—in the pouring rain! So don’t you tell me about sacrifices for your family! And don’t you *dare* pretend that I’m part of yours!”

Ige gulped and apologized fiercely, tears welling within his eyes. Keiko arrived just in time to misinterpret the scene, and scolded Nishi for bullying the stagehand.

“Whatever,” Nishi said, spitting out a second wad of blood. This time, her tooth came out. She picked it up and clenched it within her fist. “Mark my words: this whole tournament’s a mess. And I ain’t got no intention of getting roped up into it. You hear me?”

■■■■

“Quit jerkin’ around and untie me, you prickless rice pluckers! Chikushō!”

Nishi was at the bottom of a dogpile consisting of her fellow classmates: Hatch, Keiko and Ige to be precise. They were tied up around the ankles in some half-witted training exercise courtesy of their interim instructor, Kohaku. The drill was supposed to help with their teamwork—which was sorely lacking.

Though that wasn’t the only thing that was sore. Bruises aside, everyone’s feelings were raw after what had happened last night to Kuniko. The quintessential village girl with a gentle smile and an even softer demeanor...Nishi had never liked her, yet she wouldn’t wish what that young woman went through upon her greatest foe.

The Shima samurai were bastards who were going to pay for their crime: Captain Goro chief among them. This had become personal, not just to Nishi but to everyone in Tanimura. Hatch was the first one up from the pile, the most serious and hellbent to improve. His resolve—even though his hands were cut to shreds and his katana had to be tied to his palms—was a source of inspiration to the rest of them.

That didn’t mean Nishi had to enjoy the lesson, though. Especially when the farmers started hitting her with sticks each time she fell.

“Hit me again and I’ll shove that stick right up your ass! Gah!” Nishi swung at one of the men with all of her might. The momentum took the group down once more, this time prompting Kohaku to call for a pause in training.

“Not out of mercy,” Nishi observed as the prudish samurai headed off on a stroll with the ronin. He was all but skipping even under all that armor. *“Got it bad for the teacher, huh? Talk about boardin’ a sinking ship.”*

The yakuza shook her head as the farmers undid the knots around her ankles, thanking them with a foot to the face. Masashi arrived with a set of tea and a forced smile. He exchanged pleasantries and his stomach did, too—it was growling.

Nishi’s followed suit, as did Hatch and Ige’s. Everyone was hungry. The tournament was tomorrow and yet none of them could take their minds off food. The shugenja gave a sly, smug look when Nishi said as much, which prompted the yakuza to interrogate him further.

Turned out Masashi was weak to tickles.

“Ah-haha, ah—okay, okay! But you mustn’t mention this to that baka. Promise, this time!” the shugenja said, suddenly becoming stern and outstretching his pinky finger. As silly as such a promise was, Nishi was proven to be untrustworthy and was compelled to do likewise.

Once the two shook fingers, Masashi revealed that the farmers had a plan in the works for an early, overnight harvest, complete with a party the next morning to send off their heroes. Apparently, he, Kuniko, Borgia and Ige had been conspiring about this idea in secret for the past several days. Now, after what had happened to the farmer’s daughter, raising each other’s spirits was more important than ever.

“So this party you’re puttin’ on...” Nishi said, cracking her neck, “...anything I can do to help?”

■■■■

The yakuza captain may have never regretted anything more than offering to help. Instead of putting up tables or streamers—you know, like what you did for any normal sort of celebration—she had been tasked with helping the farmers for the harvest. She gained both a newfound respect and a crack in her back from bending over and cutting stalks for the better part of a night.

But to be honest, Nishi appreciated a chance to get her mind off the tournament. She wouldn’t have been able to sleep, anyway, not with her nerves on end as they were. While she was no stranger to combat, she had grown attached to her fellow students all the same.

She had gotten closer to the farmers as well—at least in a physical sense, as all one-hundred and fifty-three occupants of Tanimura were crammed shoulder-to-shoulder into the barn-turned-dining hall. Ige had gone to great lengths to fashion it into a kabuki stage, with production values far beyond anything the yakuza expected.

PON

PON* *PON* *PON

The stagehand thumped a makeshift drum before shouting in a booming voice fit for theater.

“Introducing...the hope and pride of Tanimura—the students of the Ronin School of Swordfighting!”

The door to the front of the shed was opened, and behind it was a very sleep-deprived and bewildered sensei. The ronin was as rattled as a skeleton—and was beginning to look like one, too, though that issue was soon to be resolved. On the table in front of the farmers were bowls stacked with rice, freshly harvested, heated, and smelling like heaven.

Even if they were a tad unripened, it was going to be the best rice Nishi and the rest of the ‘Tanimura Champions’ had ever eaten.

Though before they dug in, there was a ritual to perform. Nishi put on her tailor-made haori jacket with the team's name stitched on the back of it, the cloth dyed in an indigo shade of blue. The tailor in this case was none other than Kuniko who looked upon the champions with eyes red from fresh tears on a face rigid with determination.

Her presence was a reminder of what they were fighting for.

Each student took turns being introduced and paraded around like a hero. Ige's skills in kabuki were on full display as he embellished each of them—as if they were renowned samurai from the Golden Era. Even Nishi got an applause, albeit a muted one.

When it was her turn to speak to 'Sensei', however, her words were far from flattering.

"Don't get it twisted, ronin. I'm only here for the rice," she said, before grabbing the sword instructor by the collar and bringing them in close. Her next words were meant for them and them alone. "I'll make this clear. There's only two fucked-up killers on this team, and *they're looking at each other.*"

The ronin nodded. "Then let's do what we do best."

■■■■

"Sensei," Ige asked, "is...that them?"

The kabuki stagehand's uncertainty was warranted as the Tanimura Champions watched a group of old men wielding pitchforks wobble up to the fighting platform. Hatch thought it was a joke and said as much, though Nishi had seen enough dead men walking to recognize the look on their faces.

These old geezers had accepted death.

"Our village is Aokimura, up the river from yours and a week's walk from...ah, I suppose it doesn't matter," said their leader. He wore a regretful, wistful smile. "We can't afford to lose our young men, and we refuse to let our children die in our place. All we ask is that you remember us as sacrifices for them."

The ronin nodded to acknowledge their nobility—if not in standing, then in character—and unsheathed their sword. That was when Nishi realized something was off: the sword instructor's hands were shaking while their eyes...

"*..they've gone soft. Somethin' ain't right here,*" Nishi thought, feeling a fresh sense of unease. That sensation would only grow as the ronin failed to execute their opponent; instead of a quick, clean kill, their right arm had gone numb at the last possible second. They tripped backwards much to the audience's entertainment, while the farmer twisted about on floor like a worm squirming in its own blood.

"Nishi!" the ronin yelled, and it was all they had to say for the yakuza to swoop in and send her spiked club across the farmer's jaw. Though his brains were scattered across the combat arena, at least he was out of his misery.

Her next target was her so-called sensei, who she grabbed by the haori and pulled in forehead-to-forehead. “Where the *hell* is the ronin who killed all my boys in Jijinto? We sure could use ‘em right now!”

“I...I just couldn’t! My arm, it wouldn’t move, I—”

Nishi tossed them to the ground. She couldn’t stand weakness, and seeing it in the face of the one who had single-handedly ended the Yamagata-gumi...it shamed their memory. She didn’t know what was wrong with the ronin—only that the monster inside them was nowhere to be found.

“This is pathetic!” Shatao roared. He wasn’t referring to them, but to the farmers who were kneeling in prayer for their fallen comrade. “If you do not fight, Aokimura, I will salt your fields...and drench them with blood!”

The battle ensued even though it could hardly be considered one. Of the few highlights was Keiko’s spear technique—in particular, her throwing accuracy. Her toss had landed...well beneath the navel of one of the farmers. It prompted a roar of laughter from the crowd who watched the old man flail about with a lance where his crotch ought to be.

The rest of the fight was just as vulgar. While Nishi, Keiko and Kohaku were hardened against bloodshed, the same couldn’t be said for Hatch and Ige. The former knocked his opponent out with an elbow to the neck—but the crowd wanted more. General Shatao ordered that he execute the farmer.

He hesitated. At least until the ronin nodded their head.

Nishi didn’t have to ask whether or not that was the first man Hatch had killed: the evidence was on his face. He looked dead inside and out, with only thoughts of Kuniko to keep him on his feet. No doubt the scenes of that night were replaying through his head over and over. Nishi could sympathize; that fight at the yakuza mansion was never far from her mind.

As if the ordeal wasn’t traumatizing enough, when there was just one farmer remaining, Shatao made it even worse.

“The boy with the Shinsengumi blade. He must fight alone...or Tanimura is disqualified!”

Every samurai in the Shima barracks began to chant for Ige—in mockery more so than encouragement. The young man was shaking in his sandals, needing a few private words from his teacher to settle him down. Nishi wasn’t sure what advice the ronin gave, but sure enough, the yakuza stagehand performed for all to see.

“AhhhhH!”

And what a bloody performance it was. It was a clumsy series of strikes paired with howling screams as if Ige himself was the one being stricken. Any and all semblance of proper form and technique was thrown out the window as the young man’s fear transformed into a furious barrage of slashes.

His opponent was mauled; cut a hundred different ways, he could do nothing but spout blood all over his assailant. The unfortunate farmer likely died from blood loss before any fatal strike had landed. Nishi and Kohaku shared a glance and a nod before pulling Ige off him.

The kabuki stagehand-turned-killer was still drunk on adrenaline and high on bloodlust, and rammed his head into Nishi to get himself free. Ige looked around in search of another opponent, and when there wasn't any, he hurried over to his sensei and shouted with glee.

"Hah, Sensei! I did it! And it was so easy! Haha!"

■■■■

Handling grief with liquor was a recurring theme with Nishi, who found that the samurai stationed at the base had a far better supply of the stuff than the farmers in Tanimura had. It also helped that the samurai took to her as some sort of celebrity—they actually seemed to enjoy it when she cursed at them, so she obliged them all they wanted so long as they kept the saké flowing.

She had the blood of several farmers on her hands, both literally and figuratively. Nishi hadn't expected to be so affected by off-ing a few old geezers, but she was. Watching the naive and gentle stagehand devolve into a psychotic murderer sure didn't help her mood, either.

"*Takes after his sensei all too well,*" she thought, as she downed another gulp. And as if thinking about them was enough to summon them, the ronin appeared in her presence. They were hardly a sight for sore eyes...but even still, it was a relief to see them all the same.

"Nice of ya' to join my fan club, Sensei! You'll fit right in with the—*hic*—rest of these pathetic virgins!" Nishi downed a swig and threw the bottle. "Even Ige-kun popped a cherry back there. He's a real—*hic*—man now!"

"How about you stop being lewd and tell me what you actually mean. And don't waste my time pretending to be drunk."

Nishi cursed under her breath. It took an alcoholic to know one, and—sure enough—with the yakuza's tolerance it would take a lot more than this for her to be acting so tipsy. With a shrug and a sigh, she decided to drop the act.

"All right, everyone fuck off!" she yelled, then had to do so once more before the crowd dispersed. It was rather odd for the samurai to be taking orders from an outsider—let alone a yakuza—but that was the sort of presence Nishi had.

After they were gone, she flipped her teacher a rude gesture with her finger. "I ain't talking about pricks getting wet, ronin. I'm talking about hands getting bloody—you know, *killing*. Somethin' I thought you were good at!"

Nishi's intention was to rile the ronin up. In that regard, her words backfired. The ex-assassin slumped and lowered their head. Regret was laced in their every word.

"I'm sorry I got you into this mess."

"Pft! I stepped in this shit myself, but you can be damn sure I'll ram my foot into any bastard who gets in my way. That includes a useless sensei like you!" Nishi spat, again trying to provoke her sword instructor. Anything sort of emotion would be an improvement from the mopey sap standing in front of her.

"I've lost the Jigoku Ittō-ryū, my sensei's style. Ever since I was young, I relied upon that inhuman power. It was the source of my strength and skill, and without it, I—"

"Your sob story got an ending?" Nishi yawned. "I don't give a shit-and-a-half about your style—hah! You sound like a woman off looking for clothes! *Style*, give me a break!"

Nishi stepped forward and grabbed the ronin by the collar. "Here's your *style*! It's a smelly old haori that's a size too big for you! It looks like crap, but you can be damn sure that freckled broad back home put her heart into the stitches, you, you..."

For the first time in her life, the yakuza hadn't any words to say. She wouldn't dare let any out for fear of sobs coming out along with them. Her eyes began to burn as she thought about Kuniko and the other farmers, too. Decent, suffering folk who put on a party on their behalf. Who celebrated *her*—a yakuza who had considered herself alone in the world.

But she wasn't alone. She was fighting alongside those who cared about her. And hell—even if they didn't, they *needed* her. And that...that was more than Nishi thought she would ever have, after burning her comrades and watching their faces melt upon the pyre. She had to be strong, and she'd be damned if this ronin—of all people—would see her cry.

"Thanks, Nishi."

■■■■

The fight against General Shatao's best samurai was the worst battle Nishi had ever been a part of. There were a multitude of reasons for this, all of which blurred into a single, waking nightmare. Getting riddled with arrows—including one that had lodged itself into her leg—amidst the thickest fog the yakuza had ever seen...all while hearing the disembodied screams of her comrades...it was too much.

And as for the finale: the fog had lifted just in time for them all to watch Ige plead for his life. He got no mercy from Captain Goro, who decapitated him while the boy cried for his sensei in his final breath.

It was enough to haunt Nishi for the rest of her life. However long that would be, she didn't know, as she stood bruised and battered in the samurai general's throne room. It wasn't at all like Shiroyama's—there wasn't a golden saké fountain, for starters—but the feeling of dread was just the same.

Keiko was in the infirmary, with wounds Nishi could only pray she'd recover from. The remaining 'Tanimura Champions' hardly fared any better: Hatch struggled to stay on his feet as his hands bled along with the large, nasty cut across his face. It was a wound given to him not by any samurai, but a ronin. *The* ronin, who stood like a specter—an empty husk—over Kohaku's body.

The proud samurai wasn't dead, but he was certainly humbled as his sensei kicked him relentlessly, sparing him not an ounce of mercy. This was all done at the behest of General Shatao, who looked upon his new subjects while gurgling out the same, guttural laughter Nishi had heard when they first met.

The only one who dared to stop them was a boy in a red silk kimono. Masashi had entered the competition in disguise as Borgia thanks to a magical spell. But now, all illusions were shattered—including the shugenja's relationship with his bodyguard.

"S-stop this immediately, you baka! That's an order! I—" he was cut short when his once-protector shoved him away, hard enough to reel him backwards into a fall. It didn't sting nearly as much as the betrayal did.

When the ronin spoke, their words were colder than ice. "I don't...take orders from a kid."

"You heartless bastard, how dare you hurt Masa-kun!" Nishi yelled and charged at the ronin, forgetting about the arrow wound to her leg. She collapsed in a furious yet pathetic heap, at the mercy of the one who she dared hope was worthy of redemption.

"You should've...died in Jijinto," they replied, as if to prove her wrong.

That was the last Nishi could hear and all she could think before a searing pain made her mind go blank in agony. The ronin had plunged the scabbard of their katana into her arrow wound, adding insult to injury. The yakuza was in such pain that she couldn't even begin to form the right curses—let alone shout them.

What happened next, Nishi only knew from hearing about it from the others afterwards. Apparently, Shatao was so pleased at the ronin's obedience that he summoned them forward to kneel before him. He even took off his helmet, revealing some sort of mutation involving a bird's beak and feathers.

To be honest, Nishi thought they had all gone crazy, but the result was the same regardless of her opinion: Shatao was dead, betrayed by the ultimate betrayer. Victory was theirs...if you stretched the definition of 'victory' far enough. Hatch now wore the armor and name of the deceased general while a wounded Kohaku stood at his side.

The yakuza wouldn't forget the look on the ronin's face as they passed her by, nor would she forgive them for all they had done. Nishi had every right and reason to hate them—to despise them, and yet at that moment she saw in those eyes a look she had so often seen in herself.

"You're tryin' real hard to be the villain here, aren't ya? Well...consider it a fuckin' success!"



When the group returned to Tanimura the day after, the reception was as mixed as the group itself. Hatch and Kohaku had to stay behind while Keiko remained bed-ridden at the infirmary to heal. Their sensei was gone—which meant only Nishi was there to represent the Tanimura Champions.

Though that wasn't entirely true.

"Ige...didya' want one last look at this shithole you helped save?" Nishi asked to the hemp sack she was holding. It didn't contain a pound of potatoes but the head of the fallen champion. "No, wouldn't want to scare them, would ya? Considerate to a fuckin' fault, I swear."

Nishi smiled and chuckled, swallowing down her sorrow with a series of gulps. She was flanked by farmers at either side of her and surrounded by the hundred-some other occupants of the village. They were there for a funeral for a young man who had answered the call and paid the ultimate price.

Presiding over the burial was none other than Masashi, who led the prayers with tears flowing down his cheeks. Beside him was his sister and future wife of the Emperor: Lady Amaterasu. As far as kabuki stagehands went, Ige would get the most royal send-off of them all.

Yet it wasn't Masashi who gave the eulogy. He was too overcome with grief to say anything more. Borgia, the dwarf, didn't know what to say and neither did Toshio—the ninja who stood in a stoic silence overlooking the grave.

This was something only Nishi could do.

"I told Ige he was weak," she said, breaking the silence. "Said he was a wimp—a loser. Not that he needed my help, but I did everything I fuckin' could to make him doubt himself. And he was so damn pathetic! Gettin' blisters and swingin' like a little...a little..." Nishi cut herself off and choked down a cry. "You know, I used to think strength was about throwin' a punch or swingin' a sword. But the real shit—true strength—it ain't about that."

Nishi wiped her face clean and scowled as another's came to mind: the ronin's. It was them that her next words were meant for.

"You wanna know what real power is? Look around you! The effect you have on others...the people who care about you...that's how strong you fuckin' are! And you can say whatever you want about Ige, but...

...he sure as *hell* wasn't weak!"

[Side Story Announcement](#)

[Dec 8, 2020](#)

Hey everybody! Just wanted to give you guys a heads up going forward. There's no side story poll for this month because the 30th side story is reserved for Junko/Jun. I've neglected them for long enough, lol! Doing so any longer would put my life in jeopardy from all those rabid Junkmancers out there! \('° □ ° I||)/

As for that story, there's probably going to have to be four versions: Junko/Jun's Whatever (Male/Female MC Version). With New Years and other potential happenings, it may take a few extra days to get that one out. We'll see!

And as for this story, the 29th, it was a neck-and-neck race between Nishi and Kohaku! The yakuza won by the margin of two votes, and I assure you that the voting was much more secure than the US Election (very topical heheh)! Though many went for the samurai, the Nishi Waifu Protectorate stayed strong and won out in the end.

That said, readers will know that the Kohaku Westlands story arc isn't quite finished yet: she/he still has to find that racehorse to save Nanbu Ranch! I intend to write that story (eventually) but it won't be until after I'm done with writing Book 5. I really want to put my nose to the grindstone and focus solely on that for the months ahead.

Well, that's all I've got to say. Thanks for reading!

[MC #16's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Dec 12, 2020](#)



For these last few portraits: the gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #16 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Masculine, Brutal**

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

Short (+15)

52%

Long (+24)

44%

Long bangs (+0)

4%

Poll ended Dec 15, 2020 · 48 votes total

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

[Dec 15, 2020](#)

In terms of structure, Chapter 4 encompasses the "B-Story" of the first story in Book 5. You can almost think of it as a sidequest. One of the things I like about it is that it returns us to a familiar place with a few familiar faces, too (though under *very* different circumstances)!

As you've probably come to expect from my writing, I always prefer to re-introduce story elements vs introducing completely new ones: it keeps the memory "footprint" low + readers love throwbacks. Or at least I know I do!

This chapter also builds upon the branch made in Chapter 3, so you may want to play it twice!

[MC #17's Face Poll: 1/3](#)

[Jan 2, 2021](#)



Update: MC #16's portrait (Masculine, Brutal, Long hair) has been delayed due to the holiday season. Sorry for the wait, but I'll make sure to post it once it's complete!

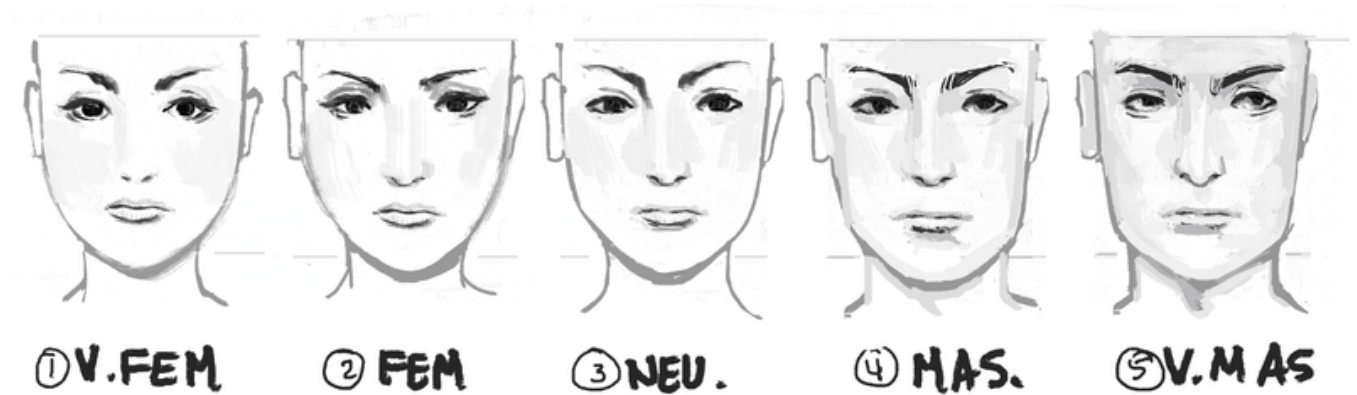
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+38)

36%

Feminine (+12)

19%

Neutral (+1)

14%

Masculine (+0)

8%

Very masculine (+32)

23%

Poll ended Jan 5, 2021 · 64 votes total

[MC #17's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Jan 6, 2021](#)



For these last few portraits: the gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #17 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 (+14)

8%

Chivalrous (+20)

16%

Charming (+14)

38%

Stoic (+8)

5%

Drifter (+3)

5%

Protective (+5)

15%

Brutal (+0)

13%

Poll ended Jan 10, 2021 · 61 votes total

[Tabletop RPGs](#)

[Jan 10, 2021](#)

How much tabletop roleplaying (Dungeons & Dragons, Pathfinder, Shadowrun, Call of Cthulu, etc) experience do you have?

Very experienced. I play/used to play mostly in-person.

Very experienced. I play/used to play mostly online.

Moderately experienced. I play/used to play mostly in-person.

Moderately experienced. I play/used to play mostly online.

Slightly experienced. I play/used to play mostly in-person.

Slightly experienced. I play/used to play mostly online.

No experience. But I'd like to try one someday.

No experience. Doesn't have much appeal to me.

I have no clue what you're talking about!

140 votes total

[Jan 11, 2021](#)



For these last few portraits: the gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #17 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Very feminine, Charming**

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

Long (+0)

55%

Ponytail (+29)

35%

Chonmage (+3)

10%

Poll ended Jan 15, 2021 · 60 votes total

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

[Jan 15, 2021](#)

Chapter 5 is when we really begin seeing two of the themes of Book 5. One of them is "movement": the journey itself is going to be (and remain) a large feature of the story. If you think back to the previous books in the series, there's not really a lot of movement going on:

Book 1: Yamato -> Jijinto

Book 2: Tonogasha -> Baron's Mansion

Book 3: Baron's Mansion -> Tanimura -> Shima

Book 4: Clanfields -> Hokusei

As far as the second theme goes...well, that's a secret! Also, don't worry about attunement too much--especially during early access. I'm still working the kinks out on how it's going to work. It's a bit different this time around!

Finally: I'm sorry about the delay with this month's side story! It's 12k words and counting, and since it's the 30th side story (and the last for a good while) I wanted to make sure I did it justice! You can expect it to come out a few days from now.

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

(If the above link doesn't work, [try this one](#). If that doesn't either, please send me a message!)

[MC #16 Face Art](#)

[Jan 18, 2021](#)

(Sorry for being so late! This portrait is December's.)

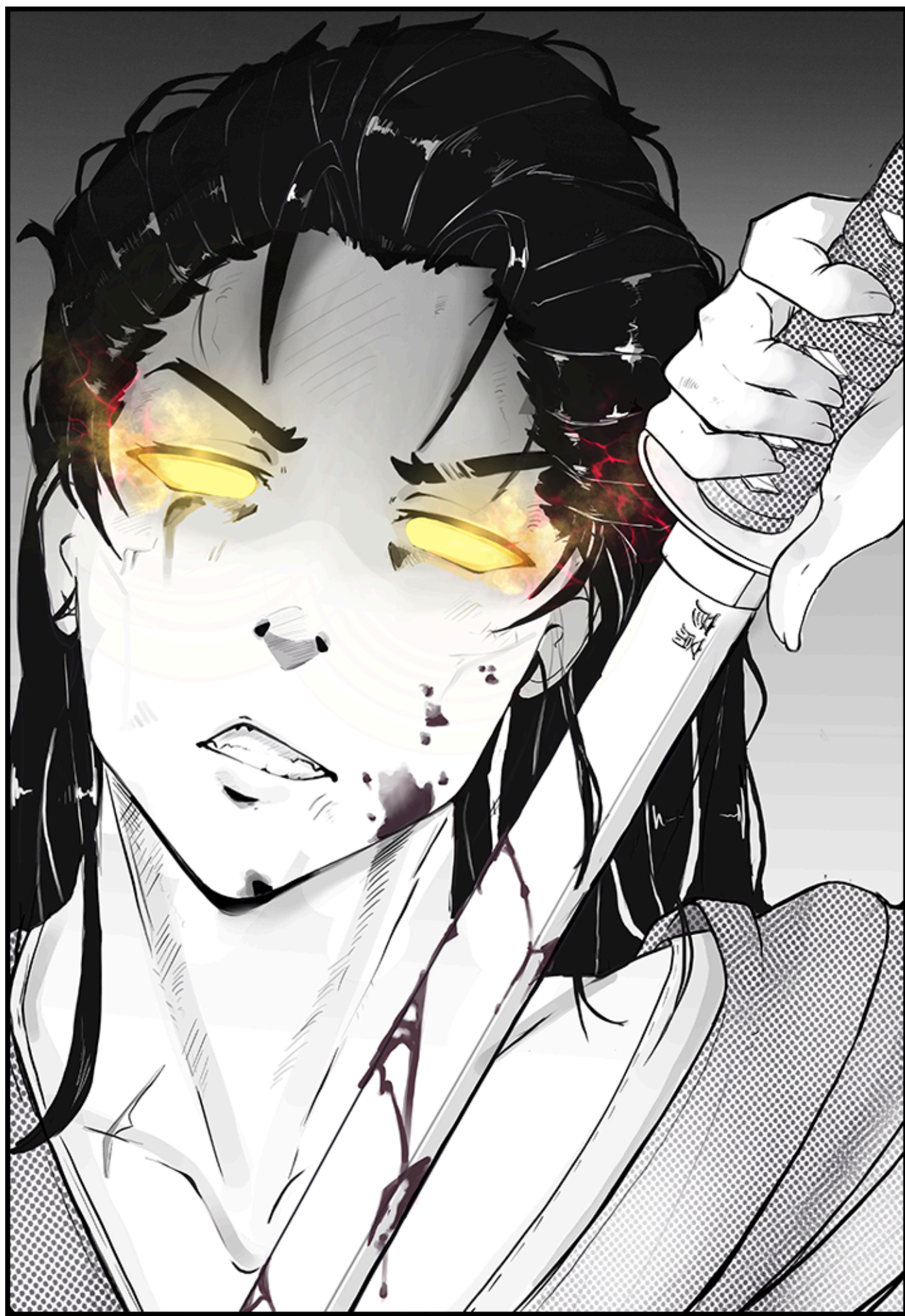
A new month, a new face! That's right: in Book 5, players will be able to (optionally) select a face for their main character! Faces will be designed each month by the intermediate+ tiers via polls. This month's face was drawn by Izumi ([twitter](#))!

This month's build: **Masculine, Brutal , Long hair**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[Jan 19, 2021](#)

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

Side Story 30: Junko's Promise (Male MC Version)

■■ Northern Hyuga ■■

“Again, Junko! Your footwork is...it needs work. Don’t get sloppy!” an old teacher yelled to his student. His voice was frail—far weaker than it had been years ago—yet it carried as much force as the whipping wind across the mountain peak. While the harshest of the winter months had passed, even in spring the gusts were cold.

And even in his twilight years, Sensei remained the strongest swordsman Junko knew.

“Hai! Yes, Sensei!” Junko replied, adjusting her feet once more. In truth, her positioning was flawless: it was a perfect jōdan—an overhead stance—that had been drilled into her mind and body years ago. The very same man who had taught her was now telling her that she was wrong, and so the obedient student made adjustments.

“Give me a break. You know the front foot shouldn’t be out that far,” remarked a less-than-obedient student observing the practice duel from afar. He was an orphan boy from Genfu who had since become a man—not that Junko ever treated him as such. Not outside their futon, anyway.

The orphan was the only rival, friend and lover Junko had. He was all the brown-haired student ever wanted...and everything she needed. But right now, he was being a real pest.

Junko focused on the practice duel—even if it wasn’t particularly intense or instructive. The student and master exchanged strikes with their wooden practice swords as the former was out-tricked by obvious feints and overpowered by wobbly swings. Junko was holding back throughout yet acted as if she was giving it her all.

The objective of these duels against Sensei had shifted over time: when Junko was a child, that meant merely staying alive. Then, as she got older, it was to stand her ground—and to leave without permanent scars and minimal bruising. Eventually, though, past her teenage years and into adulthood, the goal became vastly different.

It was, to put it simply...to not shame him.

"T-that's enough," Sensei said, his breathing starting to grow heavy. And though he tired early these days—especially this close to his mid-day nap—Junko had never once seen him break a sweat. The student bowed and thanked his master for the fight before taking her seat beside the orphan.

Her fellow student looked half-asleep and was halfway through a yawn before Junko handed over the practice sword—delivering it swiftly into his gut. After the rude awakening, the orphan hopped to his feet and swaggered over into position against Sensei.

"Come on, Boy! Show me what I've taught you!"

Junko could sense a problem well before there was one; the intensity in the orphan's stance went well beyond what was required in a practice duel against their master. Sure enough, he swung his weapon with full force against Sensei's, the collision causing the teacher's sword to crack and to be driven down into the mud.

As if that wasn't shameful enough, the orphan followed the strike with a tackle—slamming his shoulder into Sensei and forcing him to fall flat into the ground.

Junko was on her feet and in the orphan's face in an instant. Her eyes were golden while her hands were makeshift claws. They gripped around the orphan's throat as rage enveloped the daughter of a samurai—and not just any. Junko was the only child of Izō Uesugi, the head of his clan.

While the brunette came from a noble heritage, what she intended to do to the orphan was anything but.

"Junko...bring me the katana. *My* katana," Sensei ordered as he struggled to his feet. With more than a little reluctance, the obedient student released the orphan before hurrying off to the dojo. During her trip, she thought of several ways to punish her fellow student for shaming Sensei.

Most of them started by getting him naked.

After sliding open the shoji doors to the dojo and bowing with respect, Junko invited herself inside. She approached the shrine at the far end of the training hall where Sensei's sword rested on its wooden display mount. Falling to her knees in reverence, she clapped her hands and whispered a prayer.

It was short and simple. "May these hands be worthy of your sword, Sensei."

The obedient student then took the katana in both hands, raising it up before her. Turning her head to make certain she was alone, she unsheathed it—just slightly. Just enough to see *it*.

彦齋

"Gensai," Junko said, speaking the name as if it were holy. In her mind it was—even more so because that was all there was inscribed on the side of the blade. There was no family name. There was no

‘Takeda’. Sensei never mentioned his family to his students and Junko never dared to ask.

Because deep down, she already had her answer.

“You gave up your family for my sake. You saved me from that demon...and lifted me from out of that hell. You brought me and the orphan together...and taught us the way of the sword. Everything I am...I owe to you, Gensai.”

Closing her eyes, the daughter of Izō Uesugi once again renounced her past life and family in favor of her adopted one. Herself, Sensei and the orphan...they were tied together no less permanently than the stars in the sky.

With the renowned katana in hand, Junko hurried back to the practice grounds. She was worried that the orphan had done something even more foolish in her absence, yet it turned out that she should’ve been more concerned over something else, instead.

Sensei told them to kneel upon her return—and they did. With their knees muddied, the students of Gensai Takeda, the most fearsome swordsman of his era, looked up as their teacher raised his sword overhead.

“It is time I choose my successor. The Jigoku Ittō-ryū must not die with me. Such power...is meant to be used. To change and shape Hyuga.”

Junko’s eyes went wide. Her heart skipped a beat and her lungs stopped outright. *This* was the moment she had been waiting for—yet she never dared to entertain it outside her wildest dreams. To carry the future of Sensei’s style of swordsmanship on her shoulders...it was the greatest honor from the man Junko respected most.

Finally, her loyalty and dedication was about to be rewarded. It was all she could do to keep from drooling as Sensei told the orphan to lift his head. Junko licked her lips in anticipation as...as her teacher handed over the katana. To *him*.

“This is my legacy. Take it, Boy. You are the heir to the Jigoku Ittō-ryū.”

■■■■

Only Sensei possessed the ability to sleep through the sound of clashing metal rods echoing throughout the training hall. Though he was officially meditating, not even the most zen of monks could contemplate in peace while war waged right in front of them.

baa-Ang* *Baa-ang

It was a war between two students in the disguise of a practice match. Though there was no such thing as ‘practice’ for Junko, who went all-out with every swing—each more forceful than the last. She wanted to bash the orphan’s skull in and said as much with her golden-eyed glare.

As for the reason why...that much was obvious.

"I'm sorry, alright?!" the orphan yelled during a rare pause in the battle. "How many times do I gotta say it? Sensei's gone senile—he didn't mean to make me the heir! You deserve it a hundred times more than I do, Juu-chan!"

Invoking Junko's nickname did little to cool her wrath; if anything, it stoked the fires burning within her even more. "It's the greatest honor a swordsman could ever ask for—yet you treat it as a joke! You're the heir to the Jigoku Ittō-ryū—now act like it!"

The battle waged on and outside the training hall to the front yard and between the many sakura trees Sensei had planted there. This being early in spring, the pink and white blossoms were nearing full bloom—their graceful beauty making for a picturesque backdrop for a swordfight.

Of course, this wasn't a swordfight and it was anything but pretty.

"Gah! Ah—*kuso!*" the orphan yelled after Junko stomped on his leading right foot. In truth, he had been on his backfoot throughout the entire fight, focusing on withstanding Junko's onslaught until she tired.

"Stand and fight me, you coward! How dare you dishonor our style! How dare you disgrace Sensei!" Junko yelled and swung, though the orphan had already darted out of the way. Using their master's sakura trees for protection, Junko couldn't get close enough for a lethal strike.

"Why are we doin' this, Juu-chan? Why are we training so hard?" the orphan asked. It wasn't the first time he had voiced this question.

"Not this again," Junko growled, taking a moment to find a way through to reach her opponent. "To master the blade and one's self is to give up all else. And that includes weakness! Eyah!"

Junko found an opening in the orphan's guard and lunged. Unfortunately for her, her opponent had a trump card: Sensei's sword. He unsheathed it and held it out to intercept Junko's strike. The obedient student who idolized her teacher paused mid-swing.

She wouldn't dare risk damaging Sensei's sword.

"I'm tired, Junko," the orphan said. "I'm tired of watchin' the world pass me by while I sit atop this damn mountain. I'm tired of being dirt poor—having to hunt and fish for my food while living in this dump! I'm tired of freezing my ass off, too, and I'm tired of having to walk a mile every time I need to take a shit! I'm—*umph!*"

The orphan went quiet when Junko enveloped her lips over hiss. Intimacy was Junko's go-to answer for whenever her soulmate acted up like this. Whenever the orphan asked too many questions...whenever he threatened to leave her alone, sex was always the solution.

Though this time, it wasn't. "I'm tired...even of that, Juu-chan."

The kissing stopped. The daughter of Izō Uesugi opened her eyes wide, her irises shifting to a golden glow. In the absence of her lover, Junko embraced the Jigoku instead. Her words were cold. “Is that so. Draw your weapon, orphan.”

With reluctance—but knowing his partner far too well—the orphan complied, though the iron rod wasn’t the weapon Junko wanted. “This isn’t practice. Wield the sword Sensei gave you!”

The orphan had hardly the time to do just that when Junko struck forth a series of blows. She had her own katana—one of the several dozen spares the two of them had gone through over the years. With ronin and sellswords so abundant in the Clanfields, there was no shortage of cheap steel to be found for those willing to loot corpses.

And now Junko intended to loot Sensei’s sword off the orphan’s corpse. At least, that was how she fought. Yet as furious as she was, Junko was a proper swordmaster who took pride and satisfaction in a good fight—and there wasn’t one to be had. The orphan couldn’t maintain the Jigoku. Junko could see the will to live fade from his eyes as they dimmed back down to black.

As she towered over her fallen opponent, she wondered what happened to the boy from Genfu she was always chasing. She must’ve been thinking aloud.

“I’m not that stupid little boy anymore,” the orphan replied. “Don’t you see? We’ve been at each other’s throats for years. All that pain and suffering we put ourselves through...all to be stronger than the other—what was it all for? Nothing—that’s what! I don’t wanna race you anymore, Junko. And I don’t wanna chase Sensei’s shadow, either.”

Junko pushed the orphan away with a palm strike to the chest before turning around and shaking her head. In truth, she was terrified. The words her most precious person were saying felt like knives driven into her heart. She couldn’t face him like this.

“Sensei. You *know* we’d be dead without him—or worse! Don’t you have an ounce of gratitude for the man who saved us? How can you be so selfish?!”

“We’re supposed to be his students, Junko—not his servants!”

“I’m not his—” Junko started, though stopped upon hearing Sensei’s yell from the dojo. Their master had awakened from his meditative slumber and...was in need of someone to prepare hot water for his bath.

The orphan didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to. Instead, he wiped the mud off his kimono and took out a pouch from behind his obi sash. Junko recognized it—it was Sensei’s, kept in the dojo’s shrine.

“I’m going to the trading post to buy us some rice. Stay here and wash the old man’s back.”

■■■■

"You're late."

Junko hopped down from a tree and into the path of a haggard-looking ronin. It was early the next morning when the orphan made it back to dojo from his shopping trip. Aside from being hours late, his kimono was cut up and sprayed with blood. His usual stride was different—indicating a minor injury to the leg.

As far as how he smelled...

"Come on, Juu-chan. Quit sniffin' me," the orphan protested as Junko inspected him as a dog would. Aside from sweat and dried blood, another scent could be found from his lips.

"Saké. Who have you been drinking with?" Junko asked, trying—and failing—to hold back her jealousy. Though the orphan getting intoxicated was nothing new, what was more suspicious was the amount of rice he had brought back with him. He had two large buckets tied to a carrying pole atop his shoulders.

It was a lot more than Sensei's pouch of coins could purchase. Though before Junko could inquire further, the orphan locked his lips around hers. The buckets fell to the ground and the two students shortly followed. Their hands explored each other's bodies while their tongues wrestled in each other's mouths.

The familiar warmth of the man she loved was enough for Junko to halt her suspicions. "You're even easier when you're drunk," she whispered between heated breaths. She gripped her fingers atop the orphan's shoulders and slid his kimono down, revealing the strong, muscular arms beneath.

To be held in those arms until the day she died...it was all she ever wanted. Well—that wasn't entirely true. There was another part of the orphan she wanted even more—and it pressed against her hard and stiff from below. Junko deftly began to strip her partner as she had done countless times before.

Though as she was removing their sash, she felt something heavy and full. No, it wasn't *that*—it was a pouch of coins twice the size that it had been before. As much as Junko lusted for the man she had pinned beneath her...she had to know where it came from.

"Don't worry about it, Juu-chan," the orphan said between moans. "Turns out it's easy to make ryō with a good enough swordarm. There's tons of work out there, too. All I had to do was off a merchant and his guards. Old bastard died in his sleep."

"What?! What are you saying?" Junko asked, pouncing away from her lover's embrace. "You're a swordmaster—and the heir to the Jigoku Ittō-ryū! You dare disgrace yourself by doing mercenary work? Are you nothing but a sellsword?!"

The orphan remained on the ground, looking up into the sky. The sun was rising as the warblers began their chirp. Like them, the disillusioned student wished he could flap his wings and get away from it all.

But he had an anchor tied to him. It took the form of a katana branded with Sensei's name. "So you're sayin' if I get rid of this sword...then I'll be free to be whatever I want? 'Cause if that's the case...you may as well take it from me now."

"I'll take it from your corpse, instead!" Junko said before delivering a kick into the orphan's ribs. She then bent down to pick up the carrying rod and with it, the buckets of rice. "Now get up and stop being stupid. It's your turn to cook breakfast. Or is doing chores beneath you now?"

It turned out that it wasn't and that onigiri was on the menu. The orphan wasn't a great cook but you didn't have to be to make rice balls. A large, fresh one was presented to Sensei after he took his seat at the head of the table.

With a look of disgust, the old swordmaster picked it up and reluctantly took in a bite. After several chews, he spat it back at the chef. "Rice! Food fit for prey, not predators. I want meat, Boy!"

"They didn't have any," the orphan replied. "But if you wanna go off into the woods and hunt us some deer—then go right ahead! Otherwise, eat your rice."

"Don't you talk back to me, Boy! I want meat! Meat!" Sensei yelled, tossing the remnants of his onigiri at the orphan. It broke apart in his face. His eyes then went golden.

Junko intervened between them, acting as a referee between student and master. The orphan gave his companion a glare before shaking his head and walking away from the table.

Once he was gone, Sensei turned to the daughter of Izō Uesugi. "Junko..."

"I know, Sensei," Junko said, checking once more to make certain the orphan was gone. Once she was, she folded up the sleeve on her left arm and presented it before her master.

She grimaced as Sensei bit down upon it, sucking out blood as greedily as a babe would its mother's breast.

■■■■

Junko had something of a sixth sense when it came to the orphan. It was why she feigned sleep after a passionate late-afternoon 'nap' with her fellow student. The man from Genfu was as quiet as a mouse as he slipped back on his clothes and left the dojo.

But Junko was a cat and she wasn't about to let her prey slip from out of her paws. That and she had a profound curiosity, too—one compounded by jealousy. The scent of other people lingered on the one she loved. Those people would soon pay for trying to take her most precious possession away from her.

And the orphan was going to lead her straight to them.

'Them' happened to be a mercenary group encamped an hour's walk downhill from the dojo. Junko knew them as sellswords from their banners—or the lack thereof. Whereas the Uesugi and Takeda loved their emblems and clan colors, those who worked for either made certain not to be outwardly offensive.

At least visually, anyway. Their smell was another matter. Junko's sensitive nose worked against her as she lurked over to the camp in the cover of darkness. *"That smell—human filth. What can they offer you that I can't, my love?"*

For starters, the orphan was given a hero's welcome. If there wasn't a feast prepared before, there was now, as casks of saké were brought out and a skinned deer hung from a tree was cut down and brought to the fire for cooking. Aside from learning why the game around the dojo had been so scarce in recent weeks, Junko discovered her lover had a new nickname.

"Ronin! We were wonderin' when you were comin' back. Here—share a bottle of Hokusei Brewing's finest with me! Got another job offer for you...but let's fill up our stomachs, first!"

Ronin. That was the name given to samurai without a master. It was the most dishonorable title a swordsman could have, yet the orphan seemed to wear the moniker proudly. Instead of anger or disgrace, however, he appeared quite the opposite. He was smiling and laughing as the other mercs took turns trading jokes.

The whole world, for a moment, went dark for Junko. Crimson-colored lines broke out upon each of their bodies, begging to be cut and sliced a hundred ways. The Jigoku had taken control of the brown-haired samurai. And she had surrendered to it willingly.

"When was...the last time...you smiled, for me?"

It took every ounce of restraint for Junko not to rush in there and tear apart the sellswords limb from limb. She could do it easily, too; they were no more dangerous to her than their cuts of venison were to them. Everything from their lack of physical conditioning to how they slouched around the campfire denoted a lack of training and discipline.

Gensai's students were leagues beyond these mercenaries. It made sense, then, that they'd have plenty of jobs lined up for the orphan to do.

"All right, Ronin, let's talk some business," the leader of the group said, kicking his feet up atop a nearby log. "See, that merchant you...dispatched so well the other night was just a start. We've got another passin' by—and rumor is, he's packing somethin' more valuable than stale rice!"

"I may be a ronin, but I'm no bandit," said the orphan. He kept his eyes focused on the fire. "I want to do more than raid caravans."

"Right, right! Well, maybe 'merchant' ain't the best way to describe these guys, then. They're actually suppliers for the Uesugi. See, our group is trying to get in the Takeda's good graces. The reds have

gone under new management lately—word is, groups that distinguish themselves get hired on permanently. We're talkin' stipends for years, here! And you know what else?"

The orphan didn't and shook his head.

"Especially skilled warriors got a chance of gettin' adopted into a branch family. For folk with no house names like us, it's a hell of an offer. And a man with your skills...you keep at it and we may be callin' you Lord Takeda someday, hahaha!"

"Adopted, huh..."

Junko's eyes turned gold once more. This time, she embraced the Jigoku on purpose. This talk of family—and of Takeda, too...every word seemed to push the orphan further and further away from her. The now-familiar despair of losing the one she needed most made her heart sink deep beneath her chest.

But it was still beating, and so long as it was, the orphan would be hers. She refocused her eyes upon the encampment, visualizing the lines of death and fantasizing about how she would punish them for deceiving the orphan like this. For it was nothing short of trickery that could drive the one she loved against her and Sensei!

"What's this?" she asked aloud. Junko wasn't talking to herself—she was staring up into the tree she had braced up against. The lines of death depicted a figure within the branches. A figure that was frightened stiff—especially after Junko jumped up and stared them face-to-face.

"Ah—*ng!*" the figure said, trying to muffle herself mid-scream. She was more of a teenager than a woman and was too scrawny to be a mercenary. She was a kunoichi judging by her garb—a ninja, trained in the art of subterfuge.

Sensei had spoken about them before. Though they weren't the best fighters, their talents outside the battlefield made them invaluable all the same.

"D-don't kill me, please. I'm not with them," she whispered as beads of sweat fell down her forehead. Junko gave no reply aside from maintaining her stare, which was wicked enough to get the frightened kunoichi to start talking. "My name is Tamaki. M-may I ask yours?"

Junko would never give Tamaki her name. Instead, she started sniffing around her. What she smelled made her eyes open wide. The scent was disturbing, distinctive, and most of all...nostalgic.

"You're with the Uesugi," Junko said. The reaction from the ninja all but confirmed it. "What are you doing out this far? And why shouldn't I slay you here and now?"

"I'm just—I'm just here to scout and observe this group. We found the...the remains of what happened to one of our caravans three nights back. I followed their trail to here. Yet from everything I've seen...this group doesn't have near the numbers needed for what happened. Certainly not enough to kill eight veteran samurai!"

Junko couldn't help but smirk. What this Tamaki wasn't factoring in was that one of Sensei's students were among the sellswords. An idea started forming inside her head. As much as she despised the idea of helping the Uesugi—her old family—she was willing to do whatever it took to save her new one.

"Alright, ninja. Got any ideas on how you want to stop them?"

■■■■

The orphan—or rather, the ronin, as he preferred to be called—took up a position upon a wooded hillside overlooking one the main roads into Hokusei. It being the pitch-black of night, there wasn't a soul to be seen. But if the mercenary group's scouting was correct, a caravan would soon pass by delivering high-quality iron alloy to the Uesugi.

None of that meant anything to him. But this job was another chance to put his swordsmanship to use. Getting paid and praised for his efforts was a nice change of pace—considering he never got either at the dojo.

"Wonder what Juu-chan would say if she saw me now," the orphan thought aloud. Of course, Junko knew exactly what she'd say—or at least what she'd do—but she refrained from moving a muscle from her current position.

She was up in a tree adjacent to the one the orphan was crouched beside. Every bone in her body wanted to swoop down and grab her. She wanted to either take the orphan away or to take him right then and there—she couldn't make up her mind. Junko would settle for neither, though, as she waited for the rest of the mercenaries to arrive.

When the horse-drawn carriage came down the road, it was unlit by lanterns. There were no accompanying samurai and the driver sat unnerving still at the reins. It was suspicious—yet sellswords weren't known for their discretion. They ran down the hill all at once, pouncing silently like an owl swooping upon a mouse.

They weren't going to find anything, Junko knew, as she and Tamaki had already secured the driver, samurai and iron an hour earlier. With that job done, all Junko had left to do was clean up the mercenaries on their way back to camp.

That was the idea, anyway. The plan had taken a swift change when a flaming arrow flew out from the opposite side of the hill. It embedded itself into the carriage—of which the orphan and mercenaries were currently inside. The caravan went up in flames right away. It must've been soaked in lamp oil.

Junko felt her heart race out of concern for her lover, who jumped from out of the cart and began wheezing from the smoke. His kimono was charred and his hair was singed, but he was otherwise unharmed.

"For the Uesugi! Hyaah!"

The samurai that Junko and Tamaki had warned earlier yelled out a war cry in unison, announcing their presence and charging after the group. Though they wouldn't get the fight they wanted: they were up against sellswords who held no reservations when it came to running from unfavorable odds.

"Retreat! Kuso—it's a damn trap! Get outta here!"

The mercenaries scattered—which was their last mistake. Junko darted in one after the other, the Jigoku lighting them up through the smoky haze. Limbs fell off like sakura petals in a strong wind as the obedient student of Gensai took vengeance on those who dared to take her orphan away.

The only difficulty Junko faced was in making certain that her kimono didn't get dirtied by the bloodspray. Fleeing swordsmen were hardly swordsmen at all, it turned out, and not one of them so much as raised their blade against the brown-haired samurai. Though in their defence...it was hard to do so without a swordarm.

"This supposed to be thrilling? To use Sensei's style on this human filth...what a waste," Junko said aloud as she flicked her katana clean. Unfortunately, the mercenary leader was quicker on his feet than the others, but—while he managed to escape—many of his cohorts didn't. Junko counted five corpses by the time she was finished—Ichi, Ni, San, Shi, and Go—while the samurai suffered no casualties of their own.

Though considering they were Uesugi, Junko was tempted to change that. The primary outlet of her frustration was Tamaki, however, who made the mistake of approaching her with open arms.

"You fought tremendously! We managed to—*guah!*"

Junko raised the ninja by the collar of her shozoku and slammed her against a tree. To say she was upset was putting it mildly.

"Why didn't you tell me about the fire?! What if...*damn it!*" Junko growled, bashing the kunoichi against the oak once more. The thought of the orphan getting hurt made her furious. "We were supposed to be working together! And what about these samurai, huh? They weren't part of the plan!"

The group of Uesugi approached Junko with caution. They had their swords out too, though did so out of self-concern more so than with any intention of attacking the swordsman who saved them. It helped that Junko had a particular feature.

"Excuse us...but your hair—it's brown," one said, stating the obvious. "Could you be...an Uesugi? Are you from a branch family, perhaps? An illegitimate child from—"

"I'm not part of your family and I never will be," Junko said, releasing the ninja. Tamaki fell with a hard thud and clutched her throat for breath. Unwilling to turn around and face the samurai out of fear of seeing an uncle, a cousin, or some distant relative, Junko ran off into the night.

Though she wouldn't leave empty-handed.



“Interesting haircut you got there, orphan,” Junko said with a grin while her teeth grated over the stem of her tobacco pipe.

It was early afternoon the next day before the orphan had sufficiently licked their wounds from the failed caravan robbery that cost five of his companions their lives. Though few would mourn a mercenary, the orphan seemed to be bothered by the whole affair. Of course, he wouldn’t mention anything about it to Junko.

“What are cookin’, Juu-chan? You hunt down a deer?” the orphan asked, gesturing to the large pot the brown-haired samurai was stirring. As far as a reply, Junko bent over and blew a mouthful of smoke into his face.

“More like a pig. Go ahead—have some,” Junko said, pouring out a ladle of the stew into a wooden bowl.

The orphan accepted it gladly, hungry but even more relieved that Junko was in a merciful mood. His usually possessive and distrusting lover didn’t seem to question at all where he had been or why his hair was cut short on one side.

He slurped up the stew before quickly downing it and asking for another.

“This stuff is great! Puts my rice balls to shame! Bit different than the pork we usually get for our sukiyaki, though,” the orphan said, eager to down another portion. With his spirits lifted, he didn’t even mind it when Sensei took a seat beside him.

Their master enjoyed it so much that he asked for seconds after giving his praise. The orphan nearly choked on his spoon; Sensei *never* complimented either of them on their cooking—or anything, really—so this stew must’ve been especially good. Of course, the remark from Sensei certainly wasn’t.

“Now *this* is a proper meal fit for predators! You’d do well to take notice, Boy!”

The orphan held his tongue. After finishing his third bowl and letting out a loud burp, he wiped his mouth clean and said what he had prepared to say. “I...I think I’m gonna be gone for awhile. I want to do some meditations up on the mountain top—for isolation, I mean. I’ll probably be gone for a week.”

If Sensei had even heard him, he made no sign of it. He was too busy engorging himself on the stew. It was Junko that the orphan most feared and it was her eyes that he wouldn’t dare look into.

“A week, huh? Have fun.”

Junko’s apathetic response was far from the passionate outburst the orphan expected. In some ways, he was disappointed, but in many more he was immensely relieved. Though the orphan was no fool: he had a hint of suspicion too, that something wasn’t quite right.

"What, that's it? You're not going to try and stop me?"

Junko took in another puff of her pipe before bringing the ladle to her lips and sipping the stew. "Why would I? Do you take me as some sort of overprotective lunatic?"

The orphan could do nothing but stare. Junko met his eyes and the two began a staring contest. It was like a game of Mirrors—though the orphan would be the first to turn away.

After he did, Junko put on a devilish grin.

■■■■

"Ah, the Cherry Blossom Festival never fails to bring in an odd batch o' travelers this time o' year. Soon as the ice melts, I get folks from all over crossin' through to Hoku for the sakura viewings. And in case you're lookin' to wet your whistle, the brewery has a new plum wine out this year and I hear it's..."

The ferryman had a gift for gabbing and did so from the moment Junko took a seat at the back of his vessel. Traveling across the nearby lake to get to Hokusei saved time and energy; Junko needed plenty of both if she was to put a stop to the mercenary company for good.

The brown-haired samurai recalled her conversation with Tamaki from earlier. Apparently, the Uesugi were vying for a temporary truce with the Takeda to buy time to restore their supplies and numbers after their recent losses. It was a popular plan with the common people: enough so for otherwise neutral parties to side with the white-bannered clansmen.

The Takeda wanted to push their advantage, however, and so—according to the kunoichi—they hired out the orphan's mercenary group for a special job. It was a high-profile one, too, that even the ferryman knew about.

"...more a fan o' their pickled plums, to be honest. Say, you're not much of a talker, huh? Had a quiet group o' samurai not so different board right before you. Uesugi by their kimonos, but...smelled more like sellswords to me. Well, what do I know? Anyhow, I ain't much one for politics, but I reckon they were headed into Hoku for the peace talks. If it passes...well, we'll all be drunk on plum wine before the day is done! Good timin', too: my wife just gave birth to our son. What a blessin' it would be to raise 'em in an era of peace in the Clanfields!"

Junko let out a snort upon hearing that. As far as what the sellswords were doing dressed up as Uesugi samurai, their job was to sabotage the peace talks just as they began. They'd kill a few Takeda and the war would spark anew, Tamaki said, which was as clever a ploy as any Junko had heard.

Though clever ploys didn't suit her, the swordmaster found herself in one of her own: she was carrying a year-old sakura sapling. It was one of Sensei's which she had uprooted with his permission.

As far as *why* she was lugging around a small tree, Junko intended to use it as her ticket to get inside the ceremony.

Each year during the Cherry Blossom Festival, there was a ceremonial planting of new sakura trees from all across the North. It was supposed to be a unifying gesture—which was usually only ever symbolic—though with the peace talks, this year's held much more significance.

It would also get Junko in close enough to kill the remaining sellswords. She tipped her conical farmer's hat to the ferryman after reaching the other side of the lake and embarked. True to the ferryman's words, she could hear the cries of a newborn from out of a nearby shed.

"To be raised in an era of peace...you sure choose the wrong part of Hyuga to be born in," Junko thought as she made her way to Hokusei's main gate. This was the city she was born in and yet it was as foreign to her as snow on a summer's day. She had rarely made visits here and only ever on errands for Sensei.

"And you were always here with me," Junko said to the orphan who wasn't at her side. Unlike herself, her fellow student seemed to thrive in crowded places such as these. And it *was* crowded. Girls in kimonos colored every shade of pink chatted amongst themselves while merchants hawked their wares.

Street performers danced about while musicians played in a dueling symphony to earn the coin of passersby. The sheer amount of noise and movement overwhelmed Junko, whose senses weren't designed for this level of stimulation.

It also didn't help that she had next to no sense of direction here. Junko pushed through the waves of people while wielding her potted sapling like a club. Even then, the going was a slog: no matter how many festival-goers she scared away, there were always others to take their place.

"Get away from me! You filth—I could cut you all down where you stand!" she yelled out in frustration. Though even her most direct threats fell on deaf's ears as those around here were too busy sipping on plum wine and snacking on taiyaki shaped like cherry blossoms to notice.

Running short on time and even shorter on patience, Junko began moving. She needed to find the gardens where the peace talks were to take place—but right now, she'd settle for anywhere where she could hear herself think. That meant escaping Hokusei's main streets and avoiding its marketplaces.

"This is...the temple district?" Junko asked aloud. There was no one here to answer her: the Cherry Blossom Festival was one of the few celebrations that had no religious component to it. Even the monks were off during this period to enjoy the festivities.

Junko's feet took her inside a particular shrine: an old and familiar one. The Wolf Temple was made entirely of wood and was originally used as a watchtower back when Hokusei was a frontier town and Hyugans had to fear for their lives from the large, dark-brown creatures that lurked in the night.

She was referring to bears and Kondos, too. Both once ruled this region before the people later known as Hyugans arrived from a distant land, many centuries ago. Now, in the North at least, both its original occupants were nearly extinct. That was the extent of the history lesson Junko learned in her youth about the time before the clan wars.

"A moment of meditation would do me some good," Junko decided, sitting in a seiza behind a column in an unlit corner of the temple. She let out a sneeze; dust was everywhere in this poorly-maintained part of the shrine. The samurai likened it to the orphan's half of the dojo which often went unkempt for weeks on end.

One thought of the orphan grew to a dozen and then hundreds more. At least back at the dojo, Junko had Sensei to take care of and take her mind off her loneliness. But here, alone in this forsaken city and unsure of everything—the orphan's well-being, most of all—Junko found herself facing an immense dread.

A dread that would soon grow in leaps and bounds.

schisk

The shoji doors to the temple slid open before a group of visitors made their way inside. Junko glanced from behind the column and held in a gasp at what she saw. These were Uesugi, wearing white kimonos with matching emblems of two swallows kissing. They weren't the group of sellswords masquerading as clansmen, either.

These were the real deal. Junko knew as much at a glance, but it wasn't until she heard her mother's voice that all uncertainty curled up and died. It was fitting imagery, too, as that was *exactly* what the brown-haired samurai wanted to do right now. Though she wasn't a samurai right now—in her mother's presence, she was merely a girl.

"Well?! Where is he? Where's this sellsword I've taken time out of my rigorous schedule to meet?" Junko's mother yelled, pacing about the shrine. "It's distasteful enough that I'll have to share tea with Ichiro! He makes it *far* too sweet!"

Before long, a haggard man in a white kimono was brought inside. Though he was wearing the Uesugi robes, he was pushed to the ground and made to grovel low in front of the clan's matriarch. When he lifted his head up from the tatami, Junko recognized him as the leader of the mercenary company.

"La-Lady Uesugi, all my men are in place. I'm glad you accepted my offer. As to the matter of my payment, I can—"

"I have to say," Lady Uesugi started, pulling out a fan from her kimono and expanding it, "I was quite surprised when we first got your message. I thought even sellswords had some semblance of honor among their own. Yet your presence here proves me wrong.

"You tell us," the lady continued, "that the Takeda have employed your group to sabotage the talks and put false blame upon our clan. A plot very much in keeping with how devious that Ichiro can be. If I understand you correctly, you've come to us with a counter-offer: you intend to sacrifice your fellow...comrades...so that we may use the Takeda's plan against them."

The leader of the sellswords nodded, confirming the plan. He went into detail about where his company was currently lying in wait for his signal to move. When Junko realized the bastard was trying to get the orphan killed, the Jigoku took over. Yet even in its familiar embrace, Junko couldn't fully escape the presence of the woman who birthed her.

"We'll have archers in Takeda uniforms lined up on the walls. They'll dispose of your mercs—or should I say...innocent Uesugi bystanders there for the flower viewing? Fufufu!"

"But...but Lady Uesugi!" one of the samurai said, bowing deeply. "Deceit is not our way! We should think twice before resorting to Takeda tricks!"

Junko's mother rolled her eyes while fanning herself. "We cannot allow Ichiro to gain further control of the city. If that requires the sacrifice of a few sellswords to do so—than that is a price I'll gladly pay!"

The mercenary leader let out a gulp. A bead of sweat fell from his balding scalp into his mustache. "Forgive me my lady, but one of my men...he's not quite like the others. You should take extreme caution in how you—"

"Bah! You mercs are all the same," Lady Uesugi replied, putting away her fan. Just as she did so, her eyes peered off into Junko's direction. After what she said next, there was little doubt as to who she saw.

"Junko? Is that you?"

Hearing her name voiced by that woman was like a stab through the gut. The Jigoku fled from her and in its absence was a sheer terror that Junko hadn't felt since she was a young girl. A girl tortured and terrified on a nightly basis at her family's estate.

Junko covered her mouth as her throat gurgled up bile from her latest meal. Enveloped in a complete and total panic, the woman who was perhaps the greatest swordsman of this era fled. She darted out from the shrine like lightning, bursting through and running over an obese woman with brown hair at the Wolf Temple's front entrance.

She continued running as fast as her legs could carry her as if each stride pushed the memories of her childhood away. She had convinced herself for so many years that her life hadn't started until the orphan was in it.

When Sensei united her with the one who would be her most precious, *that* was when her life began. And the most precious memory of those days would always be the promise the cute boy from Genfu had made her as they stared up into the starry sky.

Junko had asked the orphan to be hers forever. It was a selfish, childish thing to ask...yet their response was as clear in her mind now as it had been during their first winter together.

"I promise. I'll be yours forever, Juu-chan."

So deep in thoughts of the past, Junko had lost track of the present: including where she was going. She knocked over a priest and nearly trampled over a shrine maiden before she realized she ought to slow down. She wasn't able to do so in time, however, before a group of children made their way into her path.

"Get the hell outta my—*ah!*" Junko yelled, before collapsing into a pile of mud. The sapling she was carrying flew from her grasp while her ankles burned as if they were broken. In truth, they were just painfully bent; the mud had glued her sandals in place.

After trying and failing to pull her feet free from the muck, she realized it wasn't made of dirt at all. It was clay—or rather, the street itself had turned into a thick sludge. It didn't make any sense...but then again, magic didn't have to.

"I'm sorry, Miss Samurai," said a boy barely in his teenage years. He looked utterly ridiculous wearing priestly robes that were two sizes too big on him, yet he seemed to be the leader of this band of children. He held out a slip of paper and clapped it within his hands. The clay began to release its grasp beneath Junko.

"What the hell was that?!" Junko asked, shaking off the remnants of the street from her toes. "No—it doesn't matter. I have to find the orphan."

Upon saying 'orphan', every pair of eyes on the group of kids began to light up. They were orphans themselves, they exclaimed, and their older brother was leading them around on a tour of the temples. Some admitted that it was as boring as it sounded, earning them a quick reprimand from their tour guide.

"Um, miss, you dropped your tree," one of the girls said, heaving the potted sapling over her head and offering it to the samurai. Junko took it and mumbled her thanks. She was about to make her exit when the boy dressed up like a Shinto priest stopped her.

"Say, that's a cherry blossom isn't it? Are you here for the planting ceremony? I can escort you to the inner gardens if you wish."

Junko was about to refuse when the kids began jumping for joy. Apparently, planting a tree was more fun than visiting shrines. Unable to find a proper excuse, the brown-haired samurai reluctantly took the boyish priest up on his offer.

The boy's name was 'Kiyo-kun' according to the children that followed him. He was their adopted older brother, more or less.

The two had a conversation en route to the inner gardens, which was far more secure than Junko had expected. The guards at one of the entrances scrutinized her intensely, but became friendly upon the sight of Kiyo-kun at her side. When Junko asked about it, her new companion blushed.

“Well...I suppose it helps when your father is the mayor, doesn’t it? Though that isn’t technically his title, of course, he’s done far more for Hokusei and its people than the Uesugi ever have!” the priest exclaimed. “And now he’s going to bring peace to the entire region. It won’t be easy, but...if anyone can do it, it’s Ichi-sama!”

Shouts of ‘Ichi-sama’ echoed from the group of children, all of whom thought very kindly of the Takeda lord. Junko still had her concerns, however. “This Ichiro Takeda...are you certain he’ll be safe? This may turn out to be a more dangerous affair than he thinks.”

The priestly boy beamed with confidence. “Ichi-sama’s swordsmanship is without equal! He’s bested every swordsman who’s challenged him. They say he’s got the quickest sword draw Hyuga has ever known!”

“Is that so?” Junko asked, her curiosity starting to pique. “I’d like to meet your father in person, then.”

Kiyo-kun was quick to apologize. “Gomenasai, but that’s impossible. He’s currently in the middle of peace talks at the moment.”

“They’ve already started?! Where are they taking place?!” Junko yelled. After Kiyo-kun gave her the location, the samurai shoved the tree into his grasp and ran off without saying so much as a goodbye.

The archers were already in place.

■■■■

The unending thump of a nearby sōzu—a bamboo device made to scare off deer—was slowly driving the orphan insane. His nerves didn’t come from fear but from an eagerness to get the job over with. Killing a half-dozen Takeda samurai wasn’t a problem. Standing in place for an hour-and-a-half, was.

“Boss is ‘sposed to be back by now. Wonder what’s keepin’ him?” one of the mercs asked aloud. There were four of them in total—five if you included the orphan. The orphan himself wasn’t quite sure who he countered himself among these days, yet all he knew for certain was that these sellswords treated him kinder than Sensei ever had.

That—and a heavy pouchful of ryō—was why he was out here loitering while dressed as an Uesugi with a faceful of makeup on. Apparently, his skin was too tan and his features were too Southern to pass for a proper Uesugi.

“I’m just glad Junko can’t see me like this. She’d never let me live it down...in more sense than one,” the orphan thought. It was the last thought he’d have before a horn sounded off in the distance. That was the signal announcing Lady Uesugi and her entourage had arrived.

Which meant it was time for the mercenary company to begin their attack.

"Forget the boss! It's time to move out," the orphan commanded. He and the mercenaries took turns moving on ahead—so as not to arouse suspicion from the security detail—with himself taking up the rear. He slowly made his approach to the teahouse where the heirs of the Uesugi and Takeda were sharing a cup of matcha while watching the cherry blossoms bloom.

The orphan didn't have Junko's nose nor her inhuman sense of smell, yet a waft of blood seemed to float within the breeze. It was an unnerving scent when paired with the sight of hundreds of sakura petals dancing in the wind. Yet, determined to focus on the task at hand, the orphan shook off all uncertainty and followed the sounds of a man laughing and a woman giggling.

It led him to a tiny yet elegantly designed teahouse that sat at the center of a pond. There were groups of samurai in red and white on either side of the water, split in half as expected of the two clans that so distrusted each other. Rightfully so, the orphan supposed, considering what the mercenary group was there to do.

Though speaking of mercenaries...the orphan couldn't find them anywhere. His concern only grew as moments passed and more of the samurai took note of his presence. Though they were being sly about it, the white-knuckled grips on their sword handles told the orphan all he needed to know.

"Someone tipped them off," the self-proclaimed ronin thought to himself. "I don't know where the others are, but...I'm not the sort to quit a job halfway through!"

The orphan didn't make it ten steps before the Takeda lord took a moment away from sipping his tea to gesture over at him. "One of yours, Kiku-chan? Hm...he has about him an aura that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I didn't think the Uesugi had such a formidable swordsman."

Lady Uesugi scoffed before raising her fan. She looked around and waited before growing frustrated and raising her hand even higher. This sellsword was supposed to be riddled with arrows by now, yet he approached their teahouse unscathed. A bead of sweat fell from the lady's brow and ruined her makeup.

"Chikusho! Guards—anyone! This is an imposter! Kill him at once!"

The sound of swords being drawn filled the silence that followed. The orphan kept his sword sheathed and his head low—though to say he wasn't prepared for battle was a fatal mistake. His legs were out and coiled in the stance Sensei taught him; though he despised his master and everything he had done to him...

...when it came down to it, the old man's techniques were good.

As the group found their bravado and charged at him with their swords raised overhead, the orphan closed his eyes. He embraced the Jigoku and took in one deep, final breath.

He then performed the Strike of Non-Action: the Jigoku Ittō-ryū's quickdraw technique. In a flash—in the blink of an eye—the katana that his Sensei had given him flew from its sheath and into his surrounding

attackers. It was over as soon as it began; nothing but a streak of blood across the nearby cherry blossoms betrayed the swordmaster's strike.

That, and the screaming samurai who fell before him, clutching their stomachs as their innards escaped them.

The first to act upon this onslaught was the Takeda lord himself, who stood at the front entrance of the teahouse with his feet positioned for battle. He held out his hand and ordered his retainers to move back—saving their lives. He then addressed the assassin with a voice lacking any of its prior humor.

"I know that style of yours. Tell me! Tell me who trained you!"

The orphan raised their head and stared into Ichiro Takeda's eyes. The golden glow from his own was answer enough. Realizing the danger he was in, the would-be sellsword ran.

The Takeda and half the city of Hokusei would give chase.

■■■■

"And here I thought you hated that one," Junko grinned, observing the fight from afar. The brown-haired samurai had taken on more of an auburn shade as of late: her hair, face and kimono was dyed in the blood of her enemies. Of which, there was only one remaining.

The leader of the mercenary band who sold out his own men crept away from the gardens as soon as the fighting started. He would pass by several of the ones he betrayed, cut to shreds and left to seep their blood beneath the cherry blossoms.

As if that sight wasn't frightening enough, he clambered up a retaining wall only to see a flock of crows waiting for him. After shooing them away, he saw the remains of the archers that were supposed to finish the deed.

"Ah!" he yelled as he slipped on a pool of blood and fell off the other side of the wall. He rolled down the slope of rocks before slamming down into the street. He got up just in time to see a ghostly figure approach him: a samurai drenched in blood, with their katana unsheathed and a trail of drool falling from their lips.

"I wonder," Junko said as she licked the blood from her katana, "if you taste as well as your underlings do!"

The mercenary screamed as he ran, running through the crowded streets of Hokusei like a rat on a sinking ship. He bumped into and stumbled over all manner of food stands and festival-goers in a desperate attempt to escape his pursuer.

Junko had taken the high road, leaping across buildings and jumping down right in front of her prey. She was of course only toying with him; if she had wanted him to die quickly, the sellsword would already be

dead.

"For betraying the orphan's trust...your death will be slow!"

The chase continued out of the city and beyond the front gates where the sellsword had pleaded with the guards for aid. They thought he was insane—or inexplicably drunk on plum wine—and tossed him away.

A more fitting way to put it was that they 'threw him to the wolves'.

AwoOooOOOooo

Junko let out a wolf's howl—a near perfect replication of the real thing. It always scared the orphan when she did it, so—as you can imagine—it had become quite a talent of hers over their years growing up together.

It scurried the sellsword forward like a rabbit that was missing one of its hind legs. The idea of wearing this one's 'paw' to bring about good fortune was starting to grow more appealing to Junko, who picked up her pace until the two arrived at the lake outside the city.

The ferryman was on his boat fishing while beside him, his wife nursed their newborn son. The vessel was anchored to the shore—or at least it was until the crazed sellsword slashed the rope with a swing of his stolen katana. It took several swings, actually, each more desperate than the last as Junko drew closer.

"What are, mad?! Leave us be!" the ferryman yelled.

When the mercenary stepped foot into his boat, the man who lived by the lake and liked to talk too much became brave. Every good man did when their family was in danger. Unfortunately, while he was able to tackle the mercenary and disarm him of his katana, he didn't expect his assailant to be carrying a sidearm.

And he *certainly* didn't expect to die by a knife wedged between his ribs. But he perished all the same while his wife screamed and their son cried. The mercenary regathered his wits and jumped onto the boat, of which had drifted a couple feet off-shore. As if a bit of water could save him from the wolf.

Junko looked down upon the ferryman to watch the last of his breath leave him. He looked as pathetic as his death had been senseless; the samurai shook her head in disgust. She wasn't the sort to get sentimental or shed tears, though—that was much more of the orphan's area of expertise.

Instead, Junko's eyes went gold as she allowed the Jigoku to embrace her. It's familiar power flowed from her wrist out to every inch of her body, consuming her in an empty warmth.

"You! You're just like the ronin, aren't you?!" the mercenary yelled. He then took a position behind the ferryman's wife, placing his knife up against her neck. "You yellow-eyed demons! Don't you take another

step forward, you monster! Or I'll kill her, too!"

The woman was sobbing uncontrollably while the newborn at her breast did likewise. It was a dramatic scene—or at least, it certainly wasn't a comedic one. Yet Junko began to laugh maniacally all the same.

"The difference between me and your...*ronin*," she said, taking a step forward onto the pier, "is that I see this world for what it really is. And I see you for what you truly are: human filth!"

Junko ran forward, leaping into the boat and allowing the Jigoku to handle the rest. It lunged its wielder forward, finding the proper arc for the fatal strike. That strike would come—however, when its target pushed the woman in its path at the last second, there was nothing Junko could do.

"No. *That sort of thinking is for the weak*," Junko said to herself as her thoughts returned and as she watched her katana take two lives with a single stab. It had gone through the mother to reach the sellsword behind her. The blade went in deep—deep enough for it to drive itself into her opponent's heart, causing him to gasp, stagger back and fall into the water with a loud splash.

As drops of water shot out from below, Junko slowly withdrew her katana from the mother's stomach. Somehow, she managed to keep her newborn held up in her arms even as the rest of her collapsed. She let out a pathetic groan just like her husband had.

"What is it, woman? You want to curse me with your dying breath?" the samurai asked. Though most would be devastated in her position, Junko felt little remorse. From a very early age and courtesy of her father, the brown-haired girl came to learn that this world was hell and that living itself was its greatest suffering.

To spare someone from all that misery with the single stroke of a sword—was that not the greatest gift?

"Onegai...please, save him," the mother said, using the last bit of her strength to raise her child and offer it to Junko. Again, it was pathetic—enough to make the samurai's gut wrench. But that wasn't the only organ that did. "Save my...little one..."

She slumped over as the last of her life left her eyes. The newborn was lowered to the ship's hull, yelling and fumbling around a growing pool of his mother's blood. Junko lowered herself too, sitting back and staring up into the darkening sky as the ferry drifted on the water.

Soon, a cold rain began drizzling down from above. She didn't blink even as drops fell into her eyes; the final words from the ferryman's wife had put her in a daze. They dug up memories the daughter of Izō Uesugi thought were long since buried.

"Little One, Little One," she repeated as her gaze fell upon the newborn screaming for his mother's warmth. "Oh, Little One. What a shame it is, to be born into this forsaken world. That's a lesson we all learn. In your case...your lesson came early, didn't it? Shall I end your suffering?"

The baby cried even more in response, flailing its arms until it hooked free a pouch from his mother's hip. Curious, Junko grabbed it and took a peek inside. Her eyes lit up at what she found.

"Alright, woman. I suppose this will make for a fair payment."

■■■■

The rain picked up that night, and by the time the orphan wondered his way back to the dojo, it was pouring. He was a mess in more ways than one and exhausted from being chased down alleys and across ravines. The Takeda lord had spared no expense to find him.

Had the orphan not known these hills like the knuckles on the back of his hand, he never would've escaped. He didn't know how Junko would react to seeing him like this...or what lie he'd tell her once she did. The orphan just knew that—after that horrendous botch of a job—he needed some peace and quiet. Some familiarity, too.

What greeted him at the entrance of the dojo...was none of those things.

"How'd your meditation go?" Junko asked. She was calm—ridiculously so as she cradled a crying baby in her arms. The contrast was crazy enough for the orphan to disbelieve his eyes; yet no matter how many times he blinked, reality didn't change.

"What...what is that thing? Junko! Did you steal someone's baby?!"

"It's mother was killed. Some mercenary stuck a sword through her gut. Poor thing was all alone," Junko said, cooing the newborn as if it was her own. For the orphan, the idea of Junko being a mother at all...was one he only entertained in his greatest nightmares. Everything about this was wrong.

"No...no, this isn't happening. You can't take care of a kid, Junko! Even you should know that!"

"Would you rather he grow up as an orphan? How'd that work for you?" Junko teased before turning her attention to the infant. It looked up at her with eyes more innocent and filled with wonder than anything else in the world. "We'll need to buy a cow in order to feed you, won't we? Not gonna be cheap...but your otosan has plenty of coin to spare, doesn't he?"

The orphan didn't reply. Instead, he lowered his head before shaking it. Soon, the rest of him shook as well. He was trying so hard to keep his anger bundled inside, but when Junko asked him to give it a name...he couldn't hold back any longer.

He embraced the Jigoku.

"I know...I know what this is, Junko. You're trying to guilt me into staying, aren't you?" he asked, each word filled with raw emotion. "I knew you were up to something...but this?!"

Junko began to chuckle as she laid the baby down on the table beside her. “Accusing me of keeping secrets...that’s real rich coming from you, orphan. Or should I say...ronin?” Junko’s own eyes went golden as she walked forth down the front steps of the dojo. “A samurai without a master! That’s what your *friends* call you!”

The orphan took a step back and into the ready position. The one Sensei had taught him. “How long have you known? No...I don’t care! Call them whatever you want—they respect me! They say I’m the greatest swordsman they’ve ever known...and they treat me like it, too!”

“Oh, I’m sure they said a lot of things. But they’re not talking much anymore.”

The man from Genfu didn’t know what his fellow student was talking about. But what he did know...was that he wasn’t a student any longer. He plunged Sensei’s sword into the mud, sheathe and all. He then made sure his voice didn’t waver.

“I’m leaving, Junko. I’m leaving it all behind.”

The orphan turned around. He couldn’t bear to see her face. The brown-haired girl he had grown up with...the only one he had to confide in, to play with, to fight and to love...he was going to walk away from the one person in this world who knew him better than anyone ever would.

It wasn’t going to be easy.

“Pick...up...your...sword. DO IT!” Junko yelled, her voice more akin to a beast than a woman. But the orphan—the ronin—had braced himself for this and shook his head. He had already said all the words left to say.

With what little the brown haired samurai had left of her humanity, while trembling with fury and fear, Junko picked up a nearby sack and tossed it over. “Before you...head out, take this.”

The sack fell beside the ronin and rolled a couple feet past him. Whatever was inside it was round. Though every sense he had told him not to look inside, the ronin felt compelled to comply with Junko’s last request. He owed her that much, at least.

But when he picked it up and took a peek inside, when he was met face-to-face with the decapitated head of the mercenary leader, he couldn’t help but let out a sigh. He really should’ve known better.

“Your family is here! You belong to *me!*”

Junko ran forth with her sword unsheathed. She wasn’t going to allow the ronin to leave her. To lose her most precious possession was worse than death, and so she charged at the ronin without restraint. Her beloved opponent would either draw his sword...or die in a single strike.

CLANG

The ronin chose the former. The two exchanged blows while the clouds above them continued to pour down. A wicked wind picked up, too, seen through the blossoms that danced violently across the air. Their fight was no less brutal as the two students of the Jigoku Ittō-ryū engaged in their most intense battle yet.

But fatigue—and something else—kept the ronin on his back foot. Junko could sense it as well: her fellow student's habit of overthinking was rearing its head in their battle. She took it as a personal insult each time her opponent didn't go for a lethal blow.

"Come on, ronin! I know you're stronger than this!"

Her opponent spat out a wad of blood in reply. There was a reason the ronin was holding back—and if there was ever a time to voice it, it was now.

"Junko...those sellswords, they respected me! They accepted me as one of their own! You could've joined us! I was gonna ask you but...I was afraid of what you'd do. Turns out I had every right to be concerned," the ronin said, shaking his head. Water began to well up in his eyes. "Come with me, Juu-chan! We can leave this place together. We can find other groups. With our skills, we'd find work all over Hyuga! We'd make more money than—"

The orphan's proposal was answered with a kick to the gut. The would-be-ronin reeled backwards, tripping over the pot of stew beside the campfire. The remains of that meal soiled his kimono.

"You've never understood what we truly are," Junko said, looking down at her opponent. "We're predators: not prey. Quit pretending to be one of *them*!"

The ronin didn't know who Junko was referring to by 'them'. At least, not until he began rubbing off the leftovers scattered across his robes. He recalled the night Junko had cooked this meal: it was the same night as the failed caravan ambush that claimed five of the mercenaries' lives.

They never did find the bodies.

"These bones...these aren't from a pig, Junko!" the ronin yelled out in horror as he discovered femurs, mandibles and clavicles among the contents of the stew. They didn't belong to any animal he knew of, and yet—even still, he refused to believe it. He refused up until the very moment Junko forced him to face the truth.

"You enjoyed how they tasted, didn't you?"

Lightning struck down as the realization hit the orphan. Vomit ejected from out of his mouth as the ronin recalled the taste. It wasn't that it was particularly tasty—but that it was nostalgic. He now knew what it had reminded him of: the orphans in Genfu.

Those boys...those innocent children...he couldn't bring himself to accept it. It was too terrible and too wicked. He would rather lose himself than recall those unthinkable horrors, and so...

<The orphan forgot himself.>

Junko's grin only grew as her opponent fully gave himself over to the Jigoku. To become the ultimate swordsman was to be nothing but the wielder of the sword. This was the thinking behind the Strike of Non-Thought: the most deadly and dangerous technique Sensei had taught them.

"Ergh!" the brown-haired student groaned as her own katana was shoved back into her chest. It was only the flat-end of the blade but even still, the force of the orphan's slashes were enough to cut her cleanly in two. It was ironic, but the only chance Junko had to survive this onslaught was to kill everything she was.

Junko did just that, forgetting herself as well.

The battle between the two wielders sent sparks flying across the otherwise dark and stormy night. The intensity of their exchange was mirrored by the whipping blossoms that swirled around them. Cries from the newborn rang out into the distance as the battle between Sensei's students moved away from the dojo.

The fight had taken them down to the pond where the two would often fish for loaches in the summer. Though neither the future nor the past was of consequence any longer. The two wielders fought and lived in the moment, accepting that it was likely their last.

Both were knee-deep in water, now, their bodies hurling through the overflowed pond without restraint. Here, where every movement required much more energy than the last, the brown-haired wielder held the advantage. She pressed it mercilessly until the red line across 'Ichi' was exposed and begging to be cut.

It was at this moment, however, that a slight pain pulsed from out of the brown-haired wielder's right pinky. It was a negligible ache, and yet...to feel anything at all ought to have been impossible while using the Strike of Non-Thought. The sensation was enough to draw the wielder out of their dissociative trance.

Junko became herself once more and—in doing so—she halted her blade mid-strike. The man before her was far more than a number. He was her greatest possession—the one who had promised to be hers forever on the night of their first winter together.

So many years ago, the two had wrapped their fingers together to seal their fate. They were to be with each other forever and ever. It was all Junko ever wanted, and yet...it was all about to come undone.

It wasn't a fatal slash but a swift kick from the ronin that would prove just as lethal. Junko was pushed out into the center of the pond where the water was at its deepest. Fallen tree branches and lengthy strings of kelp made for a great home for fishes but an even better trap for Junko's legs.

Snared, the brown-haired swordsman flailed against her unseen enemy. Unable to swim, desperation took hold as she flung out her arms and shoulders every which way in a vain attempt to keep her head

above water.

With what precious little breath she had left, she yelled out to the ronin as they looked on from the shallow end of the pond.

“You!” Junko shouted, water flooding into her mouth. “You promised me! To be mine forever! Orphan, I —”

That was all Junko could say before her lips and nose went underwater. Her eyes did, too, but not before taking in one final sight just as the dark abyss consumed her.

It was the sight of the orphan walking away.

■■■■

When Junko woke up, she was bent over and retching out water. She was freezing cold, her eyes stung and every part of her ached—her heart most of all. For while she had been out of consciousness for some time, the sight of her beloved leaving her remained fresh in her mind.

“Orphan? Orphan?!” she coughed out a cry. Even as weak as she sounded, her voice seemed to echo through the air. The rain had since halted and the wind died, leaving nothing but an eerie silence to welcome Junko as she staggered back up to the dojo.

At least the baby wasn’t crying.

An immense relief came upon Junko as she spotted the campfire in the dojo’s front yard. It was lit—albeit barely—and had the unmistakable figure of Sensei hunched over beside it. It was an odd posture for a man so dedicated to correct poise even in his old age, yet Junko paid it no mind.

“Sensei!” she shouted, rushing over and nearly losing her footing while doing so. The yard was muddy from the recent rains, and—combined with the battle between herself and the orphan—it looked as if an earthquake had ravaged the clearing.

Landscaping matters aside, Junko ran forth eager to tell Sensei all that had happened. If anyone knew how to find the orphan and return him back home where he belonged, it was the man who raised them. That was her thinking at least, until she neared closer and saw the pool of blood beneath him.

In an instant, all of Junko’s relief turned to fear. In another, it became complete and total agony.

“Sensei! SENSEI!”

Junko collapsed to her knees, using what little strength she had left to embrace the closest thing to a father she ever had. Through her tears, she mourned the loss of the one whose respect mattered to her more than life itself: the one and only man she would ever call her master.

Stabbed through the back, the greatest swordsman of the Golden Era was now no more than a wrinkled corpse. Though his wasn't the only carcass festering beside the fire. For beneath her master's body were the half-eaten remains of...of...

It was too terrible to put into words. Suffice it to say, Junko now knew why the baby wasn't crying any longer.

■■■■

"Five years," Junko said, overlooking the view of the Clanfields atop a cliff near the dojo. It was the same spot where 'Tree-san', an apple tree, once stood years ago. It had fallen over while Junko and the orphan were trying to fetch an apple for their teacher.

Even if it was terrifying at the time, it was a good memory. Unlike this one.

"Five years, Sensei," Junko repeated, patting down the last of the dirt with her shovel. She overlooked the grave with a sigh before wiping the sweat from her brow. "I will remain here and watch over your dojo—our home—for five years. I will continue to train and dedicate myself to your teachings until then.

"And after that time has passed," Junko continued, "if the orphan has yet to return...if I find that your chosen heir is unworthy...then I will hunt him down like the prey he's become."

The promise was given and then accepted by a gust of wind that made the samurai's brown curls dance across her face. No—that wasn't quite true. As Junko took her first step away from the grave and back down the mountain, she could call herself a samurai no longer.

She was a ronin. She had no master and no family...and yet, she did have a path to follow. A path that took her back to the dojo: to the future she was determined to grow and make flourish.

Junko grabbed the pouch at her hip and squeezed to get a feel for the contents inside. It wasn't gold but something far more valuable: it was what the infant's mother carried on her when she died. Though she, her husband and child were taken by the horrors of this world...

...something good would sprout from it all in the end. Junko took out a handful of apple seeds and smiled.

"When you come back, orphan, I'll have an entire orchard waiting for you."

[Side Story #30: Junko's Promise \(Female MC Version\)](#)

[Jan 19, 2021](#)

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

Side Story 30: Junko's Promise (Female MC Version)

■■ Northern Hyuga ■■

"Again, Junko! Your footwork is...it needs work. Don't get sloppy!" an old teacher yelled to his student. His voice was frail—far weaker than it had been years ago—yet it carried as much force as the whipping wind across the mountain peak. While the harshest of the winter months had passed, even in spring the gusts were cold.

And even in his twilight years, Sensei remained the strongest swordsman Junko knew.

"Hai! Yes, Sensei!" Junko replied, adjusting her feet once more. In truth, her positioning was flawless: it was a perfect jōdan—an overhead stance—that had been drilled into her mind and body years ago. The very same man who had taught her was now telling her that she was wrong, and so the obedient student made adjustments.

"Give me a break. You know the front foot shouldn't be out that far," remarked a less-than-obedient student observing the practice duel from afar. She was an orphan girl from Genfu who had since become a woman—not that Junko ever treated her as such. Not outside their futon, anyway.

The orphan was the only rival, friend and lover Junko had. She was all the brown-haired student ever wanted...and everything she needed. But right now, she was being a real pest.

Junko focused on the practice duel—even if it wasn't particularly intense or instructive. The student and master exchanged strikes with their wooden practice swords as the former was out-tricked by obvious feints and overpowered by wobbly swings. Junko was holding back throughout yet acted as if she was giving it her all.

The objective of these duels against Sensei had shifted over time: when Junko was a child, that meant merely staying alive. Then, as she got older, it was to stand her ground—and to leave without permanent scars and minimal bruising. Eventually, though, past her teenage years and into adulthood, the goal became vastly different.

It was, to put it simply...to not shame him.

"T-that's enough," Sensei said, his breathing starting to grow heavy. And though he tired early these days—especially this close to his mid-day nap—Junko had never once seen him break a sweat. The

student bowed and thanked his master for the fight before taking her seat beside the orphan.

Her fellow student looked half-asleep and was halfway through a yawn before Junko handed over the practice sword—delivering it swiftly into her gut. After the rude awakening, the orphan hopped to her feet and swaggered over into position against Sensei.

“Come on, Girl! Show me what I’ve taught you!”

Junko could sense a problem well before there was one; the intensity in the orphan’s stance went well beyond what was required in a practice duel against their master. Sure enough, she swung her weapon with full force against Sensei’s, the collision causing the teacher’s sword to crack and to be driven down into the mud.

As if that wasn’t shameful enough, the orphan followed the strike with a tackle—slamming her shoulder into Sensei and forcing him to fall flat into the ground.

Junko was on her feet and in the orphan’s face in an instant. Her eyes were golden while her hands were makeshift claws. They gripped around the orphan’s throat as rage enveloped the daughter of a samurai—and not just any. Junko was the only child of Izō Uesugi, the head of his clan.

While the brunette came from a noble heritage, what she intended to do to the orphan was anything but.

“Junko...bring me the katana. *My* katana,” Sensei ordered as he struggled to his feet. With more than a little reluctance, the obedient student released the orphan before hurrying off to the dojo. During her trip, she thought of several ways to punish her fellow student for shaming Sensei.

Most of them started by getting her naked.

After sliding open the shoji doors to the dojo and bowing with respect, Junko invited herself inside. She approached the shrine at the far end of the training hall where Sensei’s sword rested on its wooden display mount. Falling to her knees in reverence, she clapped her hands and whispered a prayer.

It was short and simple. “May these hands be worthy of your sword, Sensei.”

The obedient student then took the katana in both hands, raising it up before her. Turning her head to make certain she was alone, she unsheathed it—just slightly. Just enough to see *it*.

彦齋

“Gensai,” Junko said, speaking the name as if it were holy. In her mind it was—even more so because that was all there was inscribed on the side of the blade. There was no family name. There was no ‘Takeda’. Sensei never mentioned his family to his students and Junko never dared to ask.

Because deep down, she already had her answer.

“You gave up your family for my sake. You saved me from that demon...and lifted me from out of that hell. You brought me and the orphan together...and taught us the way of the sword. Everything I am...I owe to you, Gensai.”

Closing her eyes, the daughter of Izō Uesugi once again renounced her past life and family in favor of her adopted one. Herself, Sensei and the orphan...they were tied together no less permanently than the stars in the sky.

With the renowned katana in hand, Junko hurried back to the practice grounds. She was worried that the orphan had done something even more foolish in her absence, yet it turned out that she should've been more concerned over something else, instead.

Sensei told them to kneel upon her return—and they did. With their knees muddied, the students of Gensai Takeda, the most fearsome swordsman of his era, looked up as their teacher raised his sword overhead.

“It is time I choose my successor. The Jigoku Ittō-ryū must not die with me. Such power...is meant to be used. To change and shape Hyuga.”

Junko's eyes went wide. Her heart skipped a beat and her lungs stopped outright. *This* was the moment she had been waiting for—yet she never dared to entertain it outside her wildest dreams. To carry the future of Sensei's style of swordsmanship on her shoulders...it was the greatest honor from the man Junko respected most.

Finally, her loyalty and dedication was about to be rewarded. It was all she could do to keep from drooling as Sensei told the orphan to lift her head. Junko licked her lips in anticipation as...as her teacher handed over the katana. To *her*.

“This is my legacy. Take it, Girl. You are the heir to the Jigoku Ittō-ryū.”

■■■■

Only Sensei possessed the ability to sleep through the sound of clashing metal rods echoing throughout the training hall. Though he was officially meditating, not even the most zen of monks could contemplate in peace while war waged right in front of them.

baa-Ang* *Baa-ang

It was a war between two students in the disguise of a practice match. Though there was no such thing as ‘practice’ for Junko, who went all-out with every swing—each more forceful than the last. She wanted to bash the orphan's skull in and said as much with her golden-eyed glare.

As for the reason why...that much was obvious.

"I'm sorry, alright?!" the orphan yelled during a rare pause in the battle. "How many times do I gotta say it? Sensei's gone senile—he didn't mean to make me the heir! You deserve it a hundred times more than I do, Juu-chan!"

Invoking Junko's nickname did little to cool her wrath; if anything, it stoked the fires burning within her even more. "It's the greatest honor a swordsman could ever ask for—yet you treat it as a joke! You're the heir to the Jigoku Ittō-ryū—now act like it!"

The battle waged on and outside the training hall to the front yard and between the many sakura trees Sensei had planted there. This being early in spring, the pink and white blossoms were nearing full bloom—their graceful beauty making for a picturesque backdrop for a swordfight.

Of course, this wasn't a swordfight and it was anything but pretty.

"Gah! Ah—*kuso!*" the orphan yelled after Junko stomped on her leading right foot. In truth, she had been on her backfoot throughout the entire fight, focusing on withstanding Junko's onslaught until she tired.

"Stand and fight me, you coward! How dare you dishonor our style! How dare you disgrace Sensei!" Junko yelled and swung, though the orphan had already darted out of the way. Using their master's sakura trees for protection, Junko couldn't get close enough for a lethal strike.

"Why are we doin' this, Juu-chan? Why are we training so hard?" the orphan asked. It wasn't the first time she had voiced this question.

"Not this again," Junko growled, taking a moment to find a way through to reach her opponent. "To master the blade and one's self is to give up all else. And that includes weakness! Eyah!"

Junko found an opening in the orphan's guard and lunged. Unfortunately for her, her opponent had a trump card: Sensei's sword. She unsheathed it and held it out to intercept Junko's strike. The obedient student who idolized her teacher paused mid-swing.

She wouldn't dare risk damaging Sensei's sword.

"I'm tired, Junko," the orphan said. "I'm tired of watchin' the world pass me by while I sit atop this damn mountain. I'm tired of being dirt poor—having to hunt and fish for my food while living in this dump! I'm tired of freezing my ass off, too, and I'm tired of having to walk a mile every time I need to take a shit! I'm—*umph!*"

The orphan went quiet when Junko enveloped her lips over hers. Intimacy was Junko's go-to answer for whenever her soulmate acted up like this. Whenever the orphan asked too many questions...whenever she threatened to leave her alone, sex was always the solution.

Though this time, it wasn't. "I'm tired...even of that, Juu-chan."

The kissing stopped. The daughter of Izō Uesugi opened her eyes wide, her irises shifting to a golden glow. In the absence of her lover, Junko embraced the Jigoku instead. Her words were cold. “Is that so. Draw your weapon, orphan.”

With reluctance—but knowing her partner far too well—the orphan complied, though the iron rod wasn’t the weapon Junko wanted. “This isn’t practice. Wield the sword Sensei gave you!”

The orphan had hardly the time to do just that when Junko struck forth a series of blows. She had her own katana—one of the several dozen spares the two of them had gone through over the years. With ronin and sellswords so abundant in the Clanfields, there was no shortage of cheap steel to be found for those willing to loot corpses.

And now Junko intended to loot Sensei’s sword off the orphan’s corpse. At least, that was how she fought. Yet as furious as she was, Junko was a proper swordmaster who took pride and satisfaction in a good fight—and there wasn’t one to be had. The orphan couldn’t maintain the Jigoku. Junko could see the will to live fade from her eyes as they dimmed back down to black.

As she towered over her fallen opponent, she wondered what happened to the girl from Genfu she was always chasing. She must’ve been thinking aloud.

“I’m not that stupid little girl anymore,” the orphan replied. “Don’t you see? We’ve been at each other’s throats for years. All that pain and suffering we put ourselves through...all to be stronger than the other—what was it all for? Nothing—that’s what! I don’t wanna race you anymore, Junko. And I don’t wanna chase Sensei’s shadow, either.”

Junko pushed the orphan away with a palm strike to the chest before turning around and shaking her head. In truth, she was terrified. The words her most precious person were saying felt like knives driven into her heart. She couldn’t face her like this.

“Sensei. You *know* we’d be dead without him—or worse! Don’t you have an ounce of gratitude for the man who saved us? How can you be so selfish?!”

“We’re supposed to be his students, Junko—not his servants!”

“I’m not his—” Junko started, though stopped upon hearing Sensei’s yell from the dojo. Their master had awakened from his meditative slumber and...was in need of someone to prepare hot water for his bath.

The orphan didn’t say anything. She didn’t have to. Instead, she wiped the mud off her kimono and took out a pouch from behind her obi sash. Junko recognized it—it was Sensei’s, kept in the dojo’s shrine.

“I’m going to the trading post to buy us some rice. Stay here and wash the old man’s back.”

■■■■

"You're late."

Junko hopped down from a tree and into the path of a haggard-looking ronin. It was early the next morning when the orphan made it back to dojo from her shopping trip. Aside from being hours late, her kimono was cut up and sprayed with blood. Her usual stride was different—indicating a minor injury to the leg.

As far as how she smelled...

"Come on, Juu-chan. Quit sniffin' me," the orphan protested as Junko inspected her as a dog would. Aside from sweat and dried blood, another scent could be found from her lips.

"Saké. Who have you been drinking with?" Junko asked, trying—and failing—to hold back her jealousy. Though the orphan getting intoxicated was nothing new, what was more suspicious was the amount of rice she had brought back with her. She had two large buckets tied to a carrying pole atop her shoulders.

It was a lot more than Sensei's pouch of coins could purchase. Though before Junko could inquire further, the orphan locked her lips around hers. The buckets fell to the ground and the two students shortly followed. Their hands explored each other's bodies while their tongues wrestled in each other's mouths.

The familiar warmth of the woman she loved was enough for Junko to halt her suspicions. "You're even easier when you're drunk," she whispered between heated breaths. She gripped her fingers atop the orphan's shoulders and slid her kimono down, revealing the slim yet remarkably strong arms beneath.

To be held in those arms until the day she died...it was all Junko ever wanted. Well—that wasn't entirely true. There was another part of the orphan she wanted even more—and it was damp and hot as it pressed against her. Junko deftly began to strip her partner as she had done countless times before.

Though as she was removing their sash, she grabbed something heavy and full. No, it wasn't the orphan's bosom—it was a pouch of coins twice the size that it had been before. As much as Junko lusted for the woman she had pinned beneath her...she had to know where it came from.

"Don't worry about it, Juu-chan," the orphan said between moans. "Turns out it's easy to make ryō with a good enough swordarm. There's tons of work out there, too. All I had to do was off a merchant and his guards. Old bastard died in his sleep."

"What?! What are you saying?" Junko asked, pouncing away from her lover's embrace. "You're a swordmaster—and the heir to the Jigoku Ittō-ryū! You dare disgrace yourself by doing mercenary work? Are you nothing but a sellsword?!"

The orphan remained on the ground, looking up into the sky. The sun was rising as the warblers began their chirp. Like them, the disillusioned student wished she could flap her wings and get away from it all.

But she had an anchor tied to her. It took the form of a katana branded with Sensei's name. "So you're sayin' if I get rid of this sword...then I'll be free to be whatever I want? 'Cause if that's the case...you may as well take it from me now."

"I'll take it from your corpse, instead!" Junko said before delivering a kick into the orphan's ribs. She then bent down to pick up the carrying rod and with it, the buckets of rice. "Now get up and stop being stupid. It's your turn to cook breakfast. Or is doing chores beneath you now?"

It turned out that it wasn't and that onigiri was on the menu. The orphan wasn't a great cook but you didn't have to be to make rice balls. A large, fresh one was presented to Sensei after he took his seat at the head of the table.

With a look of disgust, the old swordmaster picked it up and reluctantly took in a bite. After several chews, he spat it back at the chef. "Rice! Food fit for prey, not predators. I want meat, Girl!"

"They didn't have any," the orphan replied. "But if you wanna go off into the woods and hunt us some deer—then go right ahead! Otherwise, eat your rice."

"Don't you talk back to me, Girl! I want meat! Meat!" Sensei yelled, tossing the remnants of his onigiri at the orphan. It broke apart in her face. Her eyes then went golden.

Junko intervened between them, acting as a referee between student and master. The orphan gave her companion a glare before shaking her head and walking away from the table.

Once she was gone, Sensei turned to the daughter of Izō Uesugi. "Junko..."

"I know, Sensei," Junko said, checking once more to make certain the orphan was gone. Once she was, she folded up the sleeve on her left arm and presented it before her master.

She grimaced as Sensei bit down upon it, sucking out blood as greedily as a babe would its mother's breast.

■■■■

Junko had something of a sixth sense when it came to the orphan. It was why she feigned sleep after a passionate late-afternoon 'nap' with her fellow student. The woman from Genfu was as quiet as a mouse as she slipped back on her clothes and left the dojo.

But Junko was a cat and she wasn't about to let her prey slip from out of her paws. That and she had a profound curiosity, too—one compounded by jealousy. The scent of other people lingered on the one she loved. Those people would soon pay for trying to take her most precious possession away from her.

And the orphan was going to lead her straight to them.

'Them' happened to be a mercenary group encamped an hour's walk downhill from the dojo. Junko knew them as sellswords from their banners—or the lack thereof. Whereas the Uesugi and Takeda loved their emblems and clan colors, those who worked for either made certain not to be outwardly offensive.

At least visually, anyway. Their smell was another matter. Junko's sensitive nose worked against her as she lurked over to the camp in the cover of darkness. *"That smell—human filth. What can they offer you that I can't, my love?"*

For starters, the orphan was given a hero's welcome. If there wasn't a feast prepared before, there was now, as casks of saké were brought out and a skinned deer hung from a tree was cut down and brought to the fire for cooking. Aside from learning why the game around the dojo had been so scarce in recent weeks, Junko discovered her lover had a new nickname.

"Ronin! We were wonderin' when you were comin' back. Here—share a bottle of Hokusei Brewing's finest with me! Got another job offer for you...but let's fill up our stomachs, first!"

Ronin. That was the name given to samurai without a master. It was the most dishonorable title a swordsman could have, yet the orphan seemed to wear the moniker proudly. Instead of anger or disgrace, however, she appeared quite the opposite. She was smiling and laughing as the other mercs took turns trading jokes.

The whole world, for a moment, went dark for Junko. Crimson-colored lines broke out upon each of their bodies, begging to be cut and sliced a hundred ways. The Jigoku had taken control of the brown-haired samurai. And she had surrendered to it willingly.

"When was...the last time...you smiled, for me?"

It took every ounce of restraint for Junko not to rush in there and tear apart the sellswords limb from limb. She could do it easily, too; they were no more dangerous to her than their cuts of venison were to them. Everything from their lack of physical conditioning to how they slouched around the campfire denoted a lack of training and discipline.

Gensai's students were leagues beyond these mercenaries. It made sense, then, that they'd have plenty of jobs lined up for the orphan to do.

"All right, Ronin, let's talk some business," the leader of the group said, kicking his feet up atop a nearby log. "See, that merchant you...dispatched so well the other night was just a start. We've got another passin' by—and rumor is, he's packing somethin' more valuable than stale rice!"

"I may be a ronin, but I'm no bandit," said the orphan. She kept her eyes focused on the fire. "I want to do more than raid caravans."

"Right, right! Well, maybe 'merchant' ain't the best way to describe these guys, then. They're actually suppliers for the Uesugi. See, our group is trying to get in the Takeda's good graces. The reds have

gone under new management lately—word is, groups that distinguish themselves get hired on permanently. We're talkin' stipends for years, here! And you know what else?"

The orphan didn't and shook her head.

"Especially skilled warriors got a chance of gettin' adopted into a branch family. For folk with no house names like us, it's a hell of an offer. And a woman with your skills...you keep at it and we may be callin' you Lady Takeda someday, hahaha!"

"Adopted, huh..."

Junko's eyes turned gold once more. This time, she embraced the Jigoku on purpose. This talk of family—and of Takeda, too...every word seemed to push the orphan further and further away from her. The now-familiar despair of losing the one she needed most made her heart sink deep beneath her chest.

But it was still beating, and so long as it was, the orphan would be hers. She refocused her eyes upon the encampment, visualizing the lines of death and fantasizing about how she would punish them for deceiving the orphan like this. For it was nothing short of trickery that could drive the one she loved against her and Sensei!

"What's this?" she asked aloud. Junko wasn't talking to herself—she was staring up into the tree she had braced up against. The lines of death depicted a figure within the branches. A figure that was frightened stiff—especially after Junko jumped up and stared them face-to-face.

"Ah—*ng!*" the figure said, trying to muffle herself mid-scream. She was more of a teenager than a woman and was too scrawny to be a mercenary. She was a kunoichi judging by her garb—a ninja, trained in the art of subterfuge.

Sensei had spoken about them before. Though they weren't the best fighters, their talents outside the battlefield made them invaluable all the same.

"D-don't kill me, please. I'm not with them," she whispered as beads of sweat fell down her forehead. Junko gave no reply aside from maintaining her stare, which was wicked enough to get the frightened kunoichi to start talking. "My name is Tamaki. M-may I ask yours?"

Junko would never give Tamaki her name. Instead, she started sniffing around her. What she smelled made her eyes open wide. The scent was disturbing, distinctive, and most of all...nostalgic.

"You're with the Uesugi," Junko said. The reaction from the ninja all but confirmed it. "What are you doing out this far? And why shouldn't I slay you here and now?"

"I'm just—I'm just here to scout and observe this group. We found the...the remains of what happened to one of our caravans three nights back. I followed their trail to here. Yet from everything I've seen...this group doesn't have near the numbers needed for what happened. Certainly not enough to kill eight veteran samurai!"

Junko couldn't help but smirk. What this Tamaki wasn't factoring in was that one of Sensei's students were among the sellswords. An idea started forming inside her head. As much as she despised the idea of helping the Uesugi—her old family—she was willing to do whatever it took to save her new one.

"Alright, ninja. Got any ideas on how you want to stop them?"

■■■■

The orphan—or rather, the ronin, as she preferred to be called—took up a position upon a wooded hillside overlooking one the main roads into Hokusei. It being the pitch-black of night, there wasn't a soul to be seen. But if the mercenary group's scouting was correct, a caravan would soon pass by delivering high-quality iron alloy to the Uesugi.

None of that meant anything to her. But this job was another chance to put her swordsmanship to use. Getting paid and praised for her efforts was a nice change of pace—considering she never got either at the dojo.

"Wonder what Juu-chan would say if she saw me now," the orphan thought aloud. Of course, Junko knew exactly what she'd say—or at least what she'd do—but she refrained from moving a muscle from her current position.

She was up in a tree adjacent to the one the orphan was crouched beside. Every bone in her body wanted to swoop down and grab her. She wanted to either take the orphan away or to take her right then and there—she couldn't make up her mind. Junko would settle for neither, though, as she waited for the rest of the mercenaries to arrive.

When the horse-drawn carriage came down the road, it was unlit by lanterns. There were no accompanying samurai and the driver sat unnerving still at the reins. It was suspicious—yet sellswords weren't known for their discretion. They ran down the hill all at once, pouncing silently like an owl swooping upon a mouse.

They weren't going to find anything, Junko knew, as she and Tamaki had already secured the driver, samurai and iron an hour earlier. With that job done, all Junko had left to do was clean up the mercenaries on their way back to camp.

That was the idea, anyway. The plan had taken a swift change when a flaming arrow flew out from the opposite side of the hill. It embedded itself into the carriage—of which the orphan and mercenaries were currently inside. The caravan went up in flames right away. It must've been soaked in lamp oil.

Junko felt her heart race out of concern for her lover, who jumped from out of the cart and began wheezing from the smoke. Her kimono was charred and her hair was singed, but she was otherwise unharmed.

"For the Uesugi! Hyaah!"

The samurai that Junko and Tamaki had warned earlier yelled out a war cry in unison, announcing their presence and charging after the group. Though they wouldn't get the fight they wanted: they were up against sellswords who held no reservations when it came to running from unfavorable odds.

"Retreat! Kuso—it's a damn trap! Get outta here!"

The mercenaries scattered—which was their last mistake. Junko darted in one after the other, the Jigoku lighting them up through the smoky haze. Limbs fell off like sakura petals in a strong wind as the obedient student of Gensai took vengeance on those who dared to take her orphan away.

The only difficulty Junko faced was in making certain that her kimono didn't get dirtied by the bloodspray. Fleeing swordsmen were hardly swordsmen at all, it turned out, and not one of them so much as raised their blade against the brown-haired samurai. Though in their defence...it was hard to do so without a swordarm.

"This supposed to be thrilling? To use Sensei's style on this human filth...what a waste," Junko said aloud as she flicked her katana clean. Unfortunately, the mercenary leader was quicker on his feet than the others, but—while he managed to escape—many of his cohorts didn't. Junko counted five corpses by the time she was finished—Ichi, Ni, San, Shi, and Go—while the samurai suffered no casualties of their own.

Though considering they were Uesugi, Junko was tempted to change that. The primary outlet of her frustration was Tamaki, however, who made the mistake of approaching her with open arms.

"You fought tremendously! We managed to—*guah!*"

Junko raised the ninja by the collar of her shozoku and slammed her against a tree. To say she was upset was putting it mildly.

"Why didn't you tell me about the fire?! What if...*damn it!*" Junko growled, bashing the kunoichi against the oak once more. The thought of the orphan getting hurt made her furious. "We were supposed to be working together! And what about these samurai, huh? They weren't part of the plan!"

The group of Uesugi approached Junko with caution. They had their swords out too, though did so out of self-concern more so than with any intention of attacking the swordsman who saved them. It helped that Junko had a particular feature.

"Excuse us...but your hair—it's brown," one said, stating the obvious. "Could you be...an Uesugi? Are you from a branch family, perhaps? An illegitimate child from—"

"I'm not part of your family and I never will be," Junko said, releasing the ninja. Tamaki fell with a hard thud and clutched her throat for breath. Unwilling to turn around and face the samurai out of fear of seeing an uncle, a cousin, or some distant relative, Junko ran off into the night.

Though she wouldn't leave empty-handed.

■■■■

“Interesting haircut you got there, orphan,” Junko said with a grin while her teeth grated over the stem of her tobacco pipe.

It was early afternoon the next day before the orphan had sufficiently licked their wounds from the failed caravan robbery that cost five of her companions their lives. Though few would mourn a mercenary, the orphan seemed to be bothered by the whole affair. Of course, she wouldn’t mention anything about it to Junko.

“What are cookin’, Juu-chan? You hunt down a deer?” the orphan asked, gesturing to the large pot the brown-haired samurai was stirring. As far as a reply, Junko bent over and blew a mouthful of smoke into her face.

“More like a pig. Go ahead—have some,” Junko said, pouring out a ladle of the stew into a wooden bowl.

The orphan accepted it gladly, hungry but even more relieved that Junko was in a merciful mood. Her usually possessive and distrusting lover didn’t seem to question at all where she had been or why her hair was cut short on one side.

She slurped up the stew before quickly downing it and asking for another.

“This stuff is great! Puts my rice balls to shame! Bit different than the pork we usually get for our sukiyaki, though,” the orphan said, eager to down another portion. With her spirits lifted, she didn’t even mind it when Sensei took a seat beside her.

Their master enjoyed it so much that he asked for seconds after giving his praise. The orphan nearly choked on her spoon; Sensei *never* complimented either of them on their cooking—or anything, really—so this stew must’ve been especially good. Of course, the remark from Sensei certainly wasn’t.

“Now *this* is a proper meal fit for predators! You’d do well to take notice, Girl!”

The orphan held her tongue. After finishing her third bowl and letting out a loud burp, she wiped her mouth clean and said what she had prepared to say. “I...I think I’m gonna be gone for awhile. I want to do some meditations up on the mountain top—for isolation, I mean. I’ll probably be gone for a week.”

If Sensei had even heard her, he made no sign of it. He was too busy engorging himself on the stew. It was Junko that the orphan most feared and it was her eyes that she wouldn’t dare look into.

“A week, huh? Have fun.”

Junko’s apathetic response was far from the passionate outburst the orphan expected. In some ways, she was disappointed, but in many more she was immensely relieved. Though the orphan was no fool: she had a hint of suspicion too, that something wasn’t quite right.

“What, that’s it? You’re not going to try and stop me?”

Junko took in another puff of her pipe before bringing the ladle to her lips and sipping the stew. “Why would I? Do you take me as some sort of overprotective lunatic?”

The orphan could do nothing but stare. Junko met her eyes and the two began a staring contest. It was like a game of Mirrors—though the orphan would be the first to turn away.

After she did, Junko put on a devilish grin.

■■■■

“Ah, the Cherry Blossom Festival never fails to bring in an odd batch o’ travelers this time o’ year. Soon as the ice melts, I get folks from all over crossin’ through to Hoku for the sakura viewings. And in case you’re lookin’ to wet your whistle, the brewery has a new plum wine out this year and I hear it’s...”

The ferryman had a gift for gabbing and did so from the moment Junko took a seat at the back of his vessel. Traveling across the nearby lake to get to Hokusei saved time and energy; Junko needed plenty of both if she was to put a stop to the mercenary company for good.

The brown-haired samurai recalled her conversation with Tamaki from earlier. Apparently, the Uesugi were vying for a temporary truce with the Takeda to buy time to restore their supplies and numbers after their recent losses. It was a popular plan with the common people: enough so for otherwise neutral parties to side with the white-bannered clansmen.

The Takeda wanted to push their advantage, however, and so—according to the kunoichi—they hired out the orphan’s mercenary group for a special job. It was a high-profile one, too, that even the ferryman knew about.

“...more a fan o’ their pickled plums, to be honest. Say, you’re not much of a talker, huh? Had a quiet group o’ samurai not so different board right before you. Uesugi by their kimonos, but...smelled more like sellswords to me. Well, what do I know? Anyhow, I ain’t much one for politics, but I reckon they were headed into Hoku for the peace talks. If it passes...well, we’ll all be drunk on plum wine before the day is done! Good timin’, too: my wife just gave birth to our son. What a blessin’ it would be to raise ‘em in an era of peace in the Clanfields!”

Junko let out a snort upon hearing that. As far as what the sellswords were doing dressed up as Uesugi samurai, their job was to sabotage the peace talks just as they began. They’d kill a few Takeda and the war would spark anew, Tamaki said, which was as clever a ploy as any Junko had heard.

Though clever ploys didn’t suit her, the swordmaster found herself in one of her own: she was carrying a year-old sakura sapling. It was one of Sensei’s which she had uprooted with his permission.

As far as *why* she was lugging around a small tree, Junko intended to use it as her ticket to get inside the ceremony.

Each year during the Cherry Blossom Festival, there was a ceremonial planting of new sakura trees from all across the North. It was supposed to be a unifying gesture—which was usually only ever symbolic—though with the peace talks, this year's held much more significance.

It would also get Junko in close enough to kill the remaining sellswords. She tipped her conical farmer's hat to the ferryman after reaching the other side of the lake and embarked. True to the ferryman's words, she could hear the cries of a newborn from out of a nearby shed.

"To be raised in an era of peace...you sure choose the wrong part of Hyuga to be born in," Junko thought as she made her way to Hokusei's main gate. This was the city she was born in and yet it was as foreign to her as snow on a summer's day. She had rarely made visits here and only ever on errands for Sensei.

"And you were always here with me," Junko said to the orphan who wasn't at her side. Unlike herself, her fellow student seemed to thrive in crowded places such as these. And it *was* crowded. Girls in kimonos colored every shade of pink chatted amongst themselves while merchants hawked their wares.

Street performers danced about while musicians played in a dueling symphony to earn the coin of passersby. The sheer amount of noise and movement overwhelmed Junko, whose senses weren't designed for this level of stimulation.

It also didn't help that she had next to no sense of direction here. Junko pushed through the waves of people while wielding her potted sapling like a club. Even then, the going was a slog: no matter how many festival-goers she scared away, there were always others to take their place.

"Get away from me! You filth—I could cut you all down where you stand!" she yelled out in frustration. Though even her most direct threats fell on deaf's ears as those around here were too busy sipping on plum wine and snacking on taiyaki shaped like cherry blossoms to notice.

Running short on time and even shorter on patience, Junko began moving. She needed to find the gardens where the peace talks were to take place—but right now, she'd settle for anywhere where she could hear herself think. That meant escaping Hokusei's main streets and avoiding its marketplaces.

"This is...the temple district?" Junko asked aloud. There was no one here to answer her: the Cherry Blossom Festival was one of the few celebrations that had no religious component to it. Even the monks were off during this period to enjoy the festivities.

Junko's feet took her inside a particular shrine: an old and familiar one. The Wolf Temple was made entirely of wood and was originally used as a watchtower back when Hokusei was a frontier town and Hyugans had to fear for their lives from the large, dark-brown creatures that lurked in the night.

She was referring to bears and Kondos, too. Both once ruled this region before the people later known as Hyugans arrived from a distant land, many centuries ago. Now, in the North at least, both its original occupants were nearly extinct. That was the extent of the history lesson Junko learned in her youth about the time before the clan wars.

"A moment of meditation would do me some good," Junko decided, sitting in a seiza behind a column in an unlit corner of the temple. She let out a sneeze; dust was everywhere in this poorly-maintained part of the shrine. The samurai likened it to the orphan's half of the dojo which often went unkempt for weeks on end.

One thought of the orphan grew to a dozen and then hundreds more. At least back at the dojo, Junko had Sensei to take care of and take her mind off her loneliness. But here, alone in this forsaken city and unsure of everything—the orphan's well-being, most of all—Junko found herself facing an immense dread.

A dread that would soon grow in leaps and bounds.

schisk

The shoji doors to the temple slid open before a group of visitors made their way inside. Junko glanced from behind the column and held in a gasp at what she saw. These were Uesugi, wearing white kimonos with matching emblems of two swallows kissing. They weren't the group of sellswords masquerading as clansmen, either.

These were the real deal. Junko knew as much at a glance, but it wasn't until she heard her mother's voice that all uncertainty curled up and died. It was fitting imagery, too, as that was *exactly* what the brown-haired samurai wanted to do right now. Though she wasn't a samurai right now—in her mother's presence, she was merely a girl.

"Well?! Where is he? Where's this sellsword I've taken time out of my rigorous schedule to meet?" Junko's mother yelled, pacing about the shrine. "It's distasteful enough that I'll have to share tea with Ichiro! He makes it *far* too sweet!"

Before long, a haggard man in a white kimono was brought inside. Though he was wearing the Uesugi robes, he was pushed to the ground and made to grovel low in front of the clan's matriarch. When he lifted his head up from the tatami, Junko recognized him as the leader of the mercenary company.

"La-Lady Uesugi, all my men are in place. I'm glad you accepted my offer. As to the matter of my payment, I can—"

"I have to say," Lady Uesugi started, pulling out a fan from her kimono and expanding it, "I was quite surprised when we first got your message. I thought even sellswords had some semblance of honor among their own. Yet your presence here proves me wrong.

"You tell us," the lady continued, "that the Takeda have employed your group to sabotage the talks and put false blame upon our clan. A plot very much in keeping with how devious that Ichiro can be. If I understand you correctly, you've come to us with a counter-offer: you intend to sacrifice your fellow...comrades...so that we may use the Takeda's plan against them."

The leader of the sellswords nodded, confirming the plan. He went into detail about where his company was currently lying in wait for his signal to move. When Junko realized the bastard was trying to get the orphan killed, the Jigoku took over. Yet even in its familiar embrace, Junko couldn't fully escape the presence of the woman who birthed her.

"We'll have archers in Takeda uniforms lined up on the walls. They'll dispose of your mercs—or should I say...innocent Uesugi bystanders there for the flower viewing? Fufufu!"

"But...but Lady Uesugi!" one of the samurai said, bowing deeply. "Deceit is not our way! We should think twice before resorting to Takeda tricks!"

Junko's mother rolled her eyes while fanning herself. "We cannot allow Ichiro to gain further control of the city. If that requires the sacrifice of a few sellswords to do so—than that is a price I'll gladly pay!"

The mercenary leader let out a gulp. A bead of sweat fell from his balding scalp into his mustache. "Forgive me my lady, but one of my men...well, she's actually a woman and...a very dangerous one at that. You should take extreme caution in how you—"

"Bah! You mercs are all the same," Lady Uesugi replied, putting away her fan. Just as she did so, her eyes peered off into Junko's direction. After what she said next, there was little doubt as to who she saw.

"Junko? Is that you?"

Hearing her name voiced by that woman was like a stab through the gut. The Jigoku fled from her and in its absence was a sheer terror that Junko hadn't felt since she was a young girl. A girl tortured and terrified on a nightly basis at her family's estate.

Junko covered her mouth as her throat gurgled up bile from her latest meal. Enveloped in a complete and total panic, the woman who was perhaps the greatest swordsman of this era fled. She darted out from the shrine like lightning, bursting through and running over an obese woman with brown hair at the Wolf Temple's front entrance.

She continued running as fast as her legs could carry her as if each stride pushed the memories of her childhood away. She had convinced herself for so many years that her life hadn't started until the orphan was in it.

When Sensei united her with the one who would be her most precious, *that* was when her life began. And the most precious memory of those days would always be the promise the cute girl from Genfu had made her as they stared up into the starry sky.

Junko had asked the orphan to be hers forever. It was a selfish, childish thing to ask...yet their response was as clear in her mind now as it had been during their first winter together.

"I promise. I'll be yours forever, Juu-chan."

So deep in thoughts of the past, Junko had lost track of the present: including where she was going. She knocked over a priest and nearly trampled over a shrine maiden before she realized she ought to slow down. She wasn't able to do so in time, however, before a group of children made their way into her path.

"Get the hell outta my—*ah!*" Junko yelled, before collapsing into a pile of mud. The sapling she was carrying flew from her grasp while her ankles burned as if they were broken. In truth, they were just painfully bent; the mud had glued her sandals in place.

After trying and failing to pull her feet free from the muck, she realized it wasn't made of dirt at all. It was clay—or rather, the street itself had turned into a thick sludge. It didn't make any sense...but then again, magic didn't have to.

"I'm sorry, Miss Samurai," said a boy barely in his teenage years. He looked utterly ridiculous wearing priestly robes that were two sizes too big on him, yet he seemed to be the leader of this band of children. He held out a slip of paper and clapped it within his hands. The clay began to release its grasp beneath Junko.

"What the hell was that?!" Junko asked, shaking off the remnants of the street from her toes. "No—it doesn't matter. I have to find the orphan."

Upon saying 'orphan', every pair of eyes on the group of kids began to light up. They were orphans themselves, they exclaimed, and their older brother was leading them around on a tour of the temples. Some admitted that it was as boring as it sounded, earning them a quick reprimand from their tour guide.

"Um, miss, you dropped your tree," one of the girls said, heaving the potted sapling over her head and offering it to the samurai. Junko took it and mumbled her thanks. She was about to make her exit when the boy dressed up like a Shinto priest stopped her.

"Say, that's a cherry blossom isn't it? Are you here for the planting ceremony? I can escort you to the inner gardens if you wish."

Junko was about to refuse when the kids began jumping for joy. Apparently, planting a tree was more fun than visiting shrines. Unable to find a proper excuse, the brown-haired samurai reluctantly took the boyish priest up on his offer.

The boy's name was 'Kiyo-kun' according to the children that followed him. He was their adopted older brother, more or less.

The two had a conversation en route to the inner gardens, which was far more secure than Junko had expected. The guards at one of the entrances scrutinized her intensely, but became friendly upon the sight of Kiyo-kun at her side. When Junko asked about it, her new companion blushed.

“Well...I suppose it helps when your father is the mayor, doesn't it? Though that isn't technically his title, of course, he's done far more for Hokusei and its people than the Uesugi ever have!” the priest exclaimed. “And now he's going to bring peace to the entire region. It won't be easy, but...if anyone can do it, it's Ichi-sama!”

Shouts of ‘Ichi-sama’ echoed from the group of children, all of whom thought very kindly of the Takeda lord. Junko still had her concerns, however. “This Ichiro Takeda...are you certain he'll be safe? This may turn out to be a more dangerous affair than he thinks.”

The priestly boy beamed with confidence. “Ichi-sama's swordsmanship is without equal! He's bested every swordsman who's challenged him. They say he's got the quickest sword draw Hyuga has ever known!”

“Is that so?” Junko asked, her curiosity starting to pique. “I'd like to meet your father in person, then.”

Kiyo-kun was quick to apologize. “Gomenasai, but that's impossible. He's currently in the middle of peace talks at the moment.”

“They've already started?! Where are they taking place?!” Junko yelled. After Kiyo-kun gave her the location, the samurai shoved the tree into his grasp and ran off without saying so much as a goodbye.

The archers were already in place.

■■■■

The unending thump of a nearby sōzu—a bamboo device made to scare off deer—was slowly driving the orphan insane. Her nerves didn't come from fear but from an eagerness to get the job over with. Killing a half-dozen Takeda samurai wasn't a problem. Standing in place for an hour-and-a-half, was.

“Boss is ‘sposed to be back by now. Wonder what's keepin' him?” one of the mercs asked aloud. There were four of them in total—five if you included the orphan. The orphan herself wasn't quite sure who she countered herself among these days, yet all she knew for certain was that these sellswords treated her kinder than Sensei ever had.

That—and a heavy pouchful of ryō—was why she was out here loitering while dressed as an Uesugi with a faceful of makeup on. Apparently, her skin was too tan and her features were too Southern to pass for a proper Uesugi.

“I'm just glad Junko can't see me like this. She'd never let me live it down...in more sense than one,” the orphan thought. It was the last thought she'd have before a horn sounded off in the distance. That was the signal announcing Lady Uesugi and her entourage had arrived.

Which meant it was time for the mercenary company to begin their attack.

"Forget the boss! It's time to move out," the orphan commanded. She and the mercenaries took turns moving on ahead—so as not to arouse suspicion from the security detail—with herself taking up the rear. She slowly made her approach to the teahouse where the heirs of the Uesugi and Takeda were sharing a cup of matcha while watching the cherry blossoms bloom.

The orphan didn't have Junko's nose nor her inhuman sense of smell, yet a waft of blood seemed to float within the breeze. It was an unnerving scent when paired with the sight of hundreds of sakura petals dancing in the wind. Yet, determined to focus on the task at hand, the orphan shook off all uncertainty and followed the sounds of a man laughing and a woman giggling.

It led her to a tiny yet elegantly designed teahouse that sat at the center of a pond. There were groups of samurai in red and white on either side of the water, split in half as expected of the two clans that so distrusted each other. Rightfully so, the orphan supposed, considering what the mercenary group was there to do.

Though speaking of mercenaries...the orphan couldn't find them anywhere. Her concern only grew as moments passed and more of the samurai took note of her presence. Though they were being sly about it, the white-knuckled grips on their sword handles told the orphan all she needed to know.

"Someone tipped them off," the self-proclaimed ronin thought to herself. "I don't know where the others are, but...I'm not the sort to quit a job halfway through!"

The orphan didn't make it ten steps before the Takeda lord took a moment away from sipping his tea to gesture over at her. "One of yours, Kiku-chan? Hm...a female samurai? And her aura...if I'm honest, her presence makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I didn't think the Uesugi had such a formidable swordsman."

Lady Uesugi scoffed before raising her fan. She looked around and waited before growing frustrated and raising her hand even higher. This sellsword was supposed to be riddled with arrows by now, yet she approached their teahouse unscathed. A bead of sweat fell from the lady's brow and ruined her makeup.

"Chikusho! Guards—anyone! This is an imposter! Kill her at once!"

The sound of swords being drawn filled the silence that followed. The orphan kept her sword sheathed and her head low—though to say she wasn't prepared for battle was a fatal mistake. Her legs were out and coiled in the stance Sensei taught her; though she despised her master and everything he had done to her...

...when it came down to it, the old man's techniques were good.

As the group found their bravado and charged at her with their swords raised overhead, the orphan closed her eyes. She embraced the Jigoku and took in one deep, final breath.

She then performed the Strike of Non-Action: the Jigoku Ittō-ryū's quickdraw technique. In a flash—in the blink of an eye—the katana that her Sensei had given her flew from its sheath and into her surrounding attackers. It was over as soon as it began; nothing but a streak of blood across the nearby cherry blossoms betrayed the swordmaster's strike.

That, and the screaming samurai who fell before her, clutching their stomachs as their innards escaped them.

The first to act upon this onslaught was the Takeda lord himself, who stood at the front entrance of the teahouse with his feet positioned for battle. He held out his hand and ordered his retainers to move back—saving their lives. He then addressed the assassin with a voice lacking any of its prior humor.

"I know that style of yours. Tell me! Tell me who trained you!"

The orphan raised their head and stared into Ichiro Takeda's eyes. The golden glow from her own was answer enough. Realizing the danger she was in, the would-be sellsword ran.

The Takeda and half the city of Hokusei would give chase.

■■■■

"And here I thought you hated that one," Junko grinned, observing the fight from afar. The brown-haired samurai had taken on more of an auburn shade as of late: her hair, face and kimono was dyed in the blood of her enemies. Of which, there was only one remaining.

The leader of the mercenary band who sold out his own men crept away from the gardens as soon as the fighting started. He would pass by several of the ones he betrayed, cut to shreds and left to seep their blood beneath the cherry blossoms.

As if that sight wasn't frightening enough, he clambered up a retaining wall only to see a flock of crows waiting for him. After shooing them away, he saw the remains of the archers that were supposed to finish the deed.

"Ah!" he yelled as he slipped on a pool of blood and fell off the other side of the wall. He rolled down the slope of rocks before slamming down into the street. He got up just in time to see a ghostly figure approach him: a samurai drenched in blood, with their katana unsheathed and a trail of drool falling from their lips.

"I wonder," Junko said as she licked the blood from her katana, "if you taste as well as your underlings do!"

The mercenary screamed as he ran, running through the crowded streets of Hokusei like a rat on a sinking ship. He bumped into and stumbled over all manner of food stands and festival-goers in a desperate attempt to escape his pursuer.

Junko had taken the high road, leaping across buildings and jumping down right in front of her prey. She was of course only toying with him; if she had wanted him to die quickly, the sellsword would already be dead.

“For betraying the orphan’s trust...your death will be slow!”

The chase continued out of the city and beyond the front gates where the sellsword had pleaded with the guards for aid. They thought he was insane—or inexplicably drunk on plum wine—and tossed him away.

A more fitting way to put it was that they ‘threw him to the wolves’.

AwoOooOOOooo

Junko let out a wolf’s howl—a near perfect replication of the real thing. It always scared the orphan when she did it, so—as you can imagine—it had become quite a talent of hers over their years growing up together.

It scurried the sellsword forward like a rabbit that was missing one of its hind legs. The idea of wearing this one’s ‘paw’ to bring about good fortune was starting to grow more appealing to Junko, who picked up her pace until the two arrived at the lake outside the city.

The ferryman was on his boat fishing while beside him, his wife nursed their newborn son. The vessel was anchored to the shore—or at least it was until the crazed sellsword slashed the rope with a swing of his stolen katana. It took several swings, actually, each more desperate than the last as Junko drew closer.

“What are, mad?! Leave us be!” the ferryman yelled.

When the mercenary stepped foot into his boat, the man who lived by the lake and liked to talk too much became brave. Every good man did when their family was in danger. Unfortunately, while he was able to tackle the mercenary and disarm him of his katana, he didn’t expect his assailant to be carrying a sidearm.

And he *certainly* didn’t expect to die by a knife wedged between his ribs. But he perished all the same while his wife screamed and their son cried. The mercenary regathered his wits and jumped onto the boat, of which had drifted a couple feet off-shore. As if a bit of water could save him from the wolf.

Junko looked down upon the ferryman to watch the last of his breath leave him. He looked as pathetic as his death had been senseless; the samurai shook her head in disgust. She wasn’t the sort to get sentimental or shed tears, though—that was much more of the orphan’s area of expertise.

Instead, Junko’s eyes went gold as she allowed the Jigoku to embrace her. It’s familiar power flowed from her wrist out to every inch of her body, consuming her in an empty warmth.

"You! You're just like the ronin, aren't you?!" the mercenary yelled. He then took a position behind the ferryman's wife, placing his knife up against her neck. "You yellow-eyed demons! Don't you take another step forward, you monster! Or I'll kill her, too!"

The woman was sobbing uncontrollably while the newborn at her breast did likewise. It was a dramatic scene—or at least, it certainly wasn't a comedic one. Yet Junko began to laugh maniacally all the same.

"The difference between me and your...*ronin*," she said, taking a step forward onto the pier, "is that I see this world for what it really is. And I see you for what you truly are: human filth!"

Junko ran forward, leaping into the boat and allowing the Jigoku to handle the rest. It lunged its wielder forward, finding the proper arc for the fatal strike. That strike would come—however, when its target pushed the woman in its path at the last second, there was nothing Junko could do.

"No. *That sort of thinking is for the weak*," Junko said to herself as her thoughts returned and as she watched her katana take two lives with a single stab. It had gone through the mother to reach the sellsword behind her. The blade went in deep—deep enough for it to drive itself into her opponent's heart, causing him to gasp, stagger back and fall into the water with a loud splash.

As drops of water shot out from below, Junko slowly withdrew her katana from the mother's stomach. Somehow, she managed to keep her newborn held up in her arms even as the rest of her collapsed. She let out a pathetic groan just like her husband had.

"What is it, woman? You want to curse me with your dying breath?" the samurai asked. Though most would be devastated in her position, Junko felt little remorse. From a very early age and courtesy of her father, the brown-haired girl came to learn that this world was hell and that living itself was its greatest suffering.

To spare someone from all that misery with the single stroke of a sword—was that not the greatest gift?

"Onegai...please, save him," the mother said, using the last bit of her strength to raise her child and offer it to Junko. Again, it was pathetic—enough to make the samurai's gut wrench. But that wasn't the only organ that did. "Save my...little one..."

She slumped over as the last of her life left her eyes. The newborn was lowered to the ship's hull, yelling and fumbling around a growing pool of his mother's blood. Junko lowered herself too, sitting back and staring up into the darkening sky as the ferry drifted on the water.

Soon, a cold rain began drizzling down from above. She didn't blink even as drops fell into her eyes; the final words from the ferryman's wife had put her in a daze. They dug up memories the daughter of Izō Uesugi thought were long since buried.

"Little One, Little One," she repeated as her gaze fell upon the newborn screaming for his mother's warmth. "Oh, Little One. What a shame it is, to be born into this forsaken world. That's a lesson we all learn. In your case...your lesson came early, didn't it? Shall I end your suffering?"

The baby cried even more in response, flailing its arms until it hooked free a pouch from his mother's hip. Curious, Junko grabbed it and took a peek inside. Her eyes lit up at what she found.

"Alright, woman. I suppose this will make for a fair payment."

■■■■

The rain picked up that night, and by the time the orphan wondered her way back to the dojo, it was pouring. She was a mess in more ways than one and exhausted from being chased down alleys and across ravines. The Takeda lord had spared no expense to find her.

Had the orphan not known these hills like the knuckles on the back of her hand, she never would've escaped. She didn't know how Junko would react to seeing her like this...or what lie she'd tell her once she did. The orphan just knew that—after that horrendous botch of a job—she needed some peace and quiet. Some familiarity, too.

What greeted her at the entrance of the dojo...was none of those things.

"How'd your meditation go?" Junko asked. She was calm—ridiculously so as she cradled a crying baby in her arms. The contrast was crazy enough for the orphan to disbelieve her eyes; yet no matter how many times she blinked, reality didn't change.

"What...what is that thing? Junko! Did you steal someone's baby?!"

"It's mother was killed. Some mercenary stuck a sword through her gut. Poor thing was all alone," Junko said, cooing the newborn as if it was her own. 'Motherly' was not a word the orphan would ever use to describe her, and so to see the unhinged swordsman like this...was just plain wrong.

"No...no, this isn't happening. You can't take care of a kid, Junko! Even you should know that!"

"Would you rather he grow up as an orphan? How'd that work for you?" Junko teased before turning her attention to the infant. It looked up at her with eyes more innocent and filled with wonder than anything else in the world. "We'll need to buy a cow in order to feed you, won't we? Not gonna be cheap...but your okaasan has plenty of coin to spare, doesn't she?"

The orphan didn't reply. Instead, she lowered her head before shaking it. Soon, the rest of her shook as well. She was trying so hard to keep her anger bundled inside, but when Junko asked her to give it a name...she couldn't hold back any longer.

She embraced the Jigoku.

"I know...I know what this is, Junko. You're trying to guilt me into staying, aren't you?" she asked, each word filled with raw emotion. "I knew you were up to something...but this?!"

Junko began to chuckle as she laid the baby down on the table beside her. “Accusing me of keeping secrets...that’s real rich coming from you, orphan. Or should I say...ronin?” Junko’s own eyes went golden as she walked forth down the front steps of the dojo. “A samurai without a master! That’s what your *friends* call you!”

The orphan took a step back and into the ready position. The one Sensei had taught her. “How long have you known? No...I don’t care! Call them whatever you want—they respect me! They say I’m the greatest swordsman they’ve ever known...and they treat me like it, too!”

“Oh, I’m sure they said a lot of things. But they’re not talking much anymore.”

The woman from Genfu didn’t know what her fellow student was talking about. But what she did know...was that she wasn’t a student any longer. She plunged Sensei’s sword into the mud, sheathe and all. She then made sure her voice didn’t waver.

“I’m leaving, Junko. I’m leaving it all behind.”

The orphan turned around. She couldn’t bear to see her face. The brown-haired girl she had grown up with...the only one she had to confide in, to play with, to fight and to love...she was going to walk away from the one person in this world who knew her better than anyone ever would.

It wasn’t going to be easy.

“Pick...up...your...sword. DO IT!” Junko yelled, her voice more akin to a beast than a woman. But the orphan—the ronin—had braced herself for this and shook her head. She had already said all the words left to say.

With what little the brown haired samurai had left of her humanity, while trembling with fury and fear, Junko picked up a nearby sack and tossed it over. “Before you...head out, take this.”

The sack fell beside the ronin and rolled a couple feet past her. Whatever was inside it was round. Though every sense she had told her not to look inside, the ronin felt compelled to comply with Junko’s last request. She owed her that much, at least.

But when she picked it up and took a peek inside, when she was met face-to-face with the decapitated head of the mercenary leader, she couldn’t help but let out a sigh. She really should’ve known better.

“Your family is here! You belong to *me!*”

Junko ran forth with her sword unsheathed. She wasn’t going to allow the ronin to leave her. To lose her most precious possession was worse than death, and so she charged at the ronin without restraint. Her beloved opponent would either draw her sword...or die in a single strike.

CLANG

The ronin chose the former. The two exchanged blows while the clouds above them continued to pour down. A wicked wind picked up, too, seen through the blossoms that danced violently across the air. Their fight was no less brutal as the two students of the Jigoku Ittō-ryū engaged in their most intense battle yet.

But fatigue—and something else—kept the ronin on her back foot. Junko could sense it as well: her fellow student's habit of overthinking was rearing its head in their battle. She took it as a personal insult each time her opponent didn't go for a lethal blow.

"Come on, ronin! I know you're stronger than this!"

Her opponent spat out a wad of blood in reply. There was a reason the ronin was holding back—and if there was ever a time to voice it, it was now.

"Junko...those sellswords, they respected me! They accepted me as one of their own! You could've joined us! I was gonna ask you but...I was afraid of what you'd do. Turns out I had every right to be concerned," the ronin said, shaking her head. Water began to well up in her eyes. "Come with me, Juu-chan! We can leave this place together. We can find other groups. With our skills, we'd find work all over Hyuga! We'd make more money than—"

The orphan's proposal was answered with a kick to the gut. The would-be-ronin reeled backwards, tripping over the pot of stew beside the campfire. The remains of that meal soiled her kimono.

"You've never understood what we truly are," Junko said, looking down at her opponent. "We're predators: not prey. Quit pretending to be one of *them*!"

The ronin didn't know who Junko was referring to by 'them'. At least, not until she began rubbing off the leftovers scattered across her robes. She recalled the night Junko had cooked this meal: it was the same night as the failed caravan ambush that claimed five of the mercenaries' lives.

They never did find the bodies.

"These bones...these aren't from a pig, Junko!" the ronin yelled out in horror as she discovered femurs, mandibles and clavicles among the contents of the stew. They didn't belong to any animal she knew of, and yet—even still, she refused to believe it. She refused up until the very moment Junko forced her to face the truth.

"You enjoyed how they tasted, didn't you?"

Lightning struck down as the realization hit the orphan. Vomit ejected from out of her mouth as the ronin recalled the taste. It wasn't that it was particularly tasty—but that it was nostalgic. She now knew what it had reminded her of: the orphans in Genfu.

Those girls...those innocent children...she couldn't bring herself to accept it. It was too terrible and too wicked. She would rather lose herself than recall those unthinkable horrors, and so...

<The orphan forgot herself.>

Junko's grin only grew as her opponent fully gave herself over to the Jigoku. To become the ultimate swordsman was to be nothing but the wielder of the sword. This was the thinking behind the Strike of Non-Thought: the most deadly and dangerous technique Sensei had taught them.

"Ergh!" the brown-haired student groaned as her own katana was shoved back into her chest. It was only the flat-end of the blade but even still, the force of the orphan's slashes were enough to cut her cleanly in two. It was ironic, but the only chance Junko had to survive this onslaught was to kill everything she was.

Junko did just that, forgetting herself as well.

The battle between the two wielders sent sparks flying across the otherwise dark and stormy night. The intensity of their exchange was mirrored by the whipping blossoms that swirled around them. Cries from the newborn rang out into the distance as the battle between Sensei's students moved away from the dojo.

The fight had taken them down to the pond where the two would often fish for loaches in the summer. Though neither the future nor the past was of consequence any longer. The two wielders fought and lived in the moment, accepting that it was likely their last.

Both were knee-deep in water, now, their bodies hurling through the overflowed pond without restraint. Here, where every movement required much more energy than the last, the brown-haired wielder held the advantage. She pressed it mercilessly until the red line across 'Ichi' was exposed and begging to be cut.

It was at this moment, however, that a slight pain pulsed from out of the brown-haired wielder's right pinky. It was a negligible ache, and yet...to feel anything at all ought to have been impossible while using the Strike of Non-Thought. The sensation was enough to draw the wielder out of their dissociative trance.

Junko became herself once more and—in doing so—she halted her blade mid-strike. The woman before her was far more than a number. She was her greatest possession—the one who had promised to be hers forever on the night of their first winter together.

So many years ago, the two had wrapped their fingers together to seal their fate. They were to be with each other forever and ever. It was all Junko ever wanted, and yet...it was all about to come undone.

It wasn't a fatal slash but a swift kick from the ronin that would prove just as lethal. Junko was pushed out into the center of the pond where the water was at its deepest. Fallen tree branches and lengthy strings of kelp made for a great home for fishes but an even better trap for Junko's legs.

Snared, the brown-haired swordsman flailed against her unseen enemy. Unable to swim, desperation took hold as she flung out her arms and shoulders every which way in a vain attempt to keep her head

above water.

With what precious little breath she had left, she yelled out to the ronin as they looked on from the shallow end of the pond.

“You!” Junko shouted, water flooding into her mouth. “You promised me! To be mine forever! Orphan, I —”

That was all Junko could say before her lips and nose went underwater. Her eyes did, too, but not before taking in one final sight just as the dark abyss consumed her.

It was the sight of the orphan walking away.

■■■■

When Junko woke up, she was bent over and retching out water. She was freezing cold, her eyes stung and every part of her ached—her heart most of all. For while she had been out of consciousness for some time, the sight of her beloved leaving her remained fresh in her mind.

“Orphan? Orphan?!” she coughed out a cry. Even as weak as she sounded, her voice seemed to echo through the air. The rain had since halted and the wind died, leaving nothing but an eerie silence to welcome Junko as she staggered back up to the dojo.

At least the baby wasn’t crying.

An immense relief came upon Junko as she spotted the campfire in the dojo’s front yard. It was lit—albeit barely—and had the unmistakable figure of Sensei hunched over beside it. It was an odd posture for a man so dedicated to correct poise even in his old age, yet Junko paid it no mind.

“Sensei!” she shouted, rushing over and nearly losing her footing while doing so. The yard was muddy from the recent rains, and—combined with the battle between herself and the orphan—it looked as if an earthquake had ravaged the clearing.

Landscaping matters aside, Junko ran forth eager to tell Sensei all that had happened. If anyone knew how to find the orphan and return her back home where she belonged, it was the man who raised them. That was her thinking at least, until she neared closer and saw the pool of blood beneath him.

In an instant, all of Junko’s relief turned to fear. In another, it became complete and total agony.

“Sensei! SENSEI!”

Junko collapsed to her knees, using what little strength she had left to embrace the closest thing to a father she ever had. Through her tears, she mourned the loss of the one whose respect mattered to her more than life itself: the one and only man she would ever call her master.

Stabbed through the back, the greatest swordsman of the Golden Era was now no more than a wrinkled corpse. Though his wasn't the only carcass festering beside the fire. For beneath her master's body were the half-eaten remains of...of...

It was too terrible to put into words. Suffice it to say, Junko now knew why the baby wasn't crying any longer.

■■■■

"Five years," Junko said, overlooking the view of the Clanfields atop a cliff near the dojo. It was the same spot where 'Tree-san', an apple tree, once stood years ago. It had fallen over while Junko and the orphan were trying to fetch an apple for their teacher.

Even if it was terrifying at the time, it was a good memory. Unlike this one.

"Five years, Sensei," Junko repeated, patting down the last of the dirt with her shovel. She overlooked the grave with a sigh before wiping the sweat from her brow. "I will remain here and watch over your dojo—our home—for five years. I will continue to train and dedicate myself to your teachings until then.

"And after that time has passed," Junko continued, "if the orphan has yet to return...if I find that your chosen heir is unworthy...then I will hunt her down like the prey she's become."

The promise was given and then accepted by a gust of wind that made the samurai's brown curls dance across her face. No—that wasn't quite true. As Junko took her first step away from the grave and back down the mountain, she could call herself a samurai no longer.

She was a ronin. She had no master and no family...and yet, she did have a path to follow. A path that took her back to the dojo: to the future she was determined to grow and make flourish.

Junko grabbed the pouch at her hip and squeezed to get a feel for the contents inside. It wasn't gold but something far more valuable: it was what the infant's mother carried on her when she died. Though she, her husband and child were taken by the horrors of this world...

...something good would sprout from it all in the end. Junko took out a handful of apple seeds and smiled.

"When you come back, orphan, I'll have an entire orchard waiting for you."

[Side Story #30: Jun's Promise \(Male MC Version\)](#)

[Jan 19, 2021](#)

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

Side Story 30: Jun's Promise (Male MC Version)

■■ Northern Hyuga ■■

"Again, Jun! Your footwork is...it needs work. Don't get sloppy!" an old teacher yelled to his student. His voice was frail—far weaker than it had been years ago—yet it carried as much force as the whipping wind across the mountain peak. While the harshest of the winter months had passed, even in spring the gusts were cold.

And even in his twilight years, Sensei remained the strongest swordsman Jun knew.

"Hai! Yes, Sensei!" Jun replied, adjusting his feet once more. In truth, his positioning was flawless: it was a perfect jōdan—an overhead stance—that had been drilled into his mind and body years ago. The very same man who had taught him was now telling him that he was wrong, and so the obedient student made adjustments.

"Give me a break. You know the front foot shouldn't be out that far," remarked a less-than-obedient student observing the practice duel from afar. He was an orphan boy from Genfu who had since become a man—not that Jun ever treated him as such. Not outside their futon, anyway.

The orphan was the only rival, friend and lover Jun had. He was all the brown-haired student ever wanted...and everything he needed. But right now, he was being a real pest.

Jun focused on the practice duel—even if it wasn't particularly intense or instructive. The student and master exchanged strikes with their wooden practice swords as the former was out-tricked by obvious feints and overpowered by wobbly swings. Jun was holding back throughout yet acted as if he was giving it his all.

The objective of these duels against Sensei had shifted over time: when Jun was a child, that meant merely staying alive. Then, as he got older, it was to stand his ground—and to leave without permanent scars and minimal bruising. Eventually, though, past his teenage years and into adulthood, the goal became vastly different.

It was, to put it simply...to not shame him.

"T-that's enough," Sensei said, his breathing starting to grow heavy. And though he tired early these days—especially this close to his mid-day nap—Jun had never once seen him break a sweat. The

student bowed and thanked his master for the fight before taking his seat beside the orphan.

His fellow student looked half-asleep and was halfway through a yawn before Jun handed over the practice sword—delivering it swiftly into his gut. After the rude awakening, the orphan hopped to his feet and swaggered over into position against Sensei.

“Come on, Boy! Show me what I’ve taught you!”

Jun could sense a problem well before there was one; the intensity in the orphan’s stance went well beyond what was required in a practice duel against their master. Sure enough, he swung his weapon with full force against Sensei’s, the collision causing the teacher’s sword to crack and to be driven down into the mud.

As if that wasn’t shameful enough, the orphan followed the strike with a tackle—slamming his shoulder into Sensei and forcing him to fall flat into the ground.

Jun was on his feet and in the orphan’s face in an instant. His eyes were golden while his hands were makeshift claws. They gripped around the orphan’s throat as rage enveloped the son of a samurai—and not just any. Jun was the only child of Izō Uesugi, the head of his clan.

While the brunet came from a noble heritage, what he intended to do to the orphan was anything but.

“Jun...bring me the katana. *My* katana,” Sensei ordered as he struggled to his feet. With more than a little reluctance, the obedient student released the orphan before hurrying off to the dojo. During his trip, he thought of several ways to punish his fellow student for shaming Sensei.

Most of them started by getting him naked.

After sliding open the shoji doors to the dojo and bowing with respect, Jun invited himself inside. He approached the shrine at the far end of the training hall where Sensei’s sword rested on its wooden display mount. Falling to his knees in reverence, he clapped his hands and whispered a prayer.

It was short and simple. “May these hands be worthy of your sword, Sensei.”

The obedient student then took the katana in both hands, raising it up before him. Turning his head to make certain he was alone, he unsheathed it—just slightly. Just enough to see *it*.

彦齋

“Gensai,” Jun said, speaking the name as if it were holy. In his mind it was—even more so because that was all there was inscribed on the side of the blade. There was no family name. There was no ‘Takeda’. Sensei never mentioned his family to his students and Jun never dared to ask.

Because deep down, he already had his answer.

“You gave up your family for my sake. You saved me from that demon...and lifted me from out of that hell. You brought me and the orphan together...and taught us the way of the sword. Everything I am...I owe to you, Gensai.”

Closing his eyes, the son of Izō Uesugi once again renounced his past life and family in favor of his adopted one. Himself, Sensei and the orphan...they were tied together no less permanently than the stars in the sky.

With the renowned katana in hand, Jun hurried back to the practice grounds. He was worried that the orphan had done something even more foolish in his absence, yet it turned out that he should’ve been more concerned over something else, instead.

Sensei told them to kneel upon his return—and they did. With their knees muddled, the students of Gensai Takeda, the most fearsome swordsman of his era, looked up as their teacher raised his sword overhead.

“It is time I choose my successor. The Jigoku Ittō-ryū must not die with me. Such power...is meant to be used. To change and shape Hyuga.”

Jun’s eyes went wide. His heart skipped a beat and his lungs stopped outright. *This* was the moment he had been waiting for—yet he never dared to entertain it outside his wildest dreams. To carry the future of Sensei’s style of swordsmanship on his shoulders...it was the greatest honor from the man Jun respected most.

Finally, his loyalty and dedication was about to be rewarded. It was all he could do to keep from drooling as Sensei told the orphan to lift his head. Jun licked his lips in anticipation as...as his teacher handed over the katana. To *him*.

“This is my legacy. Take it, Boy. You are the heir to the Jigoku Ittō-ryū.”

■■■■

Only Sensei possessed the ability to sleep through the sound of clashing metal rods echoing throughout the training hall. Though he was officially meditating, not even the most zen of monks could contemplate in peace while war waged right in front of them.

baa-Ang* *Baa-ang

It was a war between two students in the disguise of a practice match. Though there was no such thing as ‘practice’ for Jun, who went all-out with every swing—each more forceful than the last. He wanted to bash the orphan’s skull in and said as much with his golden-eyed glare.

As for the reason why...that much was obvious.

"I'm sorry, alright?!" the orphan yelled during a rare pause in the battle. "How many times do I gotta say it? Sensei's gone senile—he didn't mean to make me the heir! You deserve it a hundred times more than I do, Juu-kun!"

Invoking Jun's nickname did little to cool his wrath; if anything, it stoked the fires burning within him even more. "It's the greatest honor a swordsman could ever ask for—yet you treat it as a joke! You're the heir to the Jigoku Ittō-ryū—now act like it!"

The battle waged on and outside the training hall to the front yard and between the many sakura trees Sensei had planted there. This being early in spring, the pink and white blossoms were nearing full bloom—their graceful beauty making for a picturesque backdrop for a swordfight.

Of course, this wasn't a swordfight and it was anything but pretty.

"Gah! Ah—*kuso!*" the orphan yelled after Jun stomped on his leading right foot. In truth, he had been on his backfoot throughout the entire fight, focusing on withstanding Jun's onslaught until he tired.

"Stand and fight me, you coward! How dare you dishonor our style! How dare you disgrace Sensei!" Jun yelled and swung, though the orphan had already darted out of the way. Using their master's sakura trees for protection, Jun couldn't get close enough for a lethal strike.

"Why are we doin' this, Juu-kun? Why are we training so hard?" the orphan asked. It wasn't the first time he had voiced this question.

"Not this again," Jun growled, taking a moment to find a way through to reach his opponent. "To master the blade and one's self is to give up all else. And that includes weakness! Eyah!"

Jun found an opening in the orphan's guard and lunged. Unfortunately for him, his opponent had a trump card: Sensei's sword. He unsheathed it and held it out to intercept Jun's strike. The obedient student who idolized his teacher paused mid-swing.

He wouldn't dare risk damaging Sensei's sword.

"I'm tired, Jun," the orphan said. "I'm tired of watchin' the world pass me by while I sit atop this damn mountain. I'm tired of being dirt poor—having to hunt and fish for my food while living in this dump! I'm tired of freezing my ass off, too, and I'm tired of having to walk a mile every time I need to take a shit! I'm—*umph!*"

The orphan went quiet when Jun enveloped his lips over hiss. Intimacy was Jun's go-to answer for whenever his soulmate acted up like this. Whenever the orphan asked too many questions...whenever he threatened to leave him alone, sex was always the solution.

Though this time, it wasn't. "I'm tired...even of that, Juu-kun."

The kissing stopped. The son of Izō Uesugi opened his eyes wide, his irises shifting to a golden glow. In the absence of his lover, Jun embraced the Jigoku instead. His words were cold. “Is that so. Draw your weapon, orphan.”

With reluctance—but knowing his partner far too well—the orphan complied, though the iron rod wasn’t the weapon Jun wanted. “This isn’t practice. Wield the sword Sensei gave you!”

The orphan had hardly the time to do just that when Jun struck forth a series of blows. He had his own katana—one of the several dozen spares the two of them had gone through over the years. With ronin and sellswords so abundant in the Clanfields, there was no shortage of cheap steel to be found for those willing to loot corpses.

And now Jun intended to loot Sensei’s sword off the orphan’s corpse. At least, that was how he fought. Yet as furious as he was, Jun was a proper swordmaster who took pride and satisfaction in a good fight—and there wasn’t one to be had. The orphan couldn’t maintain the Jigoku. Jun could see the will to live fade from his eyes as they dimmed back down to black.

As he towered over his fallen opponent, he wondered what happened to the boy from Genfu he was always chasing. He must’ve been thinking aloud.

“I’m not that stupid little boy anymore,” the orphan replied. “Don’t you see? We’ve been at each other’s throats for years. All that pain and suffering we put ourselves through...all to be stronger than the other—what was it all for? Nothing—that’s what! I don’t wanna race you anymore, Jun. And I don’t wanna chase Sensei’s shadow, either.”

Jun pushed the orphan away with a palm strike to the chest before turning around and shaking his head. In truth, he was terrified. The words his most precious person were saying felt like knives driven into his heart. He couldn’t face him like this.

“Sensei. You *know* we’d be dead without him—or worse! Don’t you have an ounce of gratitude for the man who saved us? How can you be so selfish?!”

“We’re supposed to be his students, Jun—not his servants!”

“I’m not his—” Jun started, though stopped upon hearing Sensei’s yell from the dojo. Their master had awakened from his meditative slumber and...was in need of someone to prepare hot water for his bath.

The orphan didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to. Instead, he wiped the mud off his kimono and took out a pouch from behind his obi sash. Jun recognized it—it was Sensei’s, kept in the dojo’s shrine.

“I’m going to the trading post to buy us some rice. Stay here and wash the old man’s back.”

■■■■

“You’re late.”

Jun hopped down from a tree and into the path of a haggard-looking ronin. It was early the next morning when the orphan made it back to dojo from his shopping trip. Aside from being hours late, his kimono was cut up and sprayed with blood. His usual stride was different—indicating a minor injury to the leg.

As far as how he smelled...

“Come on, Juu-kun. Quit sniffin’ me,” the orphan protested as Jun inspected him as a dog would. Aside from sweat and dried blood, another scent could be found from his lips.

“Saké. Who have you been drinking with?” Jun asked, trying—and failing—to hold back his jealousy. Though the orphan getting intoxicated was nothing new, what was more suspicious was the amount of rice he had brought back with him. He had two large buckets tied to a carrying pole atop his shoulders.

It was a lot more than Sensei’s pouch of coins could purchase. Though before Jun could inquire further, the orphan locked his lips around his. The buckets fell to the ground and the two students shortly followed. Their hands explored each other’s bodies while their tongues wrestled in each other’s mouths.

The familiar warmth of the man he loved was enough for Jun to halt his suspicions. “You’re even easier when you’re drunk,” he whispered between heated breaths. He gripped his fingers atop the orphan’s shoulders and slid his kimono down, revealing the strong, muscular arms beneath.

Jun could tell with a single glance what the orphan wanted—and even if he couldn’t, the stiffness that pressed against him left little room for doubt. It was all the brown-haired swordsman could do to refrain from tearing his partner’s kimono apart; instead, his deft hands began to strip the orphan as they had done countless times before.

Though as he was removing their sash, he felt something heavy and full. No, it wasn’t *that*—it was a pouch of coins twice the size that it had been before. As much as Jun lusted for the man he had pinned beneath him...he had to know where it came from.

“Don’t worry about it, Juu-kun,” the orphan said between moans. “Turns out it’s easy to make ryō with a good enough swordarm. There’s tons of work out there, too. All I had to do was off a merchant and his guards. Old bastard died in his sleep.”

“What?! What are you saying?” Jun asked, pouncing away from his lover’s embrace. “You’re a swordmaster—and the heir to the Jigoku Ittō-ryū! You dare disgrace yourself by doing mercenary work? Are you nothing but a sellsword?!”

The orphan remained on the ground, looking up into the sky. The sun was rising as the warblers began their chirp. Like them, the disillusioned student wished he could flap his wings and get away from it all.

But he had an anchor tied to him. It took the form of a katana branded with Sensei’s name. “So you’re sayin’ if I get rid of this sword...then I’ll be free to be whatever I want? ‘Cause if that’s the case...you may as well take it from me now.”

"I'll take it from your corpse, instead!" Jun said before delivering a kick into the orphan's ribs. He then bent down to pick up the carrying rod and with it, the buckets of rice. "Now get up and stop being stupid. It's your turn to cook breakfast. Or is doing chores beneath you now?"

It turned out that it wasn't and that onigiri was on the menu. The orphan wasn't a great cook but you didn't have to be to make rice balls. A large, fresh one was presented to Sensei after he took his seat at the head of the table.

With a look of disgust, the old swordmaster picked it up and reluctantly took in a bite. After several chews, he spat it back at the chef. "Rice! Food fit for prey, not predators. I want meat, Boy!"

"They didn't have any," the orphan replied. "But if you wanna go off into the woods and hunt us some deer—then go right ahead! Otherwise, eat your rice."

"Don't you talk back to me, Boy! I want meat! Meat!" Sensei yelled, tossing the remnants of his onigiri at the orphan. It broke apart in his face. His eyes then went golden.

Jun intervened between them, acting as a referee between student and master. The orphan gave his companion a glare before shaking his head and walking away from the table.

Once he was gone, Sensei turned to the son of Izō Uesugi. "Jun..."

"I know, Sensei," Jun said, checking once more to make certain the orphan was gone. Once he was, he folded up the sleeve on his left arm and presented it before his master.

He grimaced as Sensei bit down upon it, sucking out blood as greedily as a babe would its mother's breast.

■■■■

Jun had something of a sixth sense when it came to the orphan. It was why he feigned sleep after a passionate late-afternoon 'nap' with his fellow student. The man from Genfu was as quiet as a mouse as he slipped back on his clothes and left the dojo.

But Jun was a cat and he wasn't about to let his prey slip from out of his paws. That and he had a profound curiosity, too—one compounded by jealousy. The scent of other people lingered on the one he loved. Those people would soon pay for trying to take his most precious possession away from him.

And the orphan was going to lead him straight to them.

'Them' happened to be a mercenary group encamped an hour's walk downhill from the dojo. Jun knew them as sellswords from their banners—or the lack thereof. Whereas the Uesugi and Takeda loved their emblems and clan colors, those who worked for either made certain not to be outwardly offensive.

At least visually, anyway. Their smell was another matter. Jun's sensitive nose worked against him as he lurked over to the camp in the cover of darkness. *"That smell—human filth. What can they offer you that I can't, my love?"*

For starters, the orphan was given a hero's welcome. If there wasn't a feast prepared before, there was now, as casks of saké were brought out and a skinned deer hung from a tree was cut down and brought to the fire for cooking. Aside from learning why the game around the dojo had been so scarce in recent weeks, Jun discovered his lover had a new nickname.

"Ronin! We were wonderin' when you were comin' back. Here—share a bottle of Hokusei Brewing's finest with me! Got another job offer for you...but let's fill up our stomachs, first!"

Ronin. That was the name given to samurai without a master. It was the most dishonorable title a swordsman could have, yet the orphan seemed to wear the moniker proudly. Instead of anger or disgrace, however, he appeared quite the opposite. He was smiling and laughing as the other mercs took turns trading jokes.

The whole world, for a moment, went dark for Jun. Crimson-colored lines broke out upon each of their bodies, begging to be cut and sliced a hundred ways. The Jigoku had taken control of the brown-haired samurai. And he had surrendered to it willingly.

"When was...the last time...you smiled, for me?"

It took every ounce of restraint for Jun not to rush in there and tear apart the sellswords limb from limb. He could do it easily, too; they were no more dangerous to him than their cuts of venison were to them. Everything from their lack of physical conditioning to how they slouched around the campfire denoted a lack of training and discipline.

Gensai's students were leagues beyond these mercenaries. It made sense, then, that they'd have plenty of jobs lined up for the orphan to do.

"All right, Ronin, let's talk some business," the leader of the group said, kicking his feet up atop a nearby log. "See, that merchant you...dispatched so well the other night was just a start. We've got another passin' by—and rumor is, he's packing somethin' more valuable than stale rice!"

"I may be a ronin, but I'm no bandit," said the orphan. He kept his eyes focused on the fire. "I want to do more than raid caravans."

"Right, right! Well, maybe 'merchant' ain't the best way to describe these guys, then. They're actually suppliers for the Uesugi. See, our group is trying to get in the Takeda's good graces. The reds have gone under new management lately—word is, groups that distinguish themselves get hired on permanently. We're talkin' stipends for years, here! And you know what else?"

The orphan didn't and shook his head.

“Especially skilled warriors got a chance of gettin’ adopted into a branch family. For folk with no house names like us, it’s a hell of an offer. And a man with your skills...you keep at it and we may be callin’ you Lord Takeda someday, hahaha!”

“Adopted, huh...”

Jun’s eyes turned gold once more. This time, he embraced the Jigoku on purpose. This talk of family—and of Takeda, too...every word seemed to push the orphan further and further away from him. The now-familiar despair of losing the one he needed most made his heart sink deep beneath his chest.

But it was still beating, and so long as it was, the orphan would be his. He refocused his eyes upon the encampment, visualizing the lines of death and fantasizing about how he would punish them for deceiving the orphan like this. For it was nothing short of trickery that could drive the one he loved against him and Sensei!

“What’s this?” he asked aloud. Jun wasn’t talking to himself—he was staring up into the tree he had braced up against. The lines of death depicted a figure within the branches. A figure that was frightened stiff—especially after Jun jumped up and stared them face-to-face.

“Ah—*ng!*” the figure said, trying to muffle himself mid-scream. He was more of a teenager than a man and was too scrawny to be a mercenary. He was a shinobi judging by his garb—a ninja, trained in the art of subterfuge.

Sensei had spoken about them before. Though they weren’t the best fighters, their talents outside the battlefield made them invaluable all the same.

“D-don’t kill me, please. I’m not with them,” he whispered as beads of sweat fell down his forehead. Jun gave no reply aside from maintaining his stare, which was wicked enough to get the frightened shinobi to start talking. “My name is Tamaki. M-may I ask yours?”

Jun would never give Tamaki his name. Instead, he started sniffing around him. What he smelled made his eyes open wide. The scent was disturbing, distinctive, and most of all...nostalgic.

“You’re with the Uesugi,” Jun said. The reaction from the ninja all but confirmed it. “What are you doing out this far? And why shouldn’t I slay you here and now?”

“I’m just—I’m just here to scout and observe this group. We found the...the remains of what happened to one of our caravans three nights back. I followed their trail to here. Yet from everything I’ve seen...this group doesn’t have near the numbers needed for what happened. Certainly not enough to kill eight veteran samurai!”

Jun couldn’t help but smirk. What this Tamaki wasn’t factoring in was that one of Sensei’s students were among the sellswords. An idea started forming inside his head. As much as he despised the idea of helping the Uesugi—his old family—he was willing to do whatever it took to save his new one.

“Alright, ninja. Got any ideas on how you want to stop them?”

■■■■

The orphan—or rather, the ronin, as he preferred to be called—took up a position upon a wooded hillside overlooking one the main roads into Hokusei. It being the pitch-black of night, there wasn't a soul to be seen. But if the mercenary group's scouting was correct, a caravan would soon pass by delivering high-quality iron alloy to the Uesugi.

None of that meant anything to him. But this job was another chance to put his swordsmanship to use. Getting paid and praised for his efforts was a nice change of pace—considering he never got either at the dojo.

“Wonder what Juu-kun would say if he saw me now,” the orphan thought aloud. Of course, Jun knew exactly what he'd say—or at least what he'd do—but he refrained from moving a muscle from his current position.

He was up in a tree adjacent to the one the orphan was crouched beside. Every bone in his body wanted to swoop down and grab him. He wanted to either take the orphan away or to take him right then and there—he couldn't make up his mind. Jun would settle for neither, though, as he waited for the rest of the mercenaries to arrive.

When the horse-drawn carriage came down the road, it was unlit by lanterns. There were no accompanying samurai and the driver sat unnerving still at the reins. It was suspicious—yet sellswords weren't known for their discretion. They ran down the hill all at once, pouncing silently like an owl swooping upon a mouse.

They weren't going to find anything, Jun knew, as he and Tamaki had already secured the driver, samurai and iron an hour earlier. With that job done, all Jun had left to do was clean up the mercenaries on their way back to camp.

That was the idea, anyway. The plan had taken a swift change when a flaming arrow flew out from the opposite side of the hill. It embedded itself into the carriage—of which the orphan and mercenaries were currently inside. The caravan went up in flames right away. It must've been soaked in lamp oil.

Jun felt his heart race out of concern for his lover, who jumped from out of the cart and began wheezing from the smoke. His kimono was charred and his hair was singed, but he was otherwise unharmed.

“For the Uesugi! Hyaah!”

The samurai that Jun and Tamaki had warned earlier yelled out a war cry in unison, announcing their presence and charging after the group. Though they wouldn't get the fight they wanted: they were up against sellswords who held no reservations when it came to running from unfavorable odds.

“Retreat! Kuso—it's a damn trap! Get outta here!”

The mercenaries scattered—which was their last mistake. Jun darted in one after the other, the Jigoku lighting them up through the smoky haze. Limbs fell off like sakura petals in a strong wind as the obedient student of Gensai took vengeance on those who dared to take his orphan away.

The only difficulty Jun faced was in making certain that his kimono didn't get dirtied by the bloodspray. Fleeing swordsmen were hardly swordsmen at all, it turned out, and not one of them so much as raised their blade against the brown-haired samurai. Though in their defence...it was hard to do so without a swordarm.

"This supposed to be thrilling? To use Sensei's style on this human filth...what a waste," Jun said aloud as he flicked his katana clean. Unfortunately, the mercenary leader was quicker on his feet than the others, but—while he managed to escape—many of his cohorts didn't. Jun counted five corpses by the time he was finished—Ichi, Ni, San, Shi, and Go—while the samurai suffered no casualties of their own.

Though considering they were Uesugi, Jun was tempted to change that. The primary outlet of his frustration was Tamaki, however, who made the mistake of approaching him with open arms.

"You fought tremendously! We managed to—*guah!*"

Jun raised the ninja by the collar of his shozoku and slammed him against a tree. To say he was upset was putting it mildly.

"Why didn't you tell me about the fire?! What if...*damn it!*" Jun growled, bashing the shinobi against the oak once more. The thought of the orphan getting hurt made him furious. "We were supposed to be working together! And what about these samurai, huh? They weren't part of the plan!"

The group of Uesugi approached Jun with caution. They had their swords out too, though did so out of self-concern more so than with any intention of attacking the swordsman who saved them. It helped that Jun had a particular feature.

"Excuse us...but your hair—it's brown," one said, stating the obvious. "Could you be...an Uesugi? Are you from a branch family, perhaps? An illegitimate child from—"

"I'm not part of your family and I never will be," Jun said, releasing the ninja. Tamaki fell with a hard thud and clutched his throat for breath. Unwilling to turn around and face the samurai out of fear of seeing an uncle, a cousin, or some distant relative, Jun ran off into the night.

Though he wouldn't leave empty-handed.

■■■■■

"Interesting haircut you got there, orphan," Jun said with a grin while his teeth grated over the stem of his tobacco pipe.

It was early afternoon the next day before the orphan had sufficiently licked their wounds from the failed caravan robbery that cost five of his companions their lives. Though few would mourn a mercenary, the orphan seemed to be bothered by the whole affair. Of course, he wouldn't mention anything about it to Jun.

"What are cookin', Juu-kun? You hunt down a deer?" the orphan asked, gesturing to the large pot the brown-haired samurai was stirring. As far as a reply, Jun bent over and blew a mouthful of smoke into his face.

"More like a pig. Go ahead—have some," Jun said, pouring out a ladle of the stew into a wooden bowl.

The orphan accepted it gladly, hungry but even more relieved that Jun was in a merciful mood. His usually possessive and distrusting lover didn't seem to question at all where he had been or why his hair was cut short on one side.

He slurped up the stew before quickly downing it and asking for another.

"This stuff is great! Puts my rice balls to shame! Bit different than the pork we usually get for our sukiyaki, though," the orphan said, eager to down another portion. With his spirits lifted, he didn't even mind it when Sensei took a seat beside him.

Their master enjoyed it so much that he asked for seconds after giving his praise. The orphan nearly choked on his spoon; Sensei *never* complimented either of them on their cooking—or anything, really—so this stew must've been especially good. Of course, the remark from Sensei certainly wasn't.

"Now *this* is a proper meal fit for predators! You'd do well to take notice, Boy!"

The orphan held his tongue. After finishing his third bowl and letting out a loud burp, he wiped his mouth clean and said what he had prepared to say. "I...I think I'm gonna be gone for awhile. I want to do some meditations up on the mountain top—for isolation, I mean. I'll probably be gone for a week."

If Sensei had even heard him, he made no sign of it. He was too busy engorging himself on the stew. It was Jun that the orphan most feared and it was his eyes that he wouldn't dare look into.

"A week, huh? Have fun."

Jun's apathetic response was far from the passionate outburst the orphan expected. In some ways, he was disappointed, but in many more he was immensely relieved. Though the orphan was no fool: he had a hint of suspicion too, that something wasn't quite right.

"What, that's it? You're not going to try and stop me?"

Jun took in another puff of his pipe before bringing the ladle to his lips and sipping the stew. "Why would I? Do you take me as some sort of overprotective lunatic?"

The orphan could do nothing but stare. Jun met his eyes and the two began a staring contest. It was like a game of Mirrors—though the orphan would be the first to turn away.

After he did, Jun put on a devilish grin.

■■■■

“Ah, the Cherry Blossom Festival never fails to bring in an odd batch o’ travelers this time o’ year. Soon as the ice melts, I get folks from all over crossin’ through to Hoku for the sakura viewings. And in case you’re lookin’ to wet your whistle, the brewery has a new plum wine out this year and I hear it’s...”

The ferryman had a gift for gabbing and did so from the moment Jun took a seat at the back of his vessel. Traveling across the nearby lake to get to Hokusei saved time and energy; Jun needed plenty of both if he was to put a stop to the mercenary company for good.

The brown-haired samurai recalled his conversation with Tamaki from earlier. Apparently, the Uesugi were vying for a temporary truce with the Takeda to buy time to restore their supplies and numbers after their recent losses. It was a popular plan with the common people: enough so for otherwise neutral parties to side with the white-bannered clansmen.

The Takeda wanted to push their advantage, however, and so—according to the shinobi—they hired out the orphan’s mercenary group for a special job. It was a high-profile one, too, that even the ferryman knew about.

“...more a fan o’ their pickled plums, to be honest. Say, you’re not much of a talker, huh? Had a quiet group o’ samurai not so different board right before you. Uesugi by their kimonos, but...smelled more like sellswords to me. Well, what do I know? Anyhow, I ain’t much one for politics, but I reckon they were headed into Hoku for the peace talks. If it passes...well, we’ll all be drunk on plum wine before the day is done! Good timin’, too: my wife just gave birth to our son. What a blessin’ it would be to raise ‘em in an era of peace in the Clanfields!”

Jun let out a snort upon hearing that. As far as what the sellswords were doing dressed up as Uesugi samurai, their job was to sabotage the peace talks just as they began. They’d kill a few Takeda and the war would spark anew, Tamaki said, which was as clever a ploy as any Jun had heard.

Though clever ploys didn’t suit him, the swordmaster found himself in one of his own: he was carrying a year-old sakura sapling. It was one of Sensei’s which he had uprooted with his permission.

As far as *why* he was lugging around a small tree, Jun intended to use it as his ticket to get inside the ceremony.

Each year during the Cherry Blossom Festival, there was a ceremonial planting of new sakura trees from all across the North. It was supposed to be a unifying gesture—which was usually only ever symbolic—though with the peace talks, this year’s held much more significance.

It would also get Jun in close enough to kill the remaining sellswords. He tipped his conical farmer's hat to the ferryman after reaching the other side of the lake and embarked. True to the ferryman's words, he could hear the cries of a newborn from out of a nearby shed.

"To be raised in an era of peace...you sure choose the wrong part of Hyuga to be born in," Jun thought as he made his way to Hokusei's main gate. This was the city he was born in and yet it was as foreign to him as snow on a summer's day. He had rarely made visits here and only ever on errands for Sensei.

"And you were always here with me," Jun said to the orphan who wasn't at his side. Unlike himself, his fellow student seemed to thrive in crowded places such as these. And it was crowded. Girls in kimonos colored every shade of pink chatted amongst themselves while merchants hawked their wares.

Street performers danced about while musicians played in a dueling symphony to earn the coin of passersby. The sheer amount of noise and movement overwhelmed Jun, whose senses weren't designed for this level of stimulation.

It also didn't help that he had next to no sense of direction here. Jun pushed through the waves of people while wielding his potted sapling like a club. Even then, the going was a slog: no matter how many festival-goers he scared away, there were always others to take their place.

"Get away from me! You filth—I could cut you all down where you stand!" he yelled out in frustration. Though even his most direct threats fell on deaf ears as those around here were too busy sipping on plum wine and snacking on taiyaki shaped like cherry blossoms to notice.

Running short on time and even shorter on patience, Jun began moving. He needed to find the gardens where the peace talks were to take place—but right now, he'd settle for anywhere where he could hear himself think. That meant escaping Hokusei's main streets and avoiding its marketplaces.

"This is...the temple district?" Jun asked aloud. There was no one here to answer him: the Cherry Blossom Festival was one of the few celebrations that had no religious component to it. Even the monks were off during this period to enjoy the festivities.

Jun's feet took him inside a particular shrine: an old and familiar one. The Wolf Temple was made entirely of wood and was originally used as a watchtower back when Hokusei was a frontier town and Hyugans had to fear for their lives from the large, dark-brown creatures that lurked in the night.

He was referring to bears and Kondos, too. Both once ruled this region before the people later known as Hyugans arrived from a distant land, many centuries ago. Now, in the North at least, both its original occupants were nearly extinct. That was the extent of the history lesson Jun learned in his youth about the time before the clan wars.

"A moment of meditation would do me some good," Jun decided, sitting in a seiza behind a column in an unlit corner of the temple. He let out a sneeze; dust was everywhere in this poorly-maintained part of the shrine. The samurai likened it to the orphan's half of the dojo which often went unkempt for weeks on end.

One thought of the orphan grew to a dozen and then hundreds more. At least back at the dojo, Jun had Sensei to take care of and take his mind off his loneliness. But here, alone in this forsaken city and unsure of everything—the orphan’s well-being, most of all—Jun found himself facing an immense dread.

A dread that would soon grow in leaps and bounds.

schisk

The shoji doors to the temple slid open before a group of visitors made their way inside. Jun glanced from behind the column and held in a gasp at what he saw. These were Uesugi, wearing white kimonos with matching emblems of two swallows kissing. They weren’t the group of sellswords masquerading as clansmen, either.

These were the real deal. Jun knew as much at a glance, but it wasn’t until he heard his mother’s voice that all uncertainty curled up and died. It was fitting imagery, too, as that was *exactly* what the brown-haired samurai wanted to do right now. Though he wasn’t a samurai right now—in his mother’s presence, he was merely a boy.

“Well?! Where is he? Where’s this sellsword I’ve taken time out of my rigorous schedule to meet?” Jun’s mother yelled, pacing about the shrine. “It’s distasteful enough that I’ll have to share tea with Ichiro! He makes it *far* too sweet!”

Before long, a haggard man in a white kimono was brought inside. Though he was wearing the Uesugi robes, he was pushed to the ground and made to grovel low in front of the clan’s matriarch. When he lifted his head up from the tatami, Jun recognized him as the leader of the mercenary company.

“La-Lady Uesugi, all my men are in place. I’m glad you accepted my offer. As to the matter of my payment, I can—”

“I have to say,” Lady Uesugi started, pulling out a fan from her kimono and expanding it, “I was quite surprised when we first got your message. I thought even sellswords had some semblance of honor among their own. Yet your presence here proves me wrong.

“You tell us,” the lady continued, “that the Takeda have employed your group to sabotage the talks and put false blame upon our clan. A plot very much in keeping with how devious that Ichiro can be. If I understand you correctly, you’ve come to us with a counter-offer: you intend to sacrifice your fellow...comrades...so that we may use the Takeda’s plan against them.”

The leader of the sellswords nodded, confirming the plan. He went into detail about where his company was currently lying in wait for his signal to move. When Jun realized the bastard was trying to get the orphan killed, the Jigoku took over. Yet even in its familiar embrace, Jun couldn’t fully escape the presence of the woman who birthed him.

“We’ll have archers in Takeda uniforms lined up on the walls. They’ll dispose of your mercs—or should I say...innocent Uesugi bystanders there for the flower viewing? Fufufu!”

"But...but Lady Uesugi!" one of the samurai said, bowing deeply. "Deceit is not our way! We should think twice before resorting to Takeda tricks!"

Jun's mother rolled her eyes while fanning herself. "We cannot allow Ichiro to gain further control of the city. If that requires the sacrifice of a few sellswords to do so—than that is a price I'll gladly pay!"

The mercenary leader let out a gulp. A bead of sweat fell from his balding scalp into his mustache. "Forgive me my lady, but one of my men...he's not quite like the others. You should take extreme caution in how you—"

"Bah! You mercs are all the same," Lady Uesugi replied, putting away her fan. Just as she did so, her eyes peered off into Jun's direction. After what he said next, there was little doubt as to who she saw.

"Jun? Is that you?"

Hearing his name voiced by that woman was like a stab through the gut. The Jigoku fled from him and in its absence was a sheer terror that Jun hadn't felt since he was a young boy. A boy tortured and terrified on a nightly basis at his family's estate.

Jun covered his mouth as his throat gurgled up bile from his latest meal. Enveloped in a complete and total panic, the man who was perhaps the greatest swordsman of this era fled. He darted out from the shrine like lightning, bursting through and running over an obese man with brown hair at the Wolf Temple's front entrance.

He continued running as fast as his legs could carry him as if each stride pushed the memories of his childhood away. He had convinced himself for so many years that his life hadn't started until the orphan was in it.

When Sensei united him with the one who would be his most precious, *that* was when his life began. And the most precious memory of those days would always be the promise the cute boy from Genfu had made him as they stared up into the starry sky.

Jun had asked the orphan to be his forever. It was a selfish, childish thing to ask...yet their response was as clear in his mind now as it had been during their first winter together.

"I promise. I'll be yours forever, Juu-kun."

So deep in thoughts of the past, Jun had lost track of the present: including where he was going. He knocked over a priest and nearly trampled over a shrine maiden before he realized he ought to slow down. He wasn't able to do so in time, however, before a group of children made their way into his path.

"Get the hell outta my—*ah!*" Jun yelled, before collapsing into a pile of mud. The sapling he was carrying flew from his grasp while his ankles burned as if they were broken. In truth, they were just painfully bent; the mud had glued his sandals in place.

After trying and failing to pull his feet free from the muck, he realized it wasn't made of dirt at all. It was clay—or rather, the street itself had turned into a thick sludge. It didn't make any sense...but then again, magic didn't have to.

"I'm sorry, Mister Samurai," said a boy barely in his teenage years. He looked utterly ridiculous wearing priestly robes that were two sizes too big on him, yet he seemed to be the leader of this band of children. He held out a slip of paper and clapped it within his hands. The clay began to release its grasp beneath Jun.

"What the hell was that?!" Jun asked, shaking off the remnants of the street from his toes. "No—it doesn't matter. I have to find the orphan."

Upon saying 'orphan', every pair of eyes on the group of kids began to light up. They were orphans themselves, they exclaimed, and their older brother was leading them around on a tour of the temples. Some admitted that it was as boring as it sounded, earning them a quick reprimand from their tour guide.

"Um, mister, you dropped your tree," one of the girls said, heaving the potted sapling over her head and offering it to the samurai. Jun took it and mumbled his thanks. He was about to make his exit when the boy dressed up like a Shinto priest stopped him.

"Say, that's a cherry blossom isn't it? Are you here for the planting ceremony? I can escort you to the inner gardens if you wish."

Jun was about to refuse when the kids began jumping for joy. Apparently, planting a tree was more fun than visiting shrines. Unable to find a proper excuse, the brown-haired samurai reluctantly took the boyish priest up on his offer.

The boy's name was 'Kiyo-kun' according to the children that followed him. He was their adopted older brother, more or less.

The two had a conversation en route to the inner gardens, which was far more secure than Jun had expected. The guards at one of the entrances scrutinized him intensely, but became friendly upon the sight of Kiyo-kun at his side. When Jun asked about it, his new companion blushed.

"Well...I suppose it helps when your father is the mayor, doesn't it? Though that isn't technically his title, of course, he's done far more for Hokusei and its people than the Uesugi ever have!" the priest exclaimed. "And now he's going to bring peace to the entire region. It won't be easy, but...if anyone can do it, it's Ichi-sama!"

Shouts of 'Ichi-sama' echoed from the group of children, all of whom thought very kindly of the Takeda lord. Jun still had his concerns, however. "This Ichiro Takeda...are you certain he'll be safe? This may turn out to be a more dangerous affair than he thinks."

The priestly boy beamed with confidence. “Ichi-sama’s swordsmanship is without equal! He’s bested every swordsman who’s challenged him. They say he’s got the quickest sword draw Hyuga has ever known!”

“Is that so?” Jun asked, his curiosity starting to pique. “I’d like to meet your father in person, then.”

Kiyo-kun was quick to apologize. “Gomenasai, but that’s impossible. He’s currently in the middle of peace talks at the moment.”

“They’ve already started?! Where are they taking place?!” Jun yelled. After Kiyo-kun gave him the location, the samurai shoved the tree into his grasp and ran off without saying so much as a goodbye.

The archers were already in place.

■■■■

The unending thump of a nearby sōzu—a bamboo device made to scare off deer—was slowly driving the orphan insane. His nerves didn’t come from fear but from an eagerness to get the job over with. Killing a half-dozen Takeda samurai wasn’t a problem. Standing in place for an hour-and-a-half, was.

“Boss is ‘sposed to be back by now. Wonder what’s keepin’ him?” one of the mercs asked aloud. There were four of them in total—five if you included the orphan. The orphan himself wasn’t quite sure who he countered himself among these days, yet all he knew for certain was that these sellswords treated him kinder than Sensei ever had.

That—and a heavy pouchful of ryō—was why he was out here loitering while dressed as an Uesugi with a faceful of makeup on. Apparently, his skin was too tan and his features were too Southern to pass for a proper Uesugi.

“I’m just glad Jun can’t see me like this. He’d never let me live it down...in more sense than one,” the orphan thought. It was the last thought he’d have before a horn sounded off in the distance. That was the signal announcing Lady Uesugi and her entourage had arrived.

Which meant it was time for the mercenary company to begin their attack.

“Forget the boss! It’s time to move out,” the orphan commanded. He and the mercenaries took turns moving on ahead—so as not to arouse suspicion from the security detail—with himself taking up the rear. He slowly made his approach to the teahouse where the heirs of the Uesugi and Takeda were sharing a cup of matcha while watching the cherry blossoms bloom.

The orphan didn’t have Jun’s nose nor his inhuman sense of smell, yet a waft of blood seemed to float within the breeze. It was an unnerving scent when paired with the sight of hundreds of sakura petals dancing in the wind. Yet, determined to focus on the task at hand, the orphan shook off all uncertainty and followed the sounds of a man laughing and a woman giggling.

It led him to a tiny yet elegantly designed teahouse that sat at the center of a pond. There were groups of samurai in red and white on either side of the water, split in half as expected of the two clans that so distrusted each other. Rightfully so, the orphan supposed, considering what the mercenary group was there to do.

Though speaking of mercenaries...the orphan couldn't find them anywhere. His concern only grew as moments passed and more of the samurai took note of his presence. Though they were being sly about it, the white-knuckled grips on their sword handles told the orphan all he needed to know.

"Someone tipped them off," the self-proclaimed ronin thought to himself. "I don't know where the others are, but...I'm not the sort to quit a job halfway through!"

The orphan didn't make it ten steps before the Takeda lord took a moment away from sipping his tea to gesture over at him. "One of yours, Kiku-chan? Hm...he has about him an aura that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I didn't think the Uesugi had such a formidable swordsman."

Lady Uesugi scoffed before raising her fan. She looked around and waited before growing frustrated and raising her hand even higher. This sellsword was supposed to be riddled with arrows by now, yet he approached their teahouse unscathed. A bead of sweat fell from the lady's brow and ruined her makeup.

"Chikusho! Guards—anyone! This is an imposter! Kill him at once!"

The sound of swords being drawn filled the silence that followed. The orphan kept his sword sheathed and his head low—though to say he wasn't prepared for battle was a fatal mistake. His legs were out and coiled in the stance Sensei taught him; though he despised his master and everything he had done to him...

...when it came down to it, the old man's techniques were good.

As the group found their bravado and charged at him with their swords raised overhead, the orphan closed his eyes. He embraced the Jigoku and took in one deep, final breath.

He then performed the Strike of Non-Action: the Jigoku Ittō-ryū's quickdraw technique. In a flash—in the blink of an eye—the katana that his Sensei had given him flew from its sheath and into his surrounding attackers. It was over as soon as it began; nothing but a streak of blood across the nearby cherry blossoms betrayed the swordmaster's strike.

That, and the screaming samurai who fell before him, clutching their stomachs as their innards escaped them.

The first to act upon this onslaught was the Takeda lord himself, who stood at the front entrance of the teahouse with his feet positioned for battle. He held out his hand and ordered his retainers to move back—saving their lives. He then addressed the assassin with a voice lacking any of its prior humor.

"I know that style of yours. Tell me! Tell me who trained you!"

The orphan raised their head and stared into Ichiro Takeda's eyes. The golden glow from his own was answer enough. Realizing the danger he was in, the would-be sellsword ran.

The Takeda and half the city of Hokusei would give chase.

■■■■

"And here I thought you hated that one," Jun grinned, observing the fight from afar. The brown-haired samurai had taken on more of an auburn shade as of late: his hair, face and kimono was dyed in the blood of his enemies. Of which, there was only one remaining.

The leader of the mercenary band who sold out his own men crept away from the gardens as soon as the fighting started. He would pass by several of the ones he betrayed, cut to shreds and left to seep their blood beneath the cherry blossoms.

As if that sight wasn't frightening enough, he clambered up a retaining wall only to see a flock of crows waiting for him. After shooing them away, he saw the remains of the archers that were supposed to finish the deed.

"Ah!" he yelled as he slipped on a pool of blood and fell off the other side of the wall. He rolled down the slope of rocks before slamming down into the street. He got up just in time to see a ghostly figure approach him: a samurai drenched in blood, with their katana unsheathed and a trail of drool falling from their lips.

"I wonder," Jun said as he licked the blood from his katana, "if you taste as well as your underlings do!"

The mercenary screamed as he ran, running through the crowded streets of Hokusei like a rat on a sinking ship. He bumped into and stumbled over all manner of food stands and festival-goers in a desperate attempt to escape his pursuer.

Jun had taken the high road, leaping across buildings and jumping down right in front of his prey. He was of course only toying with him; if he had wanted him to die quickly, the sellsword would already be dead.

"For betraying the orphan's trust...your death will be slow!"

The chase continued out of the city and beyond the front gates where the sellsword had pleaded with the guards for aid. They thought he was insane—or inexplicably drunk on plum wine—and tossed him away.

A more fitting way to put it was that they 'threw him to the wolves'.

AwoOooOOOooo

Jun let out a wolf's howl—a near perfect replication of the real thing. It always scared the orphan when he did it, so—as you can imagine—it had become quite a talent of his over their years growing up together.

It scurried the sellsword forward like a rabbit that was missing one of its hind legs. The idea of wearing this one's 'paw' to bring about good fortune was starting to grow more appealing to Jun, who picked up his pace until the two arrived at the lake outside the city.

The ferryman was on his boat fishing while beside him, his wife nursed their newborn son. The vessel was anchored to the shore—or at least it was until the crazed sellsword slashed the rope with a swing of his stolen katana. It took several swings, actually, each more desperate than the last as Jun drew closer.

"What are, mad?! Leave us be!" the ferryman yelled.

When the mercenary stepped foot into his boat, the man who lived by the lake and liked to talk too much became brave. Every good man did when their family was in danger. Unfortunately, while he was able to tackle the mercenary and disarm him of his katana, he didn't expect his assailant to be carrying a sidearm.

And he *certainly* didn't expect to die by a knife wedged between his ribs. But he perished all the same while his wife screamed and their son cried. The mercenary regathered his wits and jumped onto the boat, of which had drifted a couple feet off-shore. As if a bit of water could save him from the wolf.

Jun looked down upon the ferryman to watch the last of his breath leave him. He looked as pathetic as his death had been senseless; the samurai shook his head in disgust. He wasn't the sort to get sentimental or shed tears, though—that was much more of the orphan's area of expertise.

Instead, Jun's eyes went gold as he allowed the Jigoku to embrace him. It's familiar power flowed from his wrist out to every inch of his body, consuming him in an empty warmth.

"You! You're just like the ronin, aren't you?!" the mercenary yelled. He then took a position behind the ferryman's wife, placing his knife up against her neck. "You yellow-eyed demons! Don't you take another step forward, you monster! Or I'll kill her, too!"

The woman was sobbing uncontrollably while the newborn at her breast did likewise. It was a dramatic scene—or at least, it certainly wasn't a comedic one. Yet Jun began to laugh maniacally all the same.

"The difference between me and your...*ronin*," he said, taking a step forward onto the pier, "is that I see this world for what it really is. And I see you for what you truly are: human filth!"

Jun ran forward, leaping into the boat and allowing the Jigoku to handle the rest. It lunged its wielder forward, finding the proper arc for the fatal strike. That strike would come—however, when its target pushed the woman in its path at the last second, there was nothing Jun could do.

"No. That sort of thinking is for the weak," Jun said to himself as his thoughts returned and as he watched his katana take two lives with a single stab. It had gone through the mother to reach the sellsword behind her. The blade went in deep—deep enough for it to drive itself into his opponent's heart, causing him to gasp, stagger back and fall into the water with a loud splash.

As drops of water shot out from below, Jun slowly withdrew his katana from the mother's stomach. Somehow, she managed to keep her newborn held up in her arms even as the rest of her collapsed. She let out a pathetic groan just like her husband had.

"What is it, woman? You want to curse me with your dying breath?" the samurai asked. Though most would be devastated in his position, Jun felt little remorse. From a very early age and courtesy of his father, the brown-haired boy came to learn that this world was hell and that living itself was its greatest suffering.

To spare someone from all that misery with the single stroke of a sword—was that not the greatest gift?

"Onegai...please, save him," the mother said, using the last bit of her strength to raise her child and offer it to Jun. Again, it was pathetic—enough to make the samurai's gut wrench. But that wasn't the only organ that did. "Save my...little one..."

She slumped over as the last of her life left her eyes. The newborn was lowered to the ship's hull, yelling and fumbling around a growing pool of his mother's blood. Jun lowered himself too, sitting back and staring up into the darkening sky as the ferry drifted on the water.

Soon, a cold rain began drizzling down from above. He didn't blink even as drops fell into his eyes; the final words from the ferryman's wife had put him in a daze. They dug up memories the son of Izō Uesugi thought were long since buried.

"Little One, Little One," he repeated as his gaze fell upon the newborn screaming for his mother's warmth. "Oh, Little One. What a shame it is, to be born into this forsaken world. That's a lesson we all learn. In your case...your lesson came early, didn't it? Shall I end your suffering?"

The baby cried even more in response, flailing its arms until it hooked free a pouch from his mother's hip. Curious, Jun grabbed it and took a peek inside. His eyes lit up at what he found.

"Alright, woman. I suppose this will make for a fair payment."

■■■■

The rain picked up that night, and by the time the orphan wondered his way back to the dojo, it was pouring. He was a mess in more ways than one and exhausted from being chased down alleys and across ravines. The Takeda lord had spared no expense to find him.

Had the orphan not known these hills like the knuckles on the back of his hand, he never would've escaped. He didn't know how Jun would react to seeing him like this...or what lie he'd tell him once he

did. The orphan just knew that—after that horrendous botch of a job—he needed some peace and quiet. Some familiarity, too.

What greeted him at the entrance of the dojo...was none of those things.

“How’d your meditation go?” Jun asked. He was calm—ridiculously so as he cradled a crying baby in his arms. The contrast was crazy enough for the orphan to disbelieve his eyes; yet no matter how many times he blinked, reality didn’t change.

“What...what is that thing? Jun! Did you steal someone’s baby?!”

“It’s mother was killed. Some mercenary stuck a sword through her gut. Poor thing was all alone,” Jun said, rocking the newborn in his arms as if it was his own. ‘Fatherly’ was not a word the orphan would ever use to describe him, and so to see the unhinged swordsman like this...was just plain wrong.

“No...no, this isn’t happening. You can’t take care of a kid, Jun! Even you should know that!”

“Would you rather he grow up as an orphan? How’d that work for you?” Jun teased before turning his attention to the infant. It looked up at him with eyes more innocent and filled with wonder than anything else in the world. “We’ll need to buy a cow in order to feed you, won’t we? Not gonna be cheap...but your otosan has plenty of coin to spare, doesn’t he?”

The orphan didn’t reply. Instead, he lowered his head before shaking it. Soon, the rest of him shook as well. He was trying so hard to keep his anger bundled inside, but when Jun asked him to give it a name...he couldn’t hold back any longer.

He embraced the Jigoku.

“I know...I know what this is, Jun. You’re trying to guilt me into staying, aren’t you?” he asked, each word filled with raw emotion. “I knew you were up to something...but this?!”

Jun began to chuckle as he laid the baby down on the table beside him. “Accusing me of keeping secrets...that’s real rich coming from you, orphan. Or should I say...ronin?” Jun’s own eyes went golden as he walked forth down the front steps of the dojo. “A samurai without a master! That’s what your *friends* call you!”

The orphan took a step back and into the ready position. The one Sensei had taught him. “How long have you known? No...I don’t care! Call them whatever you want—they respect me! They say I’m the greatest swordsman they’ve ever known...and they treat me like it, too!”

“Oh, I’m sure they said a lot of things. But they’re not talking much anymore.”

The man from Genfu didn’t know what his fellow student was talking about. But what he did know...was that he wasn’t a student any longer. He plunged Sensei’s sword into the mud, sheathe and all. He then made sure his voice didn’t waver.

"I'm leaving, Jun. I'm leaving it all behind."

The orphan turned around. He couldn't bear to see his face. The brown-haired boy he had grown up with...the only one he had to confide in, to play with, to fight and to love...he was going to walk away from the one person in this world who knew him better than anyone ever would.

It wasn't going to be easy.

"Pick...up...your...sword. DO IT!" Jun yelled, his voice more akin to a beast than a man. But the orphan—the ronin—had braced himself for this and shook his head. He had already said all the words left to say.

With what little the brown haired samurai had left of his humanity, while trembling with fury and fear, Jun picked up a nearby sack and tossed it over. "Before you...head out, take this."

The sack fell beside the ronin and rolled a couple feet past him. Whatever was inside it was round. Though every sense he had told him not to look inside, the ronin felt compelled to comply with Jun's last request. He owed him that much, at least.

But when he picked it up and took a peek inside, when he was met face-to-face with the decapitated head of the mercenary leader, he couldn't help but let out a sigh. He really should've known better.

"Your family is here! You belong to *me!*"

Jun ran forth with his sword unsheathed. He wasn't going to allow the ronin to leave him. To lose his most precious possession was worse than death, and so he charged at the ronin without restraint. His beloved opponent would either draw his sword...or die in a single strike.

CLANG

The ronin chose the former. The two exchanged blows while the clouds above them continued to pour down. A wicked wind picked up, too, seen through the blossoms that danced violently across the air. Their fight was no less brutal as the two students of the Jigoku Ittō-ryū engaged in their most intense battle yet.

But fatigue—and something else—kept the ronin on his back foot. Jun could sense it as well: his fellow student's habit of overthinking was rearing its head in their battle. He took it as a personal insult each time his opponent didn't go for a lethal blow.

"Come on, ronin! I know you're stronger than this!"

His opponent spat out a wad of blood in reply. There was a reason the ronin was holding back—and if there was ever a time to voice it, it was now.

“Jun...those sellswords, they respected me! They accepted me as one of their own! You could’ve joined us! I was gonna ask you but...I was afraid of what you’d do. Turns out I had every right to be concerned,” the ronin said, shaking his head. Water began to well up in his eyes. “Come with me, Juu-kun! We can leave this place together. We can find other groups. With our skills, we’d find work all over Hyuga! We’d make more money than—”

The orphan’s proposal was answered with a kick to the gut. The would-be-ronin reeled backwards, tripping over the pot of stew beside the campfire. The remains of that meal soiled his kimono.

“You’ve never understood what we truly are,” Jun said, looking down at his opponent. “We’re predators: not prey. Quit pretending to be one of *them!*”

The ronin didn’t know who Jun was referring to by ‘them’. At least, not until he began rubbing off the leftovers scattered across his robes. He recalled the night Jun had cooked this meal: it was the same night as the failed caravan ambush that claimed five of the mercenaries’ lives.

They never did find the bodies.

“These bones...these aren’t from a pig, Jun!” the ronin yelled out in horror as he discovered femurs, mandibles and clavicles among the contents of the stew. They didn’t belong to any animal he knew of, and yet—even still, he refused to believe it. He refused up until the very moment Jun forced him to face the truth.

“You enjoyed how they tasted, didn’t you?”

Lightning struck down as the realization hit the orphan. Vomit ejected from out of his mouth as the ronin recalled the taste. It wasn’t that it was particularly tasty—but that it was nostalgic. He now knew what it had reminded him of: the orphans in Genfu.

Those boys...those innocent children...he couldn’t bring himself to accept it. It was too terrible and too wicked. He would rather lose himself than recall those unthinkable horrors, and so...

<*The orphan forgot himself.*>

Jun’s grin only grew as his opponent fully gave himself over to the Jigoku. To become the ultimate swordsman was to be nothing but the wielder of the sword. This was the thinking behind the Strike of Non-Thought: the most deadly and dangerous technique Sensei had taught them.

“Ergh!” the brown-haired student groaned as his own katana was shoved back into his chest. It was only the flat-end of the blade but even still, the force of the orphan’s slashes were enough to cut him cleanly in two. It was ironic, but the only chance Jun had to survive this onslaught was to kill everything he was.

Jun did just that, forgetting himself as well.

The battle between the two wielders sent sparks flying across the otherwise dark and stormy night. The intensity of their exchange was mirrored by the whipping blossoms that swirled around them. Cries from the newborn rang out into the distance as the battle between Sensei's students moved away from the dojo.

The fight had taken them down to the pond where the two would often fish for loaches in the summer. Though neither the future nor the past was of consequence any longer. The two wielders fought and lived in the moment, accepting that it was likely their last.

Both were knee-deep in water, now, their bodies hurling through the overflowed pond without restraint. Here, where every movement required much more energy than the last, the brown-haired wielder held the advantage. He pressed it mercilessly until the red line across 'Ichi' was exposed and begging to be cut.

It was at this moment, however, that a slight pain pulsed from out of the brown-haired wielder's right pinky. It was a negligible ache, and yet...to feel anything at all ought to have been impossible while using the Strike of Non-Thought. The sensation was enough to draw the wielder out of their dissociative trance.

Jun became himself once more and—in doing so—he halted his blade mid-strike. The man before him was far more than a number. He was his greatest possession—the one who had promised to be his forever on the night of their first winter together.

So many years ago, the two had wrapped their fingers together to seal their fate. They were to be with each other forever and ever. It was all Jun ever wanted, and yet...it was all about to come undone.

It wasn't a fatal slash but a swift kick from the ronin that would prove just as lethal. Jun was pushed out into the center of the pond where the water was at its deepest. Fallen tree branches and lengthy strings of kelp made for a great home for fishes but an even better trap for Jun's legs.

Snared, the brown-haired swordsman flailed against his unseen enemy. Unable to swim, desperation took hold as he flung out his arms and shoulders every which way in a vain attempt to keep his head above water.

With what precious little breath he had left, he yelled out to the ronin as they looked on from the shallow end of the pond.

"You!" Jun shouted, water flooding into his mouth. "You promised me! To be mine forever! Orphan, I—"

That was all Jun could say before his lips and nose went underwater. His eyes did, too, but not before taking in one final sight just as the dark abyss consumed him.

It was the sight of the orphan walking away.

■■■■

When Jun woke up, he was bent over and retching out water. He was freezing cold, his eyes stung and every part of him ached—his heart most of all. For while he had been out of consciousness for some time, the sight of his beloved leaving him remained fresh in his mind.

“Orphan? Orphan?!” he coughed out a cry. Even as weak as he sounded, his voice seemed to echo through the air. The rain had since halted and the wind died, leaving nothing but an eerie silence to welcome Jun as he staggered back up to the dojo.

At least the baby wasn’t crying.

An immense relief came upon Jun as he spotted the campfire in the dojo’s front yard. It was lit—albeit barely—and had the unmistakable figure of Sensei hunched over beside it. It was an odd posture for a man so dedicated to correct poise even in his old age, yet Jun paid it no mind.

“Sensei!” he shouted, rushing over and nearly losing his footing while doing so. The yard was muddy from the recent rains, and—combined with the battle between himself and the orphan—it looked as if an earthquake had ravaged the clearing.

Landscaping matters aside, Jun ran forth eager to tell Sensei all that had happened. If anyone knew how to find the orphan and return him back home where he belonged, it was the man who raised them. That was his thinking at least, until he neared closer and saw the pool of blood beneath him.

In an instant, all of Jun’s relief turned to fear. In another, it became complete and total agony.

“Sensei! SENSEI!”

Jun collapsed to his knees, using what little strength he had left to embrace the closest thing to a father he ever had. Through his tears, he mourned the loss of the one whose respect mattered to him more than life itself: the one and only man he would ever call his master.

Stabbed through the back, the greatest swordsman of the Golden Era was now no more than a wrinkled corpse. Though his wasn’t the only carcass festering beside the fire. For beneath his master’s body were the half-eaten remains of...of...

It was too terrible to put into words. Suffice it to say, Jun now knew why the baby wasn’t crying any longer.

■■■■■

“Five years,” Jun said, overlooking the view of the Clanfields atop a cliff near the dojo. It was the same spot where ‘Tree-san’, an apple tree, once stood years ago. It had fallen over while Jun and the orphan were trying to fetch an apple for their teacher.

Even if it was terrifying at the time, it was a good memory. Unlike this one.

“Five years, Sensei,” Jun repeated, patting down the last of the dirt with his shovel. He overlooked the grave with a sigh before wiping the sweat from his brow. “I will remain here and watch over your dojo—our home—for five years. I will continue to train and dedicate myself to your teachings until then.

“And after that time has passed,” Jun continued, “if the orphan has yet to return...if I find that your chosen heir is unworthy...then I will hunt him down like the prey he’s become.”

The promise was given and then accepted by a gust of wind that made the samurai's brown curls dance across his face. No—that wasn't quite true. As Jun took his first step away from the grave and back down the mountain, he could call himself a samurai no longer.

He was a ronin. He had no master and no family...and yet, he did have a path to follow. A path that took him back to the dojo: to the future he was determined to grow and make flourish.

Jun grabbed the pouch at his hip and squeezed to get a feel for the contents inside. It wasn't gold but something far more valuable: it was what the infant's mother carried on her when she died. Though she, her husband and child were taken by the horrors of this world...

...something good would sprout from it all in the end. Jun took out a handful of apple seeds and smiled.

"When you come back, orphan, I'll have an entire orchard waiting for you."

Side Story #30: Jun's Promise (Female MC Version).

Jan 19, 2021

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

Side Story 30: Jun's Promise (Female MC Version)

■■ Northern Hyuga ■■

“Again, Jun! Your footwork is...it needs work. Don’t get sloppy!” an old teacher yelled to his student. His voice was frail—far weaker than it had been years ago—yet it carried as much force as the whipping

wind across the mountain peak. While the harshest of the winter months had passed, even in spring the gusts were cold.

And even in his twilight years, Sensei remained the strongest swordsman Jun knew.

“Hai! Yes, Sensei!” Jun replied, adjusting his feet once more. In truth, his positioning was flawless: it was a perfect jōdan—an overhead stance—that had been drilled into his mind and body years ago. The very same man who had taught him was now telling him that he was wrong, and so the obedient student made adjustments.

“Give me a break. You know the front foot shouldn’t be out that far,” remarked a less-than-obedient student observing the practice duel from afar. She was an orphan girl from Genfu who had since become a woman—not that Jun ever treated her as such. Not outside their futon, anyway.

The orphan was the only rival, friend and lover Jun had. She was all the brown-haired student ever wanted...and everything he needed. But right now, she was being a real pest.

Jun focused on the practice duel—even if it wasn’t particularly intense or instructive. The student and master exchanged strikes with their wooden practice swords as the former was out-tricked by obvious feints and overpowered by wobbly swings. Jun was holding back throughout yet acted as if he was giving it his all.

The objective of these duels against Sensei had shifted over time: when Jun was a child, that meant merely staying alive. Then, as he got older, it was to stand his ground—and to leave without permanent scars and minimal bruising. Eventually, though, past his teenage years and into adulthood, the goal became vastly different.

It was, to put it simply...to not shame him.

“T-that’s enough,” Sensei said, his breathing starting to grow heavy. And though he tired early these days—especially this close to his mid-day nap—Jun had never once seen him break a sweat. The student bowed and thanked his master for the fight before taking his seat beside the orphan.

His fellow student looked half-asleep and was halfway through a yawn before Jun handed over the practice sword—delivering it swiftly into her gut. After the rude awakening, the orphan hopped to her feet and swaggered over into position against Sensei.

“Come on, Girl! Show me what I’ve taught you!”

Jun could sense a problem well before there was one; the intensity in the orphan’s stance went well beyond what was required in a practice duel against their master. Sure enough, she swung her weapon with full force against Sensei’s, the collision causing the teacher’s sword to crack and to be driven down into the mud.

As if that wasn't shameful enough, the orphan followed the strike with a tackle—slamming her shoulder into Sensei and forcing him to fall flat into the ground.

Jun was on his feet and in the orphan's face in an instant. His eyes were golden while his hands were makeshift claws. They gripped around the orphan's throat as rage enveloped the son of a samurai—and not just any. Jun was the only child of Izō Uesugi, the head of his clan.

While the brunet came from a noble heritage, what he intended to do to the orphan was anything but.

“Jun...bring me the katana. *My* katana,” Sensei ordered as he struggled to his feet. With more than a little reluctance, the obedient student released the orphan before hurrying off to the dojo. During his trip, he thought of several ways to punish his fellow student for shaming Sensei.

Most of them started by getting her naked.

After sliding open the shoji doors to the dojo and bowing with respect, Jun invited himself inside. He approached the shrine at the far end of the training hall where Sensei's sword rested on its wooden display mount. Falling to his knees in reverence, he clapped his hands and whispered a prayer.

It was short and simple. “May these hands be worthy of your sword, Sensei.”

The obedient student then took the katana in both hands, raising it up before him. Turning his head to make certain he was alone, he unsheathed it—just slightly. Just enough to see *it*.

彦斎

“Gensai,” Jun said, speaking the name as if it were holy. In his mind it was—even more so because that was all there was inscribed on the side of the blade. There was no family name. There was no ‘Takeda’. Sensei never mentioned his family to his students and Jun never dared to ask.

Because deep down, he already had his answer.

“You gave up your family for my sake. You saved me from that demon...and lifted me from out of that hell. You brought me and the orphan together...and taught us the way of the sword. Everything I am...I owe to you, Gensai.”

Closing his eyes, the son of Izō Uesugi once again renounced his past life and family in favor of his adopted one. Himself, Sensei and the orphan...they were tied together no less permanently than the stars in the sky.

With the renowned katana in hand, Jun hurried back to the practice grounds. He was worried that the orphan had done something even more foolish in his absence, yet it turned out that he should've been more concerned over something else, instead.

Sensei told them to kneel upon his return—and they did. With their knees muddied, the students of Gensai Takeda, the most fearsome swordsman of his era, looked up as their teacher raised his sword overhead.

“It is time I choose my successor. The Jigoku Ittō-ryū must not die with me. Such power...is meant to be used. To change and shape Hyuga.”

Jun’s eyes went wide. His heart skipped a beat and his lungs stopped outright. *This* was the moment he had been waiting for—yet he never dared to entertain it outside his wildest dreams. To carry the future of Sensei’s style of swordsmanship on his shoulders...it was the greatest honor from the man Jun respected most.

Finally, his loyalty and dedication was about to be rewarded. It was all he could do to keep from drooling as Sensei told the orphan to lift her head. Jun licked his lips in anticipation as...as his teacher handed over the katana. To *her*.

“This is my legacy. Take it, Girl. You are the heir to the Jigoku Ittō-ryū.”

■■■■

Only Sensei possessed the ability to sleep through the sound of clashing metal rods echoing throughout the training hall. Though he was officially meditating, not even the most zen of monks could contemplate in peace while war waged right in front of them.

baa-Ang* *Baa-ang

It was a war between two students in the disguise of a practice match. Though there was no such thing as ‘practice’ for Jun, who went all-out with every swing—each more forceful than the last. He wanted to bash the orphan’s skull in and said as much with his golden-eyed glare.

As for the reason why...that much was obvious.

“I’m sorry, alright?!” the orphan yelled during a rare pause in the battle. “How many times do I gotta say it? Sensei’s gone senile—he didn’t mean to make me the heir! You deserve it a hundred times more than I do, Juu-kun!”

Invoking Jun’s nickname did little to cool his wrath; if anything, it stoked the fires burning within him even more. “It’s the greatest honor a swordsman could ever ask for—yet you treat it as a joke! You’re the heir to the Jigoku Ittō-ryū—now act like it!”

The battle waged on and outside the training hall to the front yard and between the many sakura trees Sensei had planted there. This being early in spring, the pink and white blossoms were nearing full bloom—their graceful beauty making for a picturesque backdrop for a swordfight.

Of course, this wasn’t a swordfight and it was anything but pretty.

"Gah! Ah—*kuso!*" the orphan yelled after Jun stomped on her leading right foot. In truth, she had been on her backfoot throughout the entire fight, focusing on withstanding Jun's onslaught until he tired.

"Stand and fight me, you coward! How dare you dishonor our style! How dare you disgrace Sensei!" Jun yelled and swung, though the orphan had already darted out of the way. Using their master's sakura trees for protection, Jun couldn't get close enough for a lethal strike.

"Why are we doin' this, Juu-kun? Why are we training so hard?" the orphan asked. It wasn't the first time she had voiced this question.

"Not this again," Jun growled, taking a moment to find a way through to reach his opponent. "To master the blade and one's self is to give up all else. And that includes weakness! Eyah!"

Jun found an opening in the orphan's guard and lunged. Unfortunately for him, his opponent had a trump card: Sensei's sword. She unsheathed it and held it out to intercept Jun's strike. The obedient student who idolized his teacher paused mid-swing.

He wouldn't dare risk damaging Sensei's sword.

"I'm tired, Jun," the orphan said. "I'm tired of watchin' the world pass me by while I sit atop this damn mountain. I'm tired of being dirt poor—having to hunt and fish for my food while living in this dump! I'm tired of freezing my ass off, too, and I'm tired of having to walk a mile every time I need to take a shit! I'm—*umph!*"

The orphan went quiet when Jun enveloped his lips over hers. Intimacy was Jun's go-to answer for whenever his soulmate acted up like this. Whenever the orphan asked too many questions...whenever she threatened to leave him alone, sex was always the solution.

Though this time, it wasn't. "I'm tired...even of that, Juu-kun."

The kissing stopped. The son of Izō Uesugi opened his eyes wide, his irises shifting to a golden glow. In the absence of his lover, Jun embraced the Jigoku instead. His words were cold. "Is that so. Draw your weapon, orphan."

With reluctance—but knowing her partner far too well—the orphan complied, though the iron rod wasn't the weapon Jun wanted. "This isn't practice. Wield the sword Sensei gave you!"

The orphan had hardly the time to do just that when Jun struck forth a series of blows. He had his own katana—one of the several dozen spares the two of them had gone through over the years. With ronin and sellswords so abundant in the Clanfields, there was no shortage of cheap steel to be found for those willing to loot corpses.

And now Jun intended to loot Sensei's sword off the orphan's corpse. At least, that was how he fought. Yet as furious as he was, Jun was a proper swordmaster who took pride and satisfaction in a good fight

—and there wasn't one to be had. The orphan couldn't maintain the Jigoku. Jun could see the will to live fade from her eyes as they dimmed back down to black.

As he towered over his fallen opponent, he wondered what happened to the girl from Genfu he was always chasing. He must've been thinking aloud.

"I'm not that stupid little girl anymore," the orphan replied. "Don't you see? We've been at each other's throats for years. All that pain and suffering we put ourselves through...all to be stronger than the other—what was it all for? Nothing—that's what! I don't wanna race you anymore, Jun. And I don't wanna chase Sensei's shadow, either."

Jun pushed the orphan away with a palm strike to the chest before turning around and shaking his head. In truth, he was terrified. The words his most precious person were saying felt like knives driven into his heart. He couldn't face her like this.

"Sensei. You *know* we'd be dead without him—or worse! Don't you have an ounce of gratitude for the man who saved us? How can you be so selfish?!"

"We're supposed to be his students, Jun—not his servants!"

"I'm not his—" Jun started, though stopped upon hearing Sensei's yell from the dojo. Their master had awakened from his meditative slumber and...was in need of someone to prepare hot water for his bath.

The orphan didn't say anything. She didn't have to. Instead, she wiped the mud off her kimono and took out a pouch from behind her obi sash. Jun recognized it—it was Sensei's, kept in the dojo's shrine.

"I'm going to the trading post to buy us some rice. Stay here and wash the old man's back."

■■■■

"You're late."

Jun hopped down from a tree and into the path of a haggard-looking ronin. It was early the next morning when the orphan made it back to dojo from her shopping trip. Aside from being hours late, her kimono was cut up and sprayed with blood. Her usual stride was different—indicating a minor injury to the leg.

As far as how she smelled...

"Come on, Juu-kun. Quit sniffin' me," the orphan protested as Jun inspected her as a dog would. Aside from sweat and dried blood, another scent could be found from her lips.

"Saké. Who have you been drinking with?" Jun asked, trying—and failing—to hold back his jealousy. Though the orphan getting intoxicated was nothing new, what was more suspicious was the amount of rice she had brought back with her. She had two large buckets tied to a carrying pole atop her shoulders.

It was a lot more than Sensei's pouch of coins could purchase. Though before Jun could inquire further, the orphan locked her lips around his. The buckets fell to the ground and the two students shortly followed. Their hands explored each other's bodies while their tongues wrestled in each other's mouths.

The familiar warmth of the woman he loved was enough for Jun to halt his suspicions. "You're even easier when you're drunk," he whispered between heated breaths. He gripped his fingers atop the orphan's shoulders and slid her kimono down, revealing the slim yet remarkably strong arms beneath.

Jun could tell with one glance what the orphan wanted—and even if he couldn't, the hot dampness that pressed against him from below left little room for doubt. It was all the brown-haired swordsman could do to refrain from tearing his partner's kimono apart; instead, his deft hands began to strip the orphan as they had done countless times before.

Though as he was removing their sash, he grabbed something heavy and full. No, it wasn't the orphan's bosom—it was a pouch of coins twice the size that it had been before. As much as Jun lusted for the woman he had pinned beneath him...he had to know where it came from.

"Don't worry about it, Juu-kun," the orphan said between moans. "Turns out it's easy to make ryō with a good enough swordarm. There's tons of work out there, too. All I had to do was off a merchant and his guards. Old bastard died in his sleep."

"What?! What are you saying?" Jun asked, pouncing away from his lover's embrace. "You're a swordmaster—and the heir to the Jigoku Ittō-ryū! You dare disgrace yourself by doing mercenary work? Are you nothing but a sellsword?!"

The orphan remained on the ground, looking up into the sky. The sun was rising as the warblers began their chirp. Like them, the disillusioned student wished she could flap her wings and get away from it all.

But she had an anchor tied to her. It took the form of a katana branded with Sensei's name. "So you're sayin' if I get rid of this sword...then I'll be free to be whatever I want? 'Cause if that's the case...you may as well take it from me now."

"I'll take it from your corpse, instead!" Jun said before delivering a kick into the orphan's ribs. He then bent down to pick up the carrying rod and with it, the buckets of rice. "Now get up and stop being stupid. It's your turn to cook breakfast. Or is doing chores beneath you now?"

It turned out that it wasn't and that onigiri was on the menu. The orphan wasn't a great cook but you didn't have to be to make rice balls. A large, fresh one was presented to Sensei after he took his seat at the head of the table.

With a look of disgust, the old swordmaster picked it up and reluctantly took in a bite. After several chews, he spat it back at the chef. "Rice! Food fit for prey, not predators. I want meat, Girl!"

"They didn't have any," the orphan replied. "But if you wanna go off into the woods and hunt us some deer—then go right ahead! Otherwise, eat your rice."

"Don't you talk back to me, Girl! I want meat! Meat!" Sensei yelled, tossing the remnants of his onigiri at the orphan. It broke apart in her face. Her eyes then went golden.

Jun intervened between them, acting as a referee between student and master. The orphan gave her companion a glare before shaking her head and walking away from the table.

Once she was gone, Sensei turned to the son of Izō Uesugi. "Jun..."

"I know, Sensei," Jun said, checking once more to make certain the orphan was gone. Once he was, he folded up the sleeve on his left arm and presented it before his master.

He grimaced as Sensei bit down upon it, sucking out blood as greedily as a babe would its mother's breast.

■■■■

Jun had something of a sixth sense when it came to the orphan. It was why he feigned sleep after a passionate late-afternoon 'nap' with his fellow student. The woman from Genfu was as quiet as a mouse as she slipped back on her clothes and left the dojo.

But Jun was a cat and he wasn't about to let his prey slip from out of his paws. That and he had a profound curiosity, too—one compounded by jealousy. The scent of other people lingered on the one he loved. Those people would soon pay for trying to take his most precious possession away from him.

And the orphan was going to lead him straight to them.

'Them' happened to be a mercenary group encamped an hour's walk downhill from the dojo. Jun knew them as sellswords from their banners—or the lack thereof. Whereas the Uesugi and Takeda loved their emblems and clan colors, those who worked for either made certain not to be outwardly offensive.

At least visually, anyway. Their smell was another matter. Jun's sensitive nose worked against him as he lurked over to the camp in the cover of darkness. *"That smell—human filth. What can they offer you that I can't, my love?"*

For starters, the orphan was given a hero's welcome. If there wasn't a feast prepared before, there was now, as casks of saké were brought out and a skinned deer hung from a tree was cut down and brought to the fire for cooking. Aside from learning why the game around the dojo had been so scarce in recent weeks, Jun discovered his lover had a new nickname.

"Ronin! We were wonderin' when you were comin' back. Here—share a bottle of Hokusei Brewing's finest with me! Got another job offer for you...but let's fill up our stomachs, first!"

Ronin. That was the name given to samurai without a master. It was the most dishonorable title a swordsman could have, yet the orphan seemed to wear the moniker proudly. Instead of anger or

disgrace, however, she appeared quite the opposite. She was smiling and laughing as the other mercs took turns trading jokes.

The whole world, for a moment, went dark for Jun. Crimson-colored lines broke out upon each of their bodies, begging to be cut and sliced a hundred ways. The Jigoku had taken control of the brown-haired samurai. And he had surrendered to it willingly.

“When was...the last time...you smiled, for me?”

It took every ounce of restraint for Jun not to rush in there and tear apart the sellswords limb from limb. He could do it easily, too; they were no more dangerous to him than their cuts of venison were to them. Everything from their lack of physical conditioning to how they slouched around the campfire denoted a lack of training and discipline.

Gensai's students were leagues beyond these mercenaries. It made sense, then, that they'd have plenty of jobs lined up for the orphan to do.

“All right, Ronin, let's talk some business,” the leader of the group said, kicking his feet up atop a nearby log. “See, that merchant you...dispatched so well the other night was just a start. We've got another passin' by—and rumor is, he's packing somethin' more valuable than stale rice!”

“I may be a ronin, but I'm no bandit,” said the orphan. She kept her eyes focused on the fire. “I want to do more than raid caravans.”

“Right, right! Well, maybe ‘merchant’ ain't the best way to describe these guys, then. They're actually suppliers for the Uesugi. See, our group is trying to get in the Takeda's good graces. The reds have gone under new management lately—word is, groups that distinguish themselves get hired on permanently. We're talkin' stipends for years, here! And you know what else?”

The orphan didn't and shook her head.

“Especially skilled warriors got a chance of gettin' adopted into a branch family. For folk with no house names like us, it's a hell of an offer. And a woman with your skills...you keep at it and we may be callin' you Lady Takeda someday, hahaha!”

“Adopted, huh...”

Jun's eyes turned gold once more. This time, he embraced the Jigoku on purpose. This talk of family—and of Takeda, too...every word seemed to push the orphan further and further away from him. The now-familiar despair of losing the one he needed most made his heart sink deep beneath his chest.

But it was still beating, and so long as it was, the orphan would be his. He refocused his eyes upon the encampment, visualizing the lines of death and fantasizing about how he would punish them for deceiving the orphan like this. For it was nothing short of trickery that could drive the one he loved against him and Sensei!

“What’s this?” he asked aloud. Jun wasn’t talking to himself—he was staring up into the tree he had braced up against. The lines of death depicted a figure within the branches. A figure that was frightened stiff—especially after Jun jumped up and stared them face-to-face.

“Ah—*ng!*” the figure said, trying to muffle himself mid-scream. He was more of a teenager than a man and was too scrawny to be a mercenary. He was a shinobi judging by his garb—a ninja, trained in the art of subterfuge.

Sensei had spoken about them before. Though they weren’t the best fighters, their talents outside the battlefield made them invaluable all the same.

“D-don’t kill me, please. I’m not with them,” he whispered as beads of sweat fell down his forehead. Jun gave no reply aside from maintaining his stare, which was wicked enough to get the frightened shinobi to start talking. “My name is Tamaki. M-may I ask yours?”

Jun would never give Tamaki his name. Instead, he started sniffing around him. What he smelled made his eyes open wide. The scent was disturbing, distinctive, and most of all...nostalgic.

“You’re with the Uesugi,” Jun said. The reaction from the ninja all but confirmed it. “What are you doing out this far? And why shouldn’t I slay you here and now?”

“I’m just—I’m just here to scout and observe this group. We found the...the remains of what happened to one of our caravans three nights back. I followed their trail to here. Yet from everything I’ve seen...this group doesn’t have near the numbers needed for what happened. Certainly not enough to kill eight veteran samurai!”

Jun couldn’t help but smirk. What this Tamaki wasn’t factoring in was that one of Sensei’s students were among the sellswords. An idea started forming inside his head. As much as he despised the idea of helping the Uesugi—his old family—he was willing to do whatever it took to save his new one.

“Alright, ninja. Got any ideas on how you want to stop them?”

■■■■

The orphan—or rather, the ronin, as she preferred to be called—took up a position upon a wooded hillside overlooking one the main roads into Hokusei. It being the pitch-black of night, there wasn’t a soul to be seen. But if the mercenary group’s scouting was correct, a caravan would soon pass by delivering high-quality iron alloy to the Uesugi.

None of that meant anything to her. But this job was another chance to put her swordsmanship to use. Getting paid and praised for her efforts was a nice change of pace—considering she never got either at the dojo.

“Wonder what Juu-kun would say if he saw me now,” the orphan thought aloud. Of course, Jun knew exactly what he’d say—or at least what he’d do—but he refrained from moving a muscle from his

current position.

He was up in a tree adjacent to the one the orphan was crouched beside. Every bone in his body wanted to swoop down and grab him. He wanted to either take the orphan away or to take her right then and there—he couldn't make up his mind. Jun would settle for neither, though, as he waited for the rest of the mercenaries to arrive.

When the horse-drawn carriage came down the road, it was unlit by lanterns. There were no accompanying samurai and the driver sat unnerving still at the reins. It was suspicious—yet sellswords weren't known for their discretion. They ran down the hill all at once, pouncing silently like an owl swooping upon a mouse.

They weren't going to find anything, Jun knew, as he and Tamaki had already secured the driver, samurai and iron an hour earlier. With that job done, all Jun had left to do was clean up the mercenaries on their way back to camp.

That was the idea, anyway. The plan had taken a swift change when a flaming arrow flew out from the opposite side of the hill. It embedded itself into the carriage—of which the orphan and mercenaries were currently inside. The caravan went up in flames right away. It must've been soaked in lamp oil.

Jun felt his heart race out of concern for his lover, who jumped from out of the cart and began wheezing from the smoke. Her kimono was charred and her hair was singed, but she was otherwise unharmed.

“For the Uesugi! Hyaah!”

The samurai that Jun and Tamaki had warned earlier yelled out a war cry in unison, announcing their presence and charging after the group. Though they wouldn't get the fight they wanted: they were up against sellswords who held no reservations when it came to running from unfavorable odds.

“Retreat! Kuso—it's a damn trap! Get outta here!”

The mercenaries scattered—which was their last mistake. Jun darted in one after the other, the Jigoku lighting them up through the smoky haze. Limbs fell off like sakura petals in a strong wind as the obedient student of Gensai took vengeance on those who dared to take his orphan away.

The only difficulty Jun faced was in making certain that his kimono didn't get dirtied by the bloodspray. Fleeing swordsmen were hardly swordsmen at all, it turned out, and not one of them so much as raised their blade against the brown-haired samurai. Though in their defence...it was hard to do so without a swordarm.

“This supposed to be thrilling? To use Sensei's style on this human filth...what a waste,” Jun said aloud as he flicked his katana clean. Unfortunately, the mercenary leader was quicker on his feet than the others, but—while he managed to escape—many of his cohorts didn't. Jun counted five corpses by the time he was finished—Ichi, Ni, San, Shi, and Go—while the samurai suffered no casualties of their own.

Though considering they were Uesugi, Jun was tempted to change that. The primary outlet of his frustration was Tamaki, however, who made the mistake of approaching him with open arms.

“You fought tremendously! We managed to—*guah!*”

Jun raised the ninja by the collar of his shozoku and slammed him against a tree. To say he was upset was putting it mildly.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the fire?! What if...*damn it!*” Jun growled, bashing the shinobi against the oak once more. The thought of the orphan getting hurt made him furious. “We were supposed to be working together! And what about these samurai, huh? They weren’t part of the plan!”

The group of Uesugi approached Jun with caution. They had their swords out too, though did so out of self-concern more so than with any intention of attacking the swordsman who saved them. It helped that Jun had a particular feature.

“Excuse us...but your hair—it’s brown,” one said, stating the obvious. “Could you be...an Uesugi? Are you from a branch family, perhaps? An illegitimate child from—”

“I’m not part of your family and I never will be,” Jun said, releasing the ninja. Tamaki fell with a hard thud and clutched his throat for breath. Unwilling to turn around and face the samurai out of fear of seeing an uncle, a cousin, or some distant relative, Jun ran off into the night.

Though he wouldn’t leave empty-handed.

■■■■

“Interesting haircut you got there, orphan,” Jun said with a grin while his teeth grated over the stem of his tobacco pipe.

It was early afternoon the next day before the orphan had sufficiently licked their wounds from the failed caravan robbery that cost five of her companions their lives. Though few would mourn a mercenary, the orphan seemed to be bothered by the whole affair. Of course, she wouldn’t mention anything about it to Jun.

“What are cookin’, Juu-kun? You hunt down a deer?” the orphan asked, gesturing to the large pot the brown-haired samurai was stirring. As far as a reply, Jun bent over and blew a mouthful of smoke into her face.

“More like a pig. Go ahead—have some,” Jun said, pouring out a ladle of the stew into a wooden bowl.

The orphan accepted it gladly, hungry but even more relieved that Jun was in a merciful mood. Her usually possessive and distrusting lover didn’t seem to question at all where she had been or why her hair was cut short on one side.

She slurped up the stew before quickly downing it and asking for another.

“This stuff is great! Puts my rice balls to shame! Bit different than the pork we usually get for our sukiyaki, though,” the orphan said, eager to down another portion. With her spirits lifted, she didn’t even mind it when Sensei took a seat beside her.

Their master enjoyed it so much that he asked for seconds after giving his praise. The orphan nearly choked on her spoon; Sensei *never* complimented either of them on their cooking—or anything, really—so this stew must’ve been especially good. Of course, the remark from Sensei certainly wasn’t.

“Now *this* is a proper meal fit for predators! You’d do well to take notice, Girl!”

The orphan held her tongue. After finishing her third bowl and letting out a loud burp, she wiped her mouth clean and said what she had prepared to say. “I...I think I’m gonna be gone for awhile. I want to do some meditations up on the mountain top—for isolation, I mean. I’ll probably be gone for a week.”

If Sensei had even heard her, he made no sign of it. He was too busy engorging himself on the stew. It was Jun that the orphan most feared and it was his eyes that she wouldn’t dare look into.

“A week, huh? Have fun.”

Jun’s apathetic response was far from the passionate outburst the orphan expected. In some ways, she was disappointed, but in many more she was immensely relieved. Though the orphan was no fool: she had a hint of suspicion too, that something wasn’t quite right.

“What, that’s it? You’re not going to try and stop me?”

Jun took in another puff of his pipe before bringing the ladle to his lips and sipping the stew. “Why would I? Do you take me as some sort of overprotective lunatic?”

The orphan could do nothing but stare. Jun met her eyes and the two began a staring contest. It was like a game of Mirrors—though the orphan would be the first to turn away.

After she did, Jun put on a devilish grin.

■■■■

“Ah, the Cherry Blossom Festival never fails to bring in an odd batch o’ travelers this time o’ year. Soon as the ice melts, I get folks from all over crossin’ through to Hoku for the sakura viewings. And in case you’re lookin’ to wet your whistle, the brewery has a new plum wine out this year and I hear it’s...”

The ferryman had a gift for gabbing and did so from the moment Jun took a seat at the back of his vessel. Traveling across the nearby lake to get to Hokusei saved time and energy; Jun needed plenty of both if he was to put a stop to the mercenary company for good.

The brown-haired samurai recalled his conversation with Tamaki from earlier. Apparently, the Uesugi were vying for a temporary truce with the Takeda to buy time to restore their supplies and numbers after their recent losses. It was a popular plan with the common people: enough so for otherwise neutral parties to side with the white-bannered clansmen.

The Takeda wanted to push their advantage, however, and so—according to the shinobi—they hired out the orphan's mercenary group for a special job. It was a high-profile one, too, that even the ferryman knew about.

"...more a fan o' their pickled plums, to be honest. Say, you're not much of a talker, huh? Had a quiet group o' samurai not so different board right before you. Uesugi by their kimonos, but...smelled more like sellswords to me. Well, what do I know? Anyhow, I ain't much one for politics, but I reckon they were headed into Hoku for the peace talks. If it passes...well, we'll all be drunk on plum wine before the day is done! Good timin', too: my wife just gave birth to our son. What a blessin' it would be to raise 'em in an era of peace in the Clanfields!"

Jun let out a snort upon hearing that. As far as what the sellswords were doing dressed up as Uesugi samurai, their job was to sabotage the peace talks just as they began. They'd kill a few Takeda and the war would spark anew, Tamaki said, which was as clever a ploy as any Jun had heard.

Though clever ploys didn't suit him, the swordmaster found himself in one of his own: he was carrying a year-old sakura sapling. It was one of Sensei's which he had uprooted with his permission.

As far as *why* he was lugging around a small tree, Jun intended to use it as his ticket to get inside the ceremony.

Each year during the Cherry Blossom Festival, there was a ceremonial planting of new sakura trees from all across the North. It was supposed to be a unifying gesture—which was usually only ever symbolic—though with the peace talks, this year's held much more significance.

It would also get Jun in close enough to kill the remaining sellswords. He tipped his conical farmer's hat to the ferryman after reaching the other side of the lake and embarked. True to the ferryman's words, he could hear the cries of a newborn from out of a nearby shed.

"To be raised in an era of peace...you sure choose the wrong part of Hyuga to be born in," Jun thought as he made his way to Hokusei's main gate. This was the city he was born in and yet it was as foreign to him as snow on a summer's day. He had rarely made visits here and only ever on errands for Sensei.

"And you were always here with me," Jun said to the orphan who wasn't at his side. Unlike himself, his fellow student seemed to thrive in crowded places such as these. And it *was* crowded. Girls in kimonos colored every shade of pink chatted amongst themselves while merchants hawked their wares.

Street performers danced about while musicians played in a dueling symphony to earn the coin of passersby. The sheer amount of noise and movement overwhelmed Jun, whose senses weren't designed for this level of stimulation.

It also didn't help that he had next to no sense of direction here. Jun pushed through the waves of people while wielding his potted sapling like a club. Even then, the going was a slog: no matter how many festival-goers he scared away, there were always others to take their place.

"Get away from me! You filth—I could cut you all down where you stand!" he yelled out in frustration. Though even his most direct threats fell on deaf's ears as those around here were too busy sipping on plum wine and snacking on taiyaki shaped like cherry blossoms to notice.

Running short on time and even shorter on patience, Jun began moving. He needed to find the gardens where the peace talks were to take place—but right now, he'd settle for anywhere where he could hear himself think. That meant escaping Hokusei's main streets and avoiding its marketplaces.

"This is...the temple district?" Jun asked aloud. There was no one here to answer him: the Cherry Blossom Festival was one of the few celebrations that had no religious component to it. Even the monks were off during this period to enjoy the festivities.

Jun's feet took him inside a particular shrine: an old and familiar one. The Wolf Temple was made entirely of wood and was originally used as a watchtower back when Hokusei was a frontier town and Hyugans had to fear for their lives from the large, dark-brown creatures that lurked in the night.

He was referring to bears and Kondos, too. Both once ruled this region before the people later known as Hyugans arrived from a distant land, many centuries ago. Now, in the North at least, both its original occupants were nearly extinct. That was the extent of the history lesson Jun learned in his youth about the time before the clan wars.

"A moment of meditation would do me some good," Jun decided, sitting in a seiza behind a column in an unlit corner of the temple. He let out a sneeze; dust was everywhere in this poorly-maintained part of the shrine. The samurai likened it to the orphan's half of the dojo which often went unkempt for weeks on end.

One thought of the orphan grew to a dozen and then hundreds more. At least back at the dojo, Jun had Sensei to take care of and take his mind off his loneliness. But here, alone in this forsaken city and unsure of everything—the orphan's well-being, most of all—Jun found himself facing an immense dread.

A dread that would soon grow in leaps and bounds.

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The shoji doors to the temple slid open before a group of visitors made their way inside. Jun glanced from behind the column and held in a gasp at what he saw. These were Uesugi, wearing white kimonos with matching emblems of two swallows kissing. They weren't the group of sellswords masquerading as clansmen, either.

These were the real deal. Jun knew as much at a glance, but it wasn't until he heard his mother's voice that all uncertainty curled up and died. It was fitting imagery, too, as that was *exactly* what the brown-

haired samurai wanted to do right now. Though he wasn't a samurai right now—in his mother's presence, he was merely a boy.

"Well?! Where is he? Where's this sellsword I've taken time out of my rigorous schedule to meet?" Jun's mother yelled, pacing about the shrine. "It's distasteful enough that I'll have to share tea with Ichiro! He makes it *far* too sweet!"

Before long, a haggard man in a white kimono was brought inside. Though he was wearing the Uesugi robes, he was pushed to the ground and made to grovel low in front of the clan's matriarch. When he lifted his head up from the tatami, Jun recognized him as the leader of the mercenary company.

"La-Lady Uesugi, all my men are in place. I'm glad you accepted my offer. As to the matter of my payment, I can—"

"I have to say," Lady Uesugi started, pulling out a fan from her kimono and expanding it, "I was quite surprised when we first got your message. I thought even sellswords had some semblance of honor among their own. Yet your presence here proves me wrong.

"You tell us," the lady continued, "that the Takeda have employed your group to sabotage the talks and put false blame upon our clan. A plot very much in keeping with how devious that Ichiro can be. If I understand you correctly, you've come to us with a counter-offer: you intend to sacrifice your fellow...comrades...so that we may use the Takeda's plan against them."

The leader of the sellswords nodded, confirming the plan. He went into detail about where his company was currently lying in wait for his signal to move. When Jun realized the bastard was trying to get the orphan killed, the Jigoku took over. Yet even in its familiar embrace, Jun couldn't fully escape the presence of the woman who birthed him.

"We'll have archers in Takeda uniforms lined up on the walls. They'll dispose of your mercs—or should I say...innocent Uesugi bystanders there for the flower viewing? Fufufu!"

"But...but Lady Uesugi!" one of the samurai said, bowing deeply. "Deceit is not our way! We should think twice before resorting to Takeda tricks!"

Jun's mother rolled her eyes while fanning herself. "We cannot allow Ichiro to gain further control of the city. If that requires the sacrifice of a few sellswords to do so—than that is a price I'll gladly pay!"

The mercenary leader let out a gulp. A bead of sweat fell from his balding scalp into his mustache. "Forgive me my lady, but one of my men...well, she's actually a woman and...a very dangerous one at that. You should take extreme caution in how you—"

"Bah! You mercs are all the same," Lady Uesugi replied, putting away her fan. Just as she did so, her eyes peered off into Jun's direction. After what he said next, there was little doubt as to who she saw.

"Jun? Is that you?"

Hearing his name voiced by that woman was like a stab through the gut. The Jigoku fled from him and in its absence was a sheer terror that Jun hadn't felt since he was a young boy. A boy tortured and terrified on a nightly basis at his family's estate.

Jun covered his mouth as his throat gurgled up bile from his latest meal. Enveloped in a complete and total panic, the man who was perhaps the greatest swordsman of this era fled. He darted out from the shrine like lightning, bursting through and running over an obese man with brown hair at the Wolf Temple's front entrance.

He continued running as fast as his legs could carry him as if each stride pushed the memories of his childhood away. He had convinced himself for so many years that his life hadn't started until the orphan was in it.

When Sensei united him with the one who would be his most precious, *that* was when his life began. And the most precious memory of those days would always be the promise the cute girl from Genfu had made him as they stared up into the starry sky.

Jun had asked the orphan to be his forever. It was a selfish, childish thing to ask...yet their response was as clear in his mind now as it had been during their first winter together.

"I promise. I'll be yours forever, Juu-kun."

So deep in thoughts of the past, Jun had lost track of the present: including where he was going. He knocked over a priest and nearly trampled over a shrine maiden before he realized he ought to slow down. He wasn't able to do so in time, however, before a group of children made their way into his path.

"Get the hell outta my—*ah!*" Jun yelled, before collapsing into a pile of mud. The sapling he was carrying flew from his grasp while his ankles burned as if they were broken. In truth, they were just painfully bent; the mud had glued his sandals in place.

After trying and failing to pull his feet free from the muck, he realized it wasn't made of dirt at all. It was clay—or rather, the street itself had turned into a thick sludge. It didn't make any sense...but then again, magic didn't have to.

"I'm sorry, Mister Samurai," said a boy barely in his teenage years. He looked utterly ridiculous wearing priestly robes that were two sizes too big on him, yet he seemed to be the leader of this band of children. He held out a slip of paper and clapped it within his hands. The clay began to release its grasp beneath Jun.

"What the hell was that?!" Jun asked, shaking off the remnants of the street from his toes. "No—it doesn't matter. I have to find the orphan."

Upon saying 'orphan', every pair of eyes on the group of kids began to light up. They were orphans themselves, they exclaimed, and their older brother was leading them around on a tour of the temples.

Some admitted that it was as boring as it sounded, earning them a quick reprimand from their tour guide.

“Um, mister, you dropped your tree,” one of the girls said, heaving the potted sapling over her head and offering it to the samurai. Jun took it and mumbled his thanks. He was about to make his exit when the boy dressed up like a Shinto priest stopped him.

“Say, that’s a cherry blossom isn’t it? Are you here for the planting ceremony? I can escort you to the inner gardens if you wish.”

Jun was about to refuse when the kids began jumping for joy. Apparently, planting a tree was more fun than visiting shrines. Unable to find a proper excuse, the brown-haired samurai reluctantly took the boyish priest up on his offer.

The boy’s name was ‘Kiyo-kun’ according to the children that followed him. He was their adopted older brother, more or less.

The two had a conversation en route to the inner gardens, which was far more secure than Jun had expected. The guards at one of the entrances scrutinized him intensely, but became friendly upon the sight of Kiyo-kun at his side. When Jun asked about it, his new companion blushed.

“Well...I suppose it helps when your father is the mayor, doesn’t it? Though that isn’t technically his title, of course, he’s done far more for Hokusei and its people than the Uesugi ever have!” the priest exclaimed. “And now he’s going to bring peace to the entire region. It won’t be easy, but...if anyone can do it, it’s Ichi-sama!”

Shouts of ‘Ichi-sama’ echoed from the group of children, all of whom thought very kindly of the Takeda lord. Jun still had his concerns, however. “This Ichiro Takeda...are you certain he’ll be safe? This may turn out to be a more dangerous affair than he thinks.”

The priestly boy beamed with confidence. “Ichi-sama’s swordsmanship is without equal! He’s bested every swordsman who’s challenged him. They say he’s got the quickest sword draw Hyuga has ever known!”

“Is that so?” Jun asked, his curiosity starting to pique. “I’d like to meet your father in person, then.”

Kiyo-kun was quick to apologize. “Gomenasai, but that’s impossible. He’s currently in the middle of peace talks at the moment.”

“They’ve already started?! Where are they taking place?!” Jun yelled. After Kiyo-kun gave him the location, the samurai shoved the tree into his grasp and ran off without saying so much as a goodbye.

The archers were already in place.

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The unending thump of a nearby sōzu—a bamboo device made to scare off deer—was slowly driving the orphan insane. Her nerves didn't come from fear but from an eagerness to get the job over with. Killing a half-dozen Takeda samurai wasn't a problem. Standing in place for an hour-and-a-half, was.

"Boss is 'sposed to be back by now. Wonder what's keepin' him?" one of the mercs asked aloud. There were four of them in total—five if you included the orphan. The orphan herself wasn't quite sure who she countered herself among these days, yet all she knew for certain was that these sellswords treated her kinder than Sensei ever had.

That—and a heavy pouchful of ryō—was why she was out here loitering while dressed as an Uesugi with a faceful of makeup on. Apparently, her skin was too tan and her features were too Southern to pass for a proper Uesugi.

"I'm just glad Jun can't see me like this. He'd never let me live it down...in more sense than one," the orphan thought. It was the last thought she'd have before a horn sounded off in the distance. That was the signal announcing Lady Uesugi and her entourage had arrived.

Which meant it was time for the mercenary company to begin their attack.

"Forget the boss! It's time to move out," the orphan commanded. She and the mercenaries took turns moving on ahead—so as not to arouse suspicion from the security detail—with herself taking up the rear. She slowly made her approach to the teahouse where the heirs of the Uesugi and Takeda were sharing a cup of matcha while watching the cherry blossoms bloom.

The orphan didn't have Jun's nose nor his inhuman sense of smell, yet a waft of blood seemed to float within the breeze. It was an unnerving scent when paired with the sight of hundreds of sakura petals dancing in the wind. Yet, determined to focus on the task at hand, the orphan shook off all uncertainty and followed the sounds of a man laughing and a woman giggling.

It led her to a tiny yet elegantly designed teahouse that sat at the center of a pond. There were groups of samurai in red and white on either side of the water, split in half as expected of the two clans that so distrusted each other. Rightfully so, the orphan supposed, considering what the mercenary group was there to do.

Though speaking of mercenaries...the orphan couldn't find them anywhere. Her concern only grew as moments passed and more of the samurai took note of her presence. Though they were being sly about it, the white-knuckled grips on their sword handles told the orphan all she needed to know.

"Someone tipped them off," the self-proclaimed ronin thought to herself. *"I don't know where the others are, but...I'm not the sort to quit a job halfway through!"*

The orphan didn't make it ten steps before the Takeda lord took a moment away from sipping his tea to gesture over at her. "One of yours, Kiku-chan? Hm...a female samurai? And her aura...if I'm honest, her presence makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I didn't think the Uesugi had such a formidable swordsman."

Lady Uesugi scoffed before raising her fan. She looked around and waited before growing frustrated and raising her hand even higher. This sellsword was supposed to be riddled with arrows by now, yet she approached their teahouse unscathed. A bead of sweat fell from the lady's brow and ruined her makeup.

"Chikusho! Guards—anyone! This is an imposter! Kill her at once!"

The sound of swords being drawn filled the silence that followed. The orphan kept her sword sheathed and her head low—though to say she wasn't prepared for battle was a fatal mistake. Her legs were out and coiled in the stance Sensei taught her; though she despised her master and everything he had done to her...

...when it came down to it, the old man's techniques were good.

As the group found their bravado and charged at her with their swords raised overhead, the orphan closed MC_hisher eyes. She embraced the Jigoku and took in one deep, final breath.

She then performed the Strike of Non-Action: the Jigoku Ittō-ryū's quickdraw technique. In a flash—in the blink of an eye—the katana that her Sensei had given her flew from its sheath and into her surrounding attackers. It was over as soon as it began; nothing but a streak of blood across the nearby cherry blossoms betrayed the swordmaster's strike.

That, and the screaming samurai who fell before her, clutching their stomachs as their innards escaped them.

The first to act upon this onslaught was the Takeda lord himself, who stood at the front entrance of the teahouse with his feet positioned for battle. He held out his hand and ordered his retainers to move back—saving their lives. He then addressed the assassin with a voice lacking any of its prior humor.

"I know that style of yours. Tell me! Tell me who trained you!"

The orphan raised their head and stared into Ichiro Takeda's eyes. The golden glow from her own was answer enough. Realizing the danger she was in, the would-be sellsword ran.

The Takeda and half the city of Hokusei would give chase.

■■■■■

"And here I thought you hated that one," Jun grinned, observing the fight from afar. The brown-haired samurai had taken on more of an auburn shade as of late: his hair, face and kimono was dyed in the blood of his enemies. Of which, there was only one remaining.

The leader of the mercenary band who sold out his own men crept away from the gardens as soon as the fighting started. He would pass by several of the ones he betrayed, cut to shreds and left to seep their blood beneath the cherry blossoms.

As if that sight wasn't frightening enough, he clambered up a retaining wall only to see a flock of crows waiting for him. After shooing them away, he saw the remains of the archers that were supposed to finish the deed.

"Ah!" he yelled as he slipped on a pool of blood and fell off the other side of the wall. He rolled down the slope of rocks before slamming down into the street. He got up just in time to see a ghostly figure approach him: a samurai drenched in blood, with their katana unsheathed and a trail of drool falling from their lips.

"I wonder," Jun said as he licked the blood from his katana, "if you taste as well as your underlings do!"

The mercenary screamed as he ran, running through the crowded streets of Hokusei like a rat on a sinking ship. He bumped into and stumbled over all manner of food stands and festival-goers in a desperate attempt to escape his pursuer.

Jun had taken the high road, leaping across buildings and jumping down right in front of his prey. He was of course only toying with him; if he had wanted him to die quickly, the sellsword would already be dead.

"For betraying the orphan's trust...your death will be slow!"

The chase continued out of the city and beyond the front gates where the sellsword had pleaded with the guards for aid. They thought he was insane—or inexplicably drunk on plum wine—and tossed him away.

A more fitting way to put it was that they 'threw him to the wolves'.

AwoOooOOOooo

Jun let out a wolf's howl—a near perfect replication of the real thing. It always scared the orphan when he did it, so—as you can imagine—it had become quite a talent of his over their years growing up together.

It scurried the sellsword forward like a rabbit that was missing one of its hind legs. The idea of wearing this one's 'paw' to bring about good fortune was starting to grow more appealing to Jun, who picked up his pace until the two arrived at the lake outside the city.

The ferryman was on his boat fishing while beside him, his wife nursed their newborn son. The vessel was anchored to the shore—or at least it was until the crazed sellsword slashed the rope with a swing of his stolen katana. It took several swings, actually, each more desperate than the last as Jun drew closer.

"What are, mad?! Leave us be!" the ferryman yelled.

When the mercenary stepped foot into his boat, the man who lived by the lake and liked to talk too much became brave. Every good man did when their family was in danger. Unfortunately, while he was

able to tackle the mercenary and disarm him of his katana, he didn't expect his assailant to be carrying a sidearm.

And he *certainly* didn't expect to die by a knife wedged between his ribs. But he perished all the same while his wife screamed and their son cried. The mercenary regathered his wits and jumped onto the boat, of which had drifted a couple feet off-shore. As if a bit of water could save him from the wolf.

Jun looked down upon the ferryman to watch the last of his breath leave him. He looked as pathetic as his death had been senseless; the samurai shook his head in disgust. He wasn't the sort to get sentimental or shed tears, though—that was much more of the orphan's area of expertise.

Instead, Jun's eyes went gold as he allowed the Jigoku to embrace him. It's familiar power flowed from his wrist out to every inch of his body, consuming him in an empty warmth.

"You! You're just like the ronin, aren't you?!" the mercenary yelled. He then took a position behind the ferryman's wife, placing his knife up against her neck. "You yellow-eyed demons! Don't you take another step forward, you monster! Or I'll kill her, too!"

The woman was sobbing uncontrollably while the newborn at her breast did likewise. It was a dramatic scene—or at least, it certainly wasn't a comedic one. Yet Jun began to laugh maniacally all the same.

"The difference between me and your...*ronin*," he said, taking a step forward onto the pier, "is that I see this world for what it really is. And I see you for what you truly are: human filth!"

Jun ran forward, leaping into the boat and allowing the Jigoku to handle the rest. It lunged its wielder forward, finding the proper arc for the fatal strike. That strike would come—however, when its target pushed the woman in its path at the last second, there was nothing Jun could do.

"*No. That sort of thinking is for the weak,*" Jun said to himself as his thoughts returned and as he watched his katana take two lives with a single stab. It had gone through the mother to reach the sellsword behind her. The blade went in deep—deep enough for it to drive itself into his opponent's heart, causing him to gasp, stagger back and fall into the water with a loud splash.

As drops of water shot out from below, Jun slowly withdrew his katana from the mother's stomach. Somehow, she managed to keep her newborn held up in her arms even as the rest of her collapsed. She let out a pathetic groan just like her husband had.

"What is it, woman? You want to curse me with your dying breath?" the samurai asked. Though most would be devastated in his position, Jun felt little remorse. From a very early age and courtesy of his father, the brown-haired boy came to learn that this world was hell and that living itself was its greatest suffering.

To spare someone from all that misery with the single stroke of a sword—was that not the greatest gift?

"Onegai...please, save him," the mother said, using the last bit of her strength to raise her child and offer it to Jun. Again, it was pathetic—enough to make the samurai's gut wrench. But that wasn't the only organ that did. "Save my...little one..."

She slumped over as the last of her life left her eyes. The newborn was lowered to the ship's hull, yelling and fumbling around a growing pool of his mother's blood. Jun lowered himself too, sitting back and staring up into the darkening sky as the ferry drifted on the water.

Soon, a cold rain began drizzling down from above. He didn't blink even as drops fell into his eyes; the final words from the ferryman's wife had put him in a daze. They dug up memories the son of Izō Uesugi thought were long since buried.

"Little One, Little One," he repeated as his gaze fell upon the newborn screaming for his mother's warmth. "Oh, Little One. What a shame it is, to be born into this forsaken world. That's a lesson we all learn. In your case...your lesson came early, didn't it? Shall I end your suffering?"

The baby cried even more in response, flailing its arms until it hooked free a pouch from his mother's hip. Curious, Jun grabbed it and took a peek inside. His eyes lit up at what he found.

"Alright, woman. I suppose this will make for a fair payment."

■■■■

The rain picked up that night, and by the time the orphan wondered her way back to the dojo, it was pouring. She was a mess in more ways than one and exhausted from being chased down alleys and across ravines. The Takeda lord had spared no expense to find her.

Had the orphan not known these hills like the knuckles on the back of her hand, she never would've escaped. She didn't know how Jun would react to seeing her like this...or what lie she'd tell him once he did. The orphan just knew that—after that horrendous botch of a job—she needed some peace and quiet. Some familiarity, too.

What greeted her at the entrance of the dojo...was none of those things.

"How'd your meditation go?" Jun asked. He was calm—ridiculously so as he cradled a crying baby in his arms. The contrast was crazy enough for the orphan to disbelieve her eyes; yet no matter how many times she blinked, reality didn't change.

"What...what is that thing? Jun! Did you steal someone's baby?!"

"It's mother was killed. Some mercenary stuck a sword through her gut. Poor thing was all alone," Jun said, rocking the newborn in his arms as if it was his own. For the orphan, the idea of Jun being a father at all...was one she only entertained in her greatest nightmares. Everything about this was wrong.

"No...no, this isn't happening. You can't take care of a kid, Jun! Even you should know that!"

"Would you rather he grow up as an orphan? How'd that work for you?" Jun teased before turning his attention to the infant. It looked up at him with eyes more innocent and filled with wonder than anything else in the world. "We'll need to buy a cow in order to feed you, won't we? Not gonna be cheap...but your okaasan has plenty of coin to spare, doesn't she?"

The orphan didn't reply. Instead, she lowered her head before shaking it. Soon, the rest of her shook as well. She was trying so hard to keep her anger bundled inside, but when Jun asked her to give it a name...she couldn't hold back any longer.

She embraced the Jigoku.

"I know...I know what this is, Jun. You're trying to guilt me into staying, aren't you?" she asked, each word filled with raw emotion. "I knew you were up to something...but this?!"

Jun began to chuckle as he laid the baby down on the table beside him. "Accusing me of keeping secrets...that's real rich coming from you, orphan. Or should I say...ronin?" Jun's own eyes went golden as he walked forth down the front steps of the dojo. "A samurai without a master! That's what your *friends* call you!"

The orphan took a step back and into the ready position. The one Sensei had taught her. "How long have you known? No...I don't care! Call them whatever you want—they respect me! They say I'm the greatest swordsman they've ever known...and they treat me like it, too!"

"Oh, I'm sure they said a lot of things. But they're not talking much anymore."

The woman from Genfu didn't know what her fellow student was talking about. But what she did know...was that she wasn't a student any longer. She plunged Sensei's sword into the mud, sheathe and all. She then made sure her voice didn't waver.

"I'm leaving, Jun. I'm leaving it all behind."

The orphan turned around. She couldn't bear to see his face. The brown-haired boy she had grown up with...the only one she had to confide in, to play with, to fight and to love...she was going to walk away from the one person in this world who knew her better than anyone ever would.

It wasn't going to be easy.

"Pick...up...your...sword. DO IT!" Jun yelled, his voice more akin to a beast than a man. But the orphan—the ronin—had braced herself for this and shook her head. She had already said all the words left to say.

With what little the brown haired samurai had left of his humanity, while trembling with fury and fear, Jun picked up a nearby sack and tossed it over. "Before you...head out, take this."

The sack fell beside the ronin and rolled a couple feet past her. Whatever was inside it was round. Though every sense she had told her not to look inside, the ronin felt compelled to comply with Jun's last request. She owed him that much, at least.

But when she picked it up and took a peek inside, when she was met face-to-face with the decapitated head of the mercenary leader, she couldn't help but let out a sigh. She really should've known better.

"Your family is here! You belong to *me!*"

Jun ran forth with his sword unsheathed. He wasn't going to allow the ronin to leave him. To lose his most precious possession was worse than death, and so he charged at the ronin without restraint. His beloved opponent would either draw her sword...or die in a single strike.

CLANG

The ronin chose the former. The two exchanged blows while the clouds above them continued to pour down. A wicked wind picked up, too, seen through the blossoms that danced violently across the air. Their fight was no less brutal as the two students of the Jigoku Ittō-ryū engaged in their most intense battle yet.

But fatigue—and something else—kept the ronin on her back foot. Jun could sense it as well: his fellow student's habit of overthinking was rearing its head in their battle. He took it as a personal insult each time his opponent didn't go for a lethal blow.

"Come on, ronin! I know you're stronger than this!"

His opponent spat out a wad of blood in reply. There was a reason the ronin was holding back—and if there was ever a time to voice it, it was now.

"Jun...those sellswords, they respected me! They accepted me as one of their own! You could've joined us! I was gonna ask you but...I was afraid of what you'd do. Turns out I had every right to be concerned," the ronin said, shaking her head. Water began to well up in her eyes. "Come with me, Juu-kun! We can leave this place together. We can find other groups. With our skills, we'd find work all over Hyuga! We'd make more money than—"

The orphan's proposal was answered with a kick to the gut. The would-be-ronin reeled backwards, tripping over the pot of stew beside the campfire. The remains of that meal soiled her kimono.

"You've never understood what we truly are," Jun said, looking down at his opponent. "We're predators: not prey. Quit pretending to be one of *them!*"

The ronin didn't know who Jun was referring to by 'them'. At least, not until she began rubbing off the leftovers scattered across her robes. She recalled the night Jun had cooked this meal: it was the same night as the failed caravan ambush that claimed five of the mercenaries' lives.

They never did find the bodies.

“These bones...these aren’t from a pig, Jun!” the ronin yelled out in horror as she discovered femurs, mandibles and clavicles among the contents of the stew. They didn’t belong to any animal she knew of, and yet—even still, she refused to believe it. She refused up until the very moment Jun forced her to face the truth.

“You enjoyed how they tasted, didn’t you?”

Lightning struck down as the realization hit the orphan. Vomit ejected from out of her mouth as the ronin recalled the taste. It wasn’t that it was particularly tasty—but that it was nostalgic. She now knew what it had reminded her of: the orphans in Genfu.

Those girls...those innocent children...she couldn’t bring herself to accept it. It was too terrible and too wicked. She would rather lose herself than recall those unthinkable horrors, and so...

<The orphan forgot herself.>

Jun’s grin only grew as his opponent fully gave herself over to the Jigoku. To become the ultimate swordsman was to be nothing but the wielder of the sword. This was the thinking behind the Strike of Non-Thought: the most deadly and dangerous technique Sensei had taught them.

“Ergh!” the brown-haired student groaned as his own katana was shoved back into his chest. It was only the flat-end of the blade but even still, the force of the orphan’s slashes were enough to cut him cleanly in two. It was ironic, but the only chance Jun had to survive this onslaught was to kill everything he was.

Jun did just that, forgetting himself as well.

The battle between the two wielders sent sparks flying across the otherwise dark and stormy night. The intensity of their exchange was mirrored by the whipping blossoms that swirled around them. Cries from the newborn rang out into the distance as the battle between Sensei’s students moved away from the dojo.

The fight had taken them down to the pond where the two would often fish for loaches in the summer. Though neither the future nor the past was of consequence any longer. The two wielders fought and lived in the moment, accepting that it was likely their last.

Both were knee-deep in water, now, their bodies hurling through the overflowed pond without restraint. Here, where every movement required much more energy than the last, the brown-haired wielder held the advantage. He pressed it mercilessly until the red line across ‘Ichi’ was exposed and begging to be cut.

It was at this moment, however, that a slight pain pulsed from out of the brown-haired wielder’s right pinky. It was a negligible ache, and yet...to feel anything at all ought to have been impossible while

using the Strike of Non-Thought. The sensation was enough to draw the wielder out of their dissociative trance.

Jun became himself once more and—in doing so—he halted his blade mid-strike. The woman before him was far more than a number. She was his greatest possession—the one who had promised to be his forever on the night of their first winter together.

So many years ago, the two had wrapped their fingers together to seal their fate. They were to be with each other forever and ever. It was all Jun ever wanted, and yet...it was all about to come undone.

It wasn't a fatal slash but a swift kick from the ronin that would prove just as lethal. Jun was pushed out into the center of the pond where the water was at its deepest. Fallen tree branches and lengthy strings of kelp made for a great home for fishes but an even better trap for Jun's legs.

Snared, the brown-haired swordsman flailed against his unseen enemy. Unable to swim, desperation took hold as he flung out his arms and shoulders every which way in a vain attempt to keep his head above water.

With what precious little breath he had left, he yelled out to the ronin as they looked on from the shallow end of the pond.

"You!" Jun shouted, water flooding into his mouth. "You promised me! To be mine forever! Orphan, I—"

That was all Jun could say before his lips and nose went underwater. His eyes did, too, but not before taking in one final sight just as the dark abyss consumed him.

It was the sight of the orphan walking away.

■■■■

When Jun woke up, he was bent over and retching out water. He was freezing cold, his eyes stung and every part of him ached—his heart most of all. For while he had been out of consciousness for some time, the sight of his beloved leaving him remained fresh in his mind.

"Orphan? Orphan?!" he coughed out a cry. Even as weak as he sounded, his voice seemed to echo through the air. The rain had since halted and the wind died, leaving nothing but an eerie silence to welcome Jun as he staggered back up to the dojo.

At least the baby wasn't crying.

An immense relief came upon Jun as he spotted the campfire in the dojo's front yard. It was lit—albeit barely—and had the unmistakable figure of Sensei hunched over beside it. It was an odd posture for a man so dedicated to correct poise even in his old age, yet Jun paid it no mind.

“Sensei!” he shouted, rushing over and nearly losing his footing while doing so. The yard was muddy from the recent rains, and—combined with the battle between himself and the orphan—it looked as if an earthquake had ravaged the clearing.

Landscaping matters aside, Jun ran forth eager to tell Sensei all that had happened. If anyone knew how to find the orphan and return her back home where she belonged, it was the man who raised them. That was his thinking at least, until he neared closer and saw the pool of blood beneath him.

In an instant, all of Jun’s relief turned to fear. In another, it became complete and total agony.

“Sensei! SENSEI!”

Jun collapsed to his knees, using what little strength he had left to embrace the closest thing to a father he ever had. Through his tears, he mourned the loss of the one whose respect mattered to him more than life itself: the one and only man he would ever call his master.

Stabbed through the back, the greatest swordsman of the Golden Era was now no more than a wrinkled corpse. Though his wasn’t the only carcass festering beside the fire. For beneath his master’s body were the half-eaten remains of...of...

It was too terrible to put into words. Suffice it to say, Jun now knew why the baby wasn’t crying any longer.

■■■■

“Five years,” Jun said, overlooking the view of the Clanfields atop a cliff near the dojo. It was the same spot where ‘Tree-san’, an apple tree, once stood years ago. It had fallen over while Jun and the orphan were trying to fetch an apple for their teacher.

Even if it was terrifying at the time, it was a good memory. Unlike this one.

“Five years, Sensei,” Jun repeated, patting down the last of the dirt with his shovel. He overlooked the grave with a sigh before wiping the sweat from his brow. “I will remain here and watch over your dojo—our home—for five years. I will continue to train and dedicate myself to your teachings until then.

“And after that time has passed,” Jun continued, “if the orphan has yet to return...if I find that your chosen heir is unworthy...then I will hunt her down like the prey she’s become.”

The promise was given and then accepted by a gust of wind that made the samurai’s brown curls dance across his face. No—that wasn’t quite true. As Jun took his first step away from the grave and back down the mountain, he could call himself a samurai no longer.

He was a ronin. He had no master and no family...and yet, he did have a path to follow. A path that took him back to the dojo: to the future he was determined to grow and make flourish.

Jun grabbed the pouch at his hip and squeezed to get a feel for the contents inside. It wasn't gold but something far more valuable: it was what the infant's mother carried on her when she died. Though she, her husband and child were taken by the horrors of this world...

...something good would sprout from it all in the end. Jun took out a handful of apple seeds and smiled.

"When you come back, orphan, I'll have an entire orchard waiting for you."

[30 Side Stories Announcement](#)

[Jan 19, 2021](#)

It's hard to believe I've written thirty of these things! Thank you all for your support. I wouldn't have been able to take time out of my schedule to make all these without it. Doing these short stories every month has helped me improve as a writer and Samurai of Hyuga improve as a story in more ways than I can count. Though once I get around to it, I'll make a blogpost about it on my [website](#)!

To put it simply, I went from starting and finishing about 3 stories to 33, refining my outlining process and really getting a chance to delve deeper into characters in a way I've never done before. Connecting secondary and tertiary characters together, thinking about the timeline and locations in relation to pre-established story events...worldbuilding! These things don't come natural to me, but these stories have forced me to improve.

And I like to think I have (lol)!

I expect most readers enjoy the main series a bit more than these short stories, which is completely understandable. But for me personally, I am more proud and more pleased of this collection of short stories than I am of the big books. I don't re-read my previous books for pleasure (just reference) but I can definitely see myself going through these side stories again. It's hard to explain, but that's how special they are to me!

The 30th side story is the last. There may be room for a bonus one down the line for Kohaku for example, to wrap up her/his story arc, but for the most part, I want to focus 100% on writing Book 5 going forward. In more practical terms, it means that the \$5 patron tier incentive is, well, less incentivizing!

While I have some future ideas for incentives, I recommend everyone at that tier move down to \$1 for the time being. The \$10 tier will remain early access until Book 5's release (late 2021 is my expectation).

Thanks again for the support—and thank you always for reading!

[MC #17 Face Art](#)

[Jan 31, 2021](#)

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 Ishiyan ([twitter](#))!

This month's build: **Very feminine, Charming, Ponytail**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[Feb 1, 2021](#)

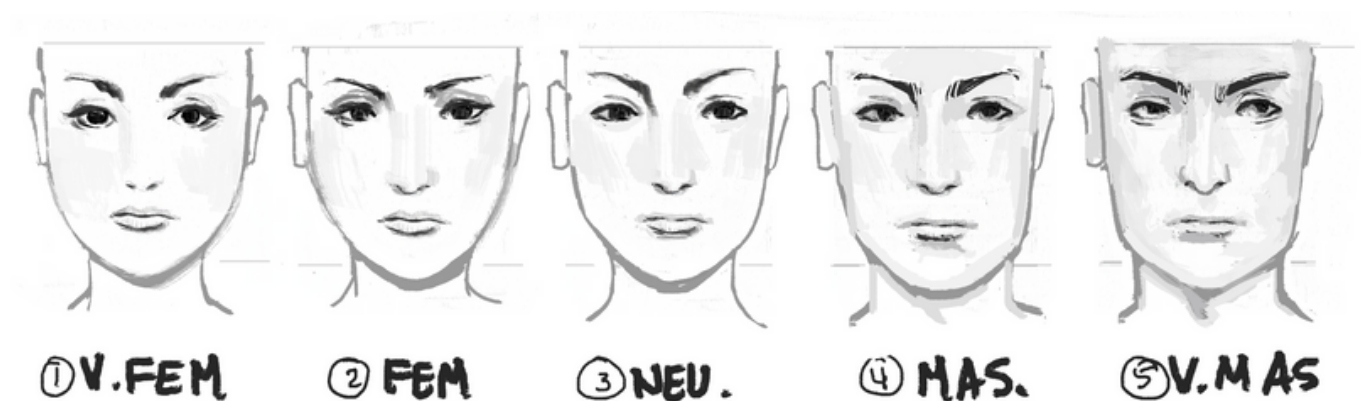
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+0)

8%

Feminine (+24)

41%

Neutral (+10)

13%

Masculine (+5)

14%

Very masculine (+47)

25%

Poll ended Feb 5, 2021 · 64 votes total

[MC #18's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Feb 7, 2021](#)



For these last few portraits: the gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #18 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 masculine**

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

Impulsive (+19)

8%

Calculated (+1)

8%

Perverted (+42)

34%

Chivalrous (+30)

22%

Stoic (+11)

7%

Drifter (+6)

10%

Protective (+14)

3%

Finesse (+5)

7%

Poll ended Feb 10, 2021 · 59 votes total

[MC #18's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Feb 11, 2021](#)



For these last few portraits: the gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #18 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Very masculine, Perverted**

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

Short (+40)

62%

Ponytail (+0)

27%

Chonmage (+9)

11%

Poll ended Feb 15, 2021 · 71 votes total

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapter 6](#)

[Feb 15, 2021](#)

Chapter 6 is an interesting chapter, though probably not for a reason you'd expect: it contains the longest conversation in the series. I'm talking about a straight, sit-down-by-the-fire sort of conversation: no shogi matches, sexy undertones, or murder mystery trials involved.

It's something I rarely do in SoH out of concern for my readers' attention spans. Whether it's a realistic fear or not, I'm glad I was able to overcome it for this chapter. It really serves to give MC and the reader a chance to hammer down their opinions/perspectives/takes on a slew of important matters. It's both a bit of a recap and something I like to call 'mental digestion'.

That said, you can expect *far* more than talking out of this one!

[MC #19's Face Poll: 1/3](#)

[Mar 1, 2021](#)



February's portrait (**Very masculine**, **Perverted**, **Short hair**) is unfortunately getting delayed, but you can expect to see it sometime later this month!



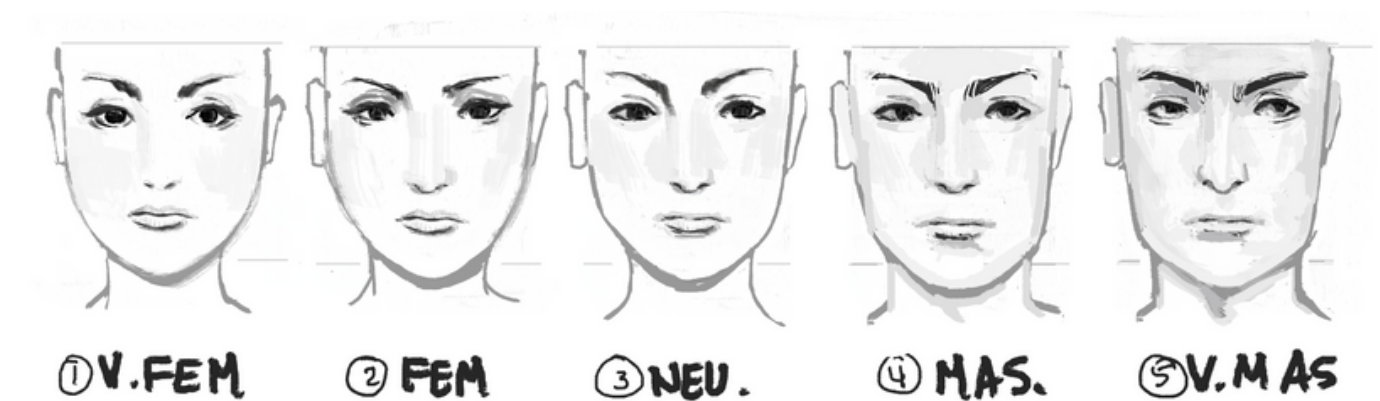
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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 (+5)

9%

Feminine (+50)

49%

Neutral (+18)

29%

Masculine (+14)

9%


Very masculine (+0)

3%

Poll ended Mar 5, 2021 · 65 votes total


[MC #19's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Mar 6, 2021](#)



For these last few portraits: the gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #19 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!

Calculated (+6)

19%

Perverted (+0)

10%

Stoic (+15)

29%

Drifter (+12)

15%

Brutal (+8)

8%

Finesse (+9)

19%

Poll ended Mar 10, 2021 · 62 votes total

[MC #18 Face Art](#)

[Mar 7, 2021](#)

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 Souijinn ([twitter](#))!

This month's build: **Very masculine, Perverted, Short hair**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[MC #19's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Mar 11, 2021](#)



For these last few portraits: the gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #19 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Feminine, Stoic**

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

Ponytail (+19)

46%

Chonmage (+17)

31%

Long bangs (+2)

24%

Poll ended Mar 15, 2021 · 72 votes total

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapters 7 & 8](#)

[Mar 15, 2021](#)

The ides of March are upon us again, patrons! To celebrate, I've got two meaty chapters for you guys this month! They span the ending of the first story in Book 5, the "Hokusei Escape Arc", and the start of the next.

Between them, there's a total of three text-input choices. They shouldn't be too difficult, and I highly recommend you play with 'Text Input Mode' on to get the best experience. Especially because your attunement score doesn't matter in early access!

What I love most about these two chapters is that they really show off the range of the MC. Everything from their personality, to their inner monologue, to their speech...we get to see them both at their lowest and highest--more specifically, their most heroic. The dialogue options in particular really struck a cord with me.

MC has always been my favorite character, but they still manage to remind me of that from time to time. Goes without saying, but you can expect a ton of drama ahead! And in case you didn't already know: there's no topic and no place I won't go for the sake of telling the best story I can. You'll see what I mean!

[MC #19 Face Art](#)

[Mar 31, 2021](#)

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 Huan Lim ([twitter,artstation](#))!

This month's build: **Feminine, Stoic, Ponytail**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[Apr 1, 2021](#)

Attention: This month's portrait will be the last able to be voted on for Book 5! In the months that follow this one and as a thank you to the awesome artists I've worked with, I'll be commissioning them for their "OC"s so that they can insert their particular character design into the story. The aim will be for around 24 portraits in total!

TLDR: Get those votes in!

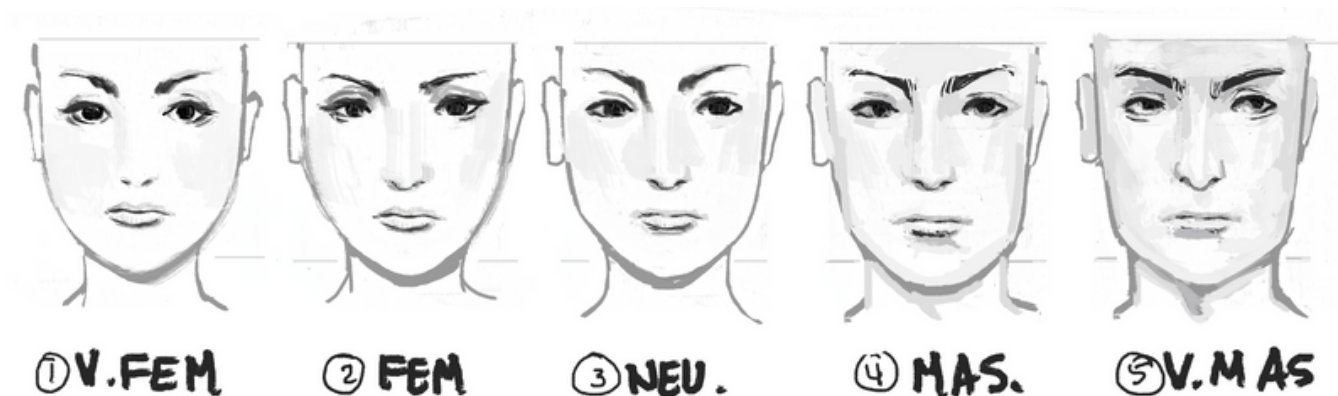
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

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)

26%

Feminine (+0)

6%

Neutral (+37)

30%

Masculine (+20)

33%

Very masculine (+0)

4%

Poll ended Apr 5, 2021 · 69 votes total

[MC #20's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Apr 6, 2021](#)



For these last few portraits: the gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #20 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 (+24)

11%

Chivalrous (+43)

33%

Charming (+0)

2%

Drifter (+21)

21%

Protective (+16)

12%

Brutal (+13)

12%

Finesse (+21)

9%

Poll ended Apr 10, 2021 · 57 votes total

[MC #20's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Apr 11, 2021](#)



For these last few portraits: the gender poll will work as it always has, but for personality/expression and hair, I'll be excluding options that have been used before with the same gender-type.

For example: since we've already done a **Feminine Charming** ronin, **Charming** will no longer show up during that particular face poll. Hope that makes sense!



The design for MC #20 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Neutral, Chivalrous**

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

Short (+0)

19%

Long (+33)

34%

Chonmage (+39)

47%

Poll ended Apr 15, 2021 · 70 votes total

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapters 9 & 10](#)

[Apr 15, 2021](#)

Nani?! Back-to-back months with two EA chapters? What's going on here?

Well, long story short is that chapter 9 *is* short! Not every chapter is going to be a 30k word monster, and that's a good thing: chapters are the most powerful scene transition tool an author has. They allow for mini-cliffhangers throughout a book--and that's what makes a story into a page-turner!

Chapter 10 is unique in that it references choices made from all prior books in the series. Aside from helping the reader recall scenes they may have read 5+ years ago, my hope is that it hammers home the theme of "change". How's our favorite ronin going to handle a Hyuga that is transforming all around them? Will they thrive in it, or feel even more like an outcast than ever before?

I know which one I'm betting on! (◡‿◡)

[MC #20 Face Art](#)

[Apr 30, 2021](#)

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 Ishiyan ([twitter](#))!

This month's build: **Neutral, Chonmage, Stoic**

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[MC Face Portrait Announcement](#)

[May 1, 2021](#)

Thanks to you guys, we've got 20 handsome/beautiful faces to pretty up our stats screens with in Book 5! I really enjoyed all the voting, and I hope you guys did to! While its kinda sad to stop it, the polls had to stop sometime, and we got a lot of ground covered thanks to your input.

Hell, picking your portrait will probably be the trickiest choice to make in the whole game, lol!

This process was also a great excuse to interact with so many awesome artists! It really astounds me how much creativity and skill is out there. As a bit of a thank-you to them for their hard work, I plan on commissioning the ones who play SoH to draw their OC (original character) as additional portraits. As far as what they look like, it'll be up to them to decide. **You can expect one this month and for the next few!**

Also, while it may not happen right away, expect to see the portraits implemented in Early Access in the near future. Portraits were something I've wanted to do for some time, but its only thanks to you guys that it actually got done. Thanks a ton for making SoH that much better!

[The Side Story Compendium](#)

[May 13, 2021](#)

I love Patreon (don't get me wrong!) but their website can be a bit slow and a chore to navigate. So I decided to make a big list of all the side stories here for easier access! Whether you're a fresh patron or an OG wanting to re-read your favorite story, this should save you some time!

While this post is public, you'll still need to be in the \$5+ tiers to read the stories. It's not mandatory, but I recommend starting from the 1st and working your way down, just because some of the stories make references to others.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Side Story #4: [Kohaku's Ranch \(Male Version\)](#)

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

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

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

Side Story #7: [Satsuma's Farewell](#)

Side Story #8: [Toshie's Survival Test](#)

Side Story #8: [Toshio's Survival Test](#)

Side Story #9: [Tanjiro's Big Break](#)

Side Story #10: [Kohaku's Rodeo \(Female Version\)](#)

Side Story #10: [Kohaku's Rodeo \(Male Version\)](#)

Side Story #11: [Masami's Field Trip](#)

Side Story #11: [Masashi's Field Trip](#)

Side Story #12: [Toshie's Guard Duty](#)

Side Story #12: [Toshio's Guard Duty](#)

Side Story #13: [Nishi's Family](#)

Side Story #14: [Hatch's Tournament](#)

Side Story #15: [Keiko's Kabuki Act](#)

Side Story #16: [Toshie's Cruise](#)

Side Story #16: [Toshio's Cruise](#)

Side Story #17: [Satsuma's Friend \(Toshie Version\)](#)

Side Story #17: [Satsuma's Friend \(Toshio Version\)](#)

Side Story #18: [Bashō's Poem](#)

Side Story #19: [Masami's Flowers](#)

Side Story #19: [Masashi's Flowers](#)

Side Story #20: [Isamu's Horse \(Female Kohaku Version\)](#)

Side Story #20: [Isamu's Horse \(Male Kohaku Version\)](#)

Side Story #21: [Toshie's Matchmaking Service](#)

Side Story #21: [Toshio's Matchmaking Service](#)

Side Story #22: [Momoko's Funeral](#)

Side Story #23: [Kohaku's Plantation \(Female Version\)](#)

Side Story #23: [Kohaku's Plantation \(Male Version\)](#)

Side Story #24: [Ige's Apprenticeship](#)

Side Story #25: [Toshie's Trial](#)

Side Story #25: [Toshio's Trial](#)

Side Story #26: [Gensai's Golden Era](#)

Side Story #27: [Masami's Graduation](#)

Side Story #27: [Masashi's Graduation](#)

Side Story #28: [Satsuma's Necklace \(Toshie Version\)](#)

Side Story #28: [Satsuma's Necklace \(Toshio Version\)](#)

Side Story #29: [Nishi's Eulogy \(Masami Version\)](#)

Side Story #29: [Nishi's Eulogy \(Masashi Version\)](#)

Side Story #30: [Junko's Promise \(Male MC Version\)](#)

Side Story #30: [Junko's Promise \(Female MC Version\)](#)

Side Story #30: [Jun's Promise \(Male MC Version\)](#)

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapter 11](#)

[May 15, 2021](#)

While it may be just one chapter this month, Chapter 11 is a behemoth: a monster that I'm glad to have behind me! It probably should've been made into two chapters, but I felt the entire heist scene needed to be done in a single shot. While every chapter needs to be able to stand on its own, this one especially has a defined beginning, middle, and end.

There are more [action] and decision-type choices in this chapter than any other. As I was editing and programming it into choicescript, I came to regret that design decision. This approach leads into more of a game-y style of choicegame that--while it can be fun to read--is incredibly unfulfilling and unfun to write!

No worries, though: I return to my old ways in the next chapter!

One of the big issues we choicegame authors face is making sure the player has the same information regardless of what choice they make, so that they (and the MC) can act on it going forward. The last thing you want is a continuity error, so you end up spending a lot of time and mental resources keeping track of tiny details and variables instead of telling the best story you can! (;*Д`)/

But enough of my angst! Let's get this show on the road!

[MC #21 Face Art](#)

[May 31, 2021](#)

This is the first in a short series of bonus portraits, featuring original designs by some of the artists you already know! These designs are (mostly) up to the artist themselves, as both a thank-you from me and a way to get their original characters into the game.

This month's face was drawn by Tokiko220 ([twitter](#), [deviantart](#))! It's especially bloody!

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)





[Book 5 Cover Art: Rough Draft](#)

[Jun 12, 2021](#)

Momoko and Hatch face off on the cover of Book 5 courtesy of [Kanitama Corokke](#)!

It's amazing how much our two companions have changed since Book 1. Prepare for a confrontation unlike any other: the drama is sure to be at an all-time high! Considering all that's happened so far, that's saying something.

Early Access folk will get to experience it all firsthand in this month's chapter!

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapter 12](#)

[Jun 15, 2021](#)

Hope you guys enjoyed the little teaser I posted earlier!

It's no spoiler to say that the scene between the Silent Lady (Momoko) and General Shatao (Hatch) is gonna be dramatic! While we're still on the second "story" of the book, I consider this scene to be the midpoint of the novel. It was something I'd been building towards for a while now, and it's always satisfying when a plan comes together!

Also: we've got portraits in the game now! During character creation, you ought to see some familiar faces pop up. The code for it is still in testing, so please let me know if you come across any bugs with it. It's crazy how much cooler they make the stats page look!

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapter 13](#)

[Jul 15, 2021](#)

Chapter 13 is one of my favorites of the whole book. Not only was it fun to write, the choices feel really satisfying, too!

Of all the chapters so far, this one interweaves the side story content the most. That doesn't mean you have to read the short stories to understand what's going on, but they do help delve into some of the revelations made by a certain character in this chapter. That character, of course, being none other than Nishi!

The foul-mouthed yakuza is one of my favorite characters—and not just because she allows me to write cuss words! Between her criminal composure, rebellious teenager phase, and a secret maternal side, there's a lot going on with her. Of the companions, Nishi has the most in common with the MC, and I think that shows in their exchanges.

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapter 14](#)

[Aug 15, 2021](#)

Another huge chapter starts us off on the third arc of Book 5: the Midlands Arc!

You can expect a bit of a departure from the previous two, with a few new faces along with some returning ones. A new setting allows me to shape it however I want, but I also get to play around with some ideas and genres that I wouldn't be able to devote an entire book to!

Thinking about it, that's really one of the greatest strengths of a multiple-story structure. But who wants to think when we've got drama and (maybe) even some romance in store? Hope you enjoy!

[MC #22 Face Art](#)

[Aug 29, 2021](#)

This is the second in a short series of bonus portraits, featuring original designs by some of the artists you already know! These designs are (mostly) up to the artist themselves, as both a thank-you from me and a way to get their original characters into the game.

This MC was drawn by Rym! If you like it, feel free to tell him about it on the patreon discord!

Portrait (Normal)



Portrait (Jigoku)



[ChoiceScript Announcement](#)

[Aug 31, 2021](#)

Hey patrons!

Got an important announcement to make: going forward, there will be **no ChoiceScript** on this Patreon account. The reasons, as you can imagine, are legal ones. This is not specific to me, but all creators with early access chapters made available through this site.

I understand the position Choice of Games/Hosted Games have taken with this, and I don't disagree with them whatsoever. While Patreon is a very legally grey area, I respect the desire to protect the use of a proprietary scripting language.

What this means is that, as an immediate solution, the early access chapters will be available in a flat, text format. I'm working on getting Chapters 1-14 available here soon for patrons on that tier.

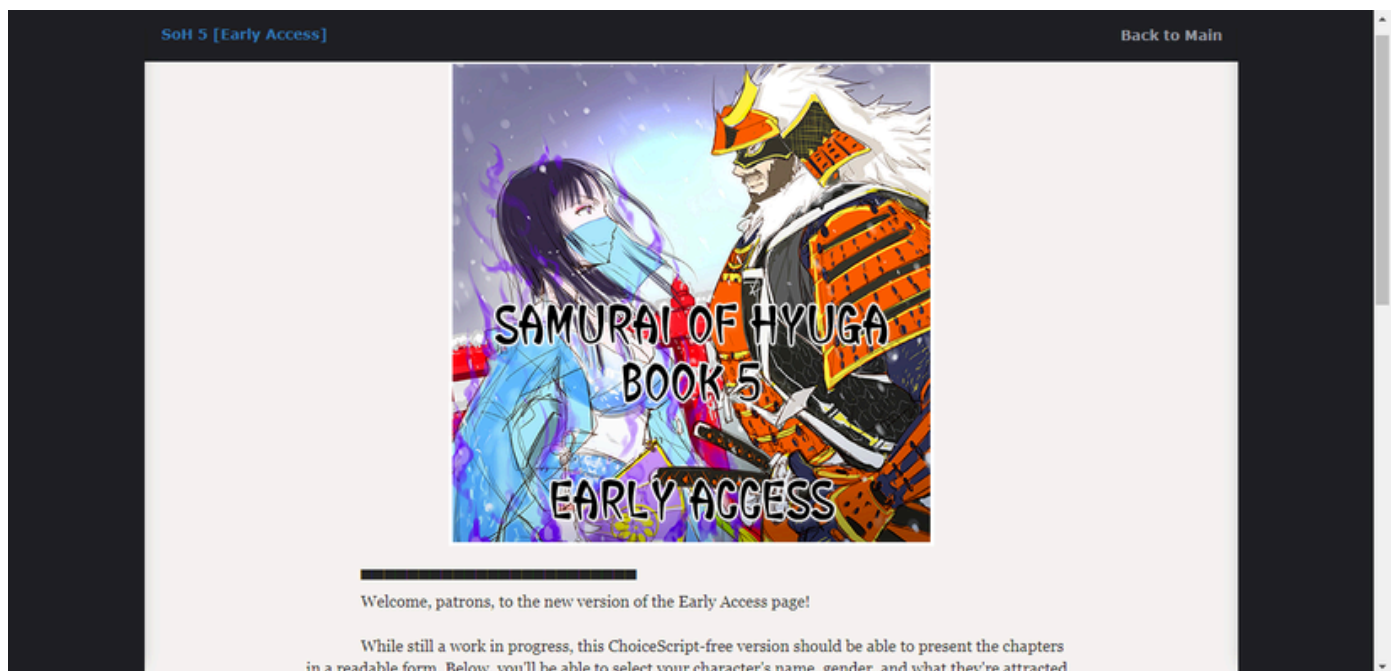
I know the experience will be diminished, and I'll update the tier descriptions + send this announcement out in a mass email just to make sure everyone knows before re-subscribing to this Patreon for September onwards.

I'm sorry for the inconvenience this causes, especially because it concerns the people who help me make a living out of this. But **please don't** vent your frustrations out on the publisher or anything like that. You wouldn't be doing anyone any good--especially not me, lol!

Anyway, that's the end of the announcement. Thanks for reading, as always!

[New Early Access Site](#)

[Sep 2, 2021](#)

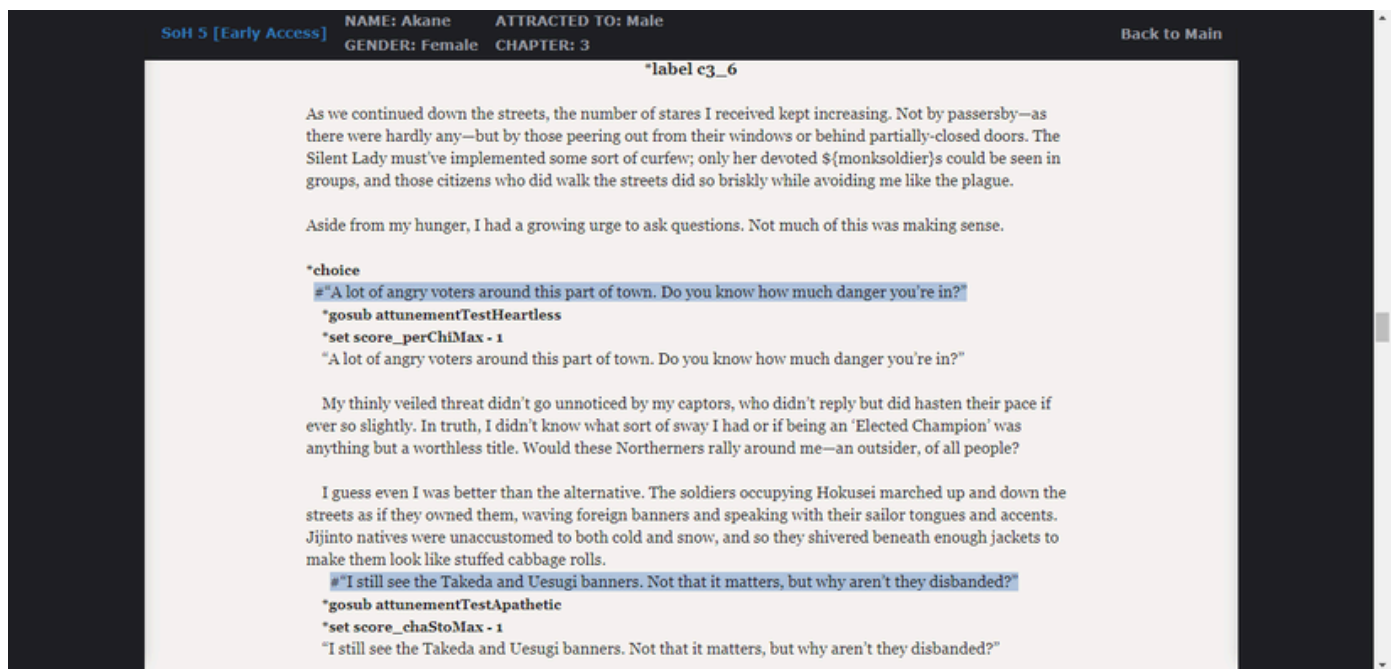
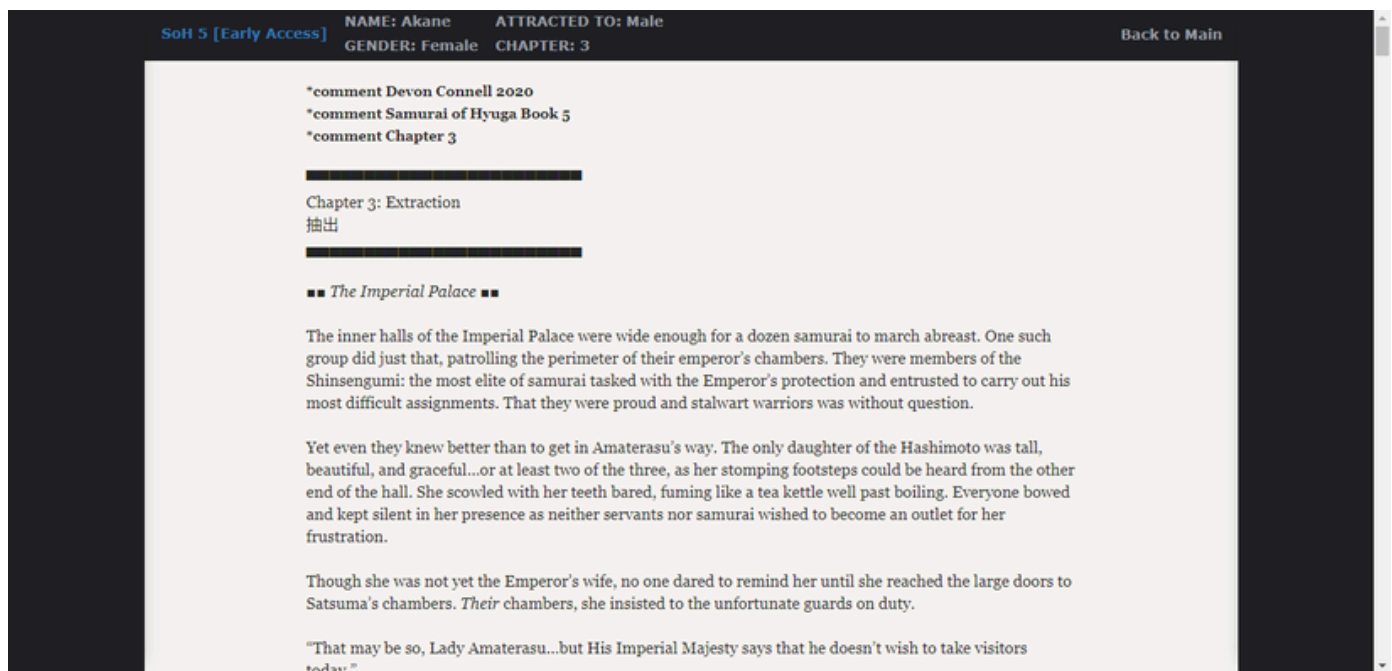


With the removal of ChoiceScript from this account, I've been busying programming up a solution to get Book 5 Early Access up and running again through a different method. I've created a site that should be able to present the chapters in a nice format.

You'll be able to select your MC's name, gender, and what they're attracted to, with all the pronouns and character names changing accordingly. All done through the magic of regular expressions!

The screenshot shows the same web page as before, but with the character selection form visible. The form is a white box with a black border. It contains the following elements: a 'Name:' label followed by a text input field with the placeholder 'Enter Name'; a 'Gender:' label followed by two radio buttons, 'Male' (selected) and 'Female'; an 'Attracted to:' label followed by two radio buttons, 'Male' (selected) and 'Female'; a 'Select Chapter:' label followed by a dropdown menu showing 'Chapter 1 [Released September 2020]'; and a green 'Go to Chapter' button at the bottom.

There are some limitations, however: choices will not be selectable. Instead, they'll be displayed one after the other. Choice text has a special background color to make them stand out more. Variables like Impulsive vs Calculated aren't implemented, so instead you'll see the text for both.



This is all still a work in progress, so things are sure to change over time. The pages may be more readable on computer than mobile, so try that if you're having difficulty. If you experience any bugs/issues, please let me know either in a comment or in a message. I'd really appreciate it!

Lastly, thanks for bearing with me through all this. I know it's not a perfect replication, but I hope it's something that will allow you to enjoy the chapters all the same!

(I'll be posting the link to patrons on the Advance tier in my next post!)

Update 25/SEPT/2021: Choices added!

Choices now work as accordion objects, expanding when you click them! This should help replicate the feel of the finished product and make chapters much more readable!

SoH 5 [Early Access]NAME: MCATTRACTED TO: MaleGENDER: MaleCHAPTER: 15Back to Main

#“You must’ve been up all night working on this.”

#“You never told me you were a master basket weaver.”

#“You just saved my back from a heck of a lot of pain, Tosh.”

“You just saved my back from a heck of a lot of pain, Tosh.”

After that massage he had given me yesterday, my spine and every bone connected to it was humming with glee. The absence of pain was an unbelievably pleasant sensation that healthy and younger folk took for granted. I was beginning to understand why old men were so bitter.

“I’m here to aid you in any way I can, MC-san. While the backpack is sturdy enough for traveling, I am unsure how it would handle the stress of combat. I know it is too much to ask you to avoid it, but... do be careful,” Toshio smiled. “Now then, please try it on and see how it fits.”

*label c15_2

I did just that, looping a strap around each arm and fastening a belt around my waist. It fit me like a glove, even after we loaded the kid inside. If Masashi had any objections, he was keeping them to himself.

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapters 1-14](#)

[Sep 2, 2021](#)

Relationship ended with **Choicescript**...**MCscript** is my new best friend!

(¯ω¯;)

Memes aside, I've got a new site for you guys to use for the early access chapters. Any and all feedback is welcomed. While it's still rough around the edges, I hope it allows you to enjoy the chapters all the same.

And as always, you can expect the next chapter to be released on the 15th of the month!

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapter 15](#)

[Sep 15, 2021](#)

Welcome to the first month of early access using MCScript!

As I mentioned in a previous post, there's no choices to be made in this version: you guys will get to see every choice, variable, and stat branch. While a lot of readers actually prefer reading chapters this way, I apologize for those who don't.

For me, it kind of feels like I'm putting on a theater play with the curtains drawn up. I don't really like my audience being able to see what's going on backstage as it kinda detracts from the Magical Experience™ I'm trying to create, you know? But it is how it is!

Chapter 15 is a fun one as it puts the reader in an interesting spot: you (an English reader who is most likely a Westerner) have inherent knowledge about what's going on that the MC doesn't. Usually, the MC knows more because they actually live in Hyuga--you're just visiting! It's a nice change of pace.

Also, there are 10 Perverted/Chivalrous stat branches in this chapter. That's a good hint of what you're in for!

[MCScript Update: Choices!](#)

[Sep 25, 2021](#)

(The link to Chapters 1-15 of Book 5 is in here!)

Hey again, early access patrons! In my spare time away from writing the next chapter, I've been working on Book 5's early access site to make things more readable + give it a better feel.

The solution: turn the choices into accordion objects, which expand when you click them!

SoH 5 [Early Access]	NAME: MC GENDER: Male	ATTRACTED TO: Male CHAPTER: 15	Back to Main
#"You must've been up all night working on this."			
#"You never told me you were a master basket weaver."			
#"You just saved my back from a heck of a lot of pain, Tosh."			
<p>"You just saved my back from a heck of a lot of pain, Tosh."</p> <p>After that massage he had given me yesterday, my spine and every bone connected to it was humming with glee. The absence of pain was an unbelievably pleasant sensation that healthy and younger folk took for granted. I was beginning to understand why old men were so bitter.</p> <p>"I'm here to aid you in any way I can, MC-san. While the backpack is sturdy enough for traveling, I am unsure how it would handle the stress of combat. I know it is too much to ask you to avoid it, but... do be careful," Toshio smiled. "Now then, please try it on and see how it fits."</p>			
*label c15_2			
I did just that, looping a strap around each arm and fastening a belt around my waist. It fit me like a glove, even after we loaded the kid inside. If Masashi had any objections, he was keeping them to himself.			

While it was a bit tedious to implement them for all 15 chapters, the result is definitely worthwhile. You should have a much easier time navigating the text now, and it should be more enjoyable, too: clicking choices is fun!

Please note: in my code, some choice text continues inside others. This can be pretty confusing, so I've added lines like in the example below to help you navigate.

SoH 5 [Early Access]	NAME: MC GENDER: Male	ATTRACTED TO: Male CHAPTER: 13	Back to Main
hell up!"			
*label scoldedByWoundedNLabel			
While getting scolded by the yakuza, I was able to catch a glimpse of a fresh cut up the right side of her stomach. It wasn't deep, but it was bleeding. It explained why she was short of breath. A wound like that usually came from a wakizashi: a samurai's sidearm. Didn't surprise me that the Shinsengumi were skilled at—			
#"We're not going to be hard to track with you bleeding everywhere."			
<p>*set portraitIsGold false</p> <p>"We're not going to be hard to track with you bleeding everywhere."</p> <p>Nishi turned around, looked down at the trail of blood behind her, and gave me a glare. "Who gives a shit? I've been bleeding half my life. Get over it—and get a move on, dumbass!"</p> <p>(CONTINUED on choice 1: While getting scolded by...)</p>			
#"All right, have it your way. Just don't fall over and die on me."			

I hope this update allows you to enjoy the chapters more. And of course, any feedback is always helpful!

[A Note on Plagiarism](#)

[Oct 15, 2021](#)

Sorry beforehand for the unpleasant subject matter! This stuff isn't fun to write about, and I'm sure it's not a joy to read, either. But due to something that happened last week, I felt it deserved some attention.

Plagiarism is nothing new in the world of published fiction, but recently I came across a "writer" pretending to be the author of SoH, posting cospasta'd chapters from the books as well as the patreon short stories.

They had been keeping the act up for over a year. I don't even want to try getting into the mind of someone so desperate for validation that they need the hollow achievement of passing another's work off as their own. I'm more sad for them than I am upset—that's how pathetic the whole situation is!

In any case, I reported them and the stories (as well as a couple other "writers" who were doing likewise with other choicegames) and the users have been banned and their stories removed. Choice of Games DMCA'd the site and all is well in the world!

Wattpad, Inkspired, and Webnovel are popular sites for this stuff. If you frequent these places and see anything that looks awfully familiar to something you've read before, there's not an author alive who wouldn't appreciate knowing about it.

Anyway, that's the end of my report. Thanks for reading it!

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapter 16](#)

[Oct 15, 2021](#)

Can't believe we're in the middle of October already! It sure doesn't feel like it: where I'm standing in the US, we're having a high of over 80F degrees. Personally, I wouldn't mind a mild winter with a bit less snow to shovel!

But enough about the weather. You're here for Chapter 16!

This one is definitely an MC + Tosh duo chapter, which shouldn't be a surprise to anyone who's kept up with early access. Forget romance and lewdness: just having two characters interacting with each other, even if it's just back-and-forth banter, is going to deepen their relationship.

One of the most important skills of a writer is being able to deliver these conversations in an interesting or engaging way. Sitting down and having a he said/she said is boring compared to chatting amidst a high-stakes quilting competition or whispering while staking out a geisha house for an investigation.

So then, let's see what stuff the characters are talking about and doing this time!

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapter 17](#)

[Nov 15, 2021](#)

It's November! What better way to celebrate the (arguably) comfiest and most aesthetic month of the year than with a new chapter for early access?

This is **the** Tosh + MC chapter of the book. It encompasses so much about their dynamic and relationship while offering the player a taste of a different style of narrative branching. If you haven't guessed it yet: it's time for an investigation!

For those who dreaded how difficult or convoluted the Baron Island's mystery was in Book 3, don't worry: this will be nowhere near that demanding or involved. It's really a lot of fun...just trust me, okay?!

Chapter 17 has three major branches, but they're all required: you're just able to pick the order in which you do them. This setup isn't something I do very often, but it's ideal for investigation sequences where you have multiple locations and clues to find at each spot.

Tons of mystery games and visual novels do this. *AI: The Somnium Files* is one I've just finished and really enjoyed. Just be warned: it's got the weebiest ending cinematic known to man! You can check the game out for cheap on GamePass right now.

But enough shilling for Microsoft! It's time to give the people what they came for!

[Happy Thanksgiving](#)

[Nov 25, 2021](#)

Happy Thanksgiving, everybody!

I know, I know, it's an American-only holiday and I risk alienating large portions of my audience even mentioning it, but it's a good reminder for me to say thanks to the people I owe so much to.

You guys have made my writing career possible...but you've actually done a lot more than that!

Without your support over the past several years, I'd still be back in Maryland, miserable, taking beta blockers while programming in one of the most stressful working environments a software developer can be in on the East Coast. It's the sort of thing I can't legally talk about!

I would've seen my family far less often than I do now, especially my twin brother who's gone through a lot in the past year. And that's a hell of an understatement.

If I wasn't able to make payments on it like I have been, my parents would've had to sell my grandfather's house on the street I grew up on. I live in that house now, and the main reason that's even feasible is because of you guys. You can imagine how many memories I have here.

Anyway...sorry for getting sappy! Enjoy your holidays—and look forward to more samurai smut in the future!

[Book 5 Early Access: Chapter 18](#)

[Dec 15, 2021](#)

This month's chapter has a lot of talking in it. It sounds boring, when I put it that way, but really, talking can be incredibly intense. Conversations are where most drama lives, after all, and often the main goal of a writer is to stitch together these exchanges in an engaging and interesting way.

Incomplete information is vital for tension to grow. What information does one person have that the other doesn't, and what lingering doubts can be brought to a head? These are good things to ask while writing these scenes.

Chatting across a kitchen table can get rather dull, and dull things tend to be forgettable to your readers. That's why setting is very important: forcing the reader to pair some mental image to a piece of information is going to make it 100 times easier for them to recall it days, weeks, and months down the line.

This 'visual memory technique' can be very useful—so don't forget it, lol!



[Book 5 Promo Art](#)

[Dec 19, 2021](#)

Is it starting to feel real yet? Λ(◡)>

I'm very happy with how the art for Book 5 turned out, courtesy of [Kanimata Corokke](#), mostly because of how relevant it is to the story! Lets be honest, most SoH covers are ultimately just two anime characters awkwardly looking away from each other. Lame!

Here, we have a confrontation from a major scene in the book, with two characters that mean a heck of a lot to the MC—and the reader as well, I hope!

[Voice Acting...in a Choicegame?!](#)

[Dec 28, 2021](#)

I know it sounds crazy, but I'm constantly looking for ways to push the boundaries of what people come to expect from a choicegame. This idea could be great (or could suck) and that's why I'm asking for your input!

How would you feel about optional, DLC/In-App Purchase content adding MC dialogue lines to choices? The voice clip would play after a dialogue choice is made. Essentially, it would read the top line of the page (where I repeat MC's dialogue choice). Of course, there would be a male and female version.

One benefit is that it would help readers "hear" how the MC sounds, and voices can add a lot of emotion, too. It would probably make the game feel more like an anime or a visual novel. An audiobook is also a good comparison. If professionally done, it wouldn't be as cringey as you'd think.

But it *would* be distracting for a lot of readers, I think, who are so deeply immersed in the text that audio wouldn't add anything but noise. Some have a clear idea of what their MC sounds like and wouldn't want that to change.

In any case, let me know what you think!

Great idea! SoH anime when?!

As long as it's optional, sure.

Doesn't really interest me.

OK, but it's got to be in Japanese: who cares if I can't understand it! Subs > Dubs!

207 votes total