Alternate Universe. In the eleventh year of the Meiji, 1878, Japan still practices chattel slavery. The Tokugawa shogunate still reigns from Edo castle, backed by the infamous Kanryu family and their merchant empire. And Kaoru Kamiya finds an abandoned slave hiding under the docks as she's walking home...

Notes

Notes: This is all Alina's fault. The only thing I'm guilty of is being extremely susceptible to flattery. She's the one who thought this was a good idea; blame her, not me.

Of course, this didn't have to start turning into an actual story, with plot. It could have stayed a happy little plotless drawerfic, written for my id and no one else. But apparently I'm bad at doing that. So I guess you can blame me.

But blame her, too, because she didn't talk me out of it.

This story can also be found on ff.net: http://www.fanfiction.net/s/9030717/1/Invictus

Oh, and a brief historical note: "Meiji" refers to the emperor currently reigning. Even though the Bakumatsu never happened, Komei still died when he died, since he died of old age and not a sudden attack of revolutionaries. So it can be the Meiji, but still have a shogunate. ~The more you know~
Warnings: This is set in an AU where chattel slavery exists. If that's going to be upsetting to you, please don't read it. There will be mentions of sexual slavery, and of slaves being used sexually because that's kind of unavoidable in a setting like this, but there will be no graphic depictions of non consensual sex, nor is that particular form of slavery the focus of the story. So don't worry on that account.

Well. Here we go.
prologue: under a murdering moon

They were hunting her.

They wouldn’t find her. Not before she could escape. The false trail was too well laid, it had to be, she refused to even consider another outcome. So she ignored the shouts, and the dogs, and the torches flickering as Kanryu’s men spread throughout the estate, because she had time and she would escape.

The loose stone was still there, looser now that she’d spent so many weeks picking at it, stealing moments from her carefully-watched schedule. She pulled at it, breaking her manicured nails – yes, she thought, exulting, tear it all away, let me begin clean, let me be shed of him – muscles straining in protest until it finally moved from its moorings and left a space just large enough to crawl through.

Sagara was on the other side, waiting at the foot of the steep, stone-covered hill. She had to believe that. She had gambled everything on his word.

“But even if I die…” she whispered.

A stick snapped behind her. She whirled.

“No…”

She nearly sobbed.

The manslayer stood at her back, sword unsheathed and gleaming in the moonlight. She fell backwards, groping towards her tunnel, knowing that there was no way on earth she could outrun him. Her heart pounded rabbit-fast in her chest and her fingers went numb and thick with fear.

“Please.” Her voice cracked. “Don’t.”

He advanced on her, blank-eyed, and raised his sword.

“I’m not an intruder!” she cried desperately. “You don’t have any orders! I know you don’t!”

His arm froze at the top of the arc, trembling. His eyes – those terrible blank eyes – but they weren’t always blank. She knew they weren’t. She had seen – had believed – had hoped beyond reason that there was still a man in there, somewhere. That Kanryu was not the god he believed himself to be.

She’d never expected to have to hang her life on that hope.

“Please…” she breathed, and used the one weapon she had left. “Kenshin.”

Then she squeezed her eyes shut. It would be quick, at least, when it came. She knew that. She had seen the bodies of the men he killed; none of them had seen their deaths coming.

One heartbeat. Two. Three. And she wasn’t dead yet. She looked up at him, tongue thick in her dry mouth.

His eyes weren’t blank anymore.

He sheathed his sword. She scrambled backwards, clutching her small bag of belongings.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “Thank you.” Ah god, if there was any mercy Kanryu would never
know and he would be safe…  

But that she knew that for a fool’s hope, because there was no mercy in this world. She didn’t even have ignorance to comfort her. She knew exactly what this would cost him. He would pay in blood for her freedom.  

She left anyway.  

The manslayer watched her go.
Kaoru stretched and cracked her neck as she walked along the riverbank, singing tunelessly to herself. The snap-chill of winter was giving way to spring; she was pleasantly sore from a productive workout at the Maekawas’; and soon Sanosuke would be coming back from his latest trip with souvenirs and, more importantly, news. So why shouldn’t she sing as she walked along, and swing her purse idly in time?

Well, she could imagine Yahiko saying, because you sing like a dying cat, for starters.

“Hmph!” she said, and stuck her nose up at no one in particular. “As if there’s anyone to hear.”

She’d set him to doing the laundry before she left. If she’d been lucky, it would be at least partially done. Badly, but – well, he was only ten. And he’d been through a lot before Sano had dumped him on her doorstep. Allowances could be made.

Not that she’d ever tell him that, of course.

She was already planning his extra exercises when a low moan caught her ear. She stopped, looking around, and had almost dismissed it as the wind, or a creaky door, when it happened again and yes, that was absolutely an animal of some kind. A dog or a cat, probably; Tokyo was full of strays.

She stood very still. The animal moaned again, low and in pain, and she traced the sound to under a nearby dock. The ground was muddy with melted frost; she stepped as carefully as she could, but she knew it was getting all over her socks and the hem of her clothes. She could feel it, slimy and cold and eugh.

“Allright,” she muttered, crouching to peer under the dock. “You’d better not savage me, after I go out of my way to help you…”

For a few moments, all she saw was mud. Then some of it moved, heaving like a bellows, and as her eyes adjusted she realized that it wasn’t an animal at all. That was a person under there, curled in on themselves and covered in mud, shivering violently.

Oh my god.

“Hello?” she called out. “Are you okay?”

Their only response was to curl up tighter, shrinking against the stone wall. Kaoru bid a silent, wistful farewell to her second-best pants and crawled under the dock.

“My name is Kaoru,” she said, kneeling and feeling the mud soak rapidly through the thick cotton of her clothes. “Kaoru Kamiya. Can I help you?”

She reached out to the person. They – she wanted to say it was a man but between the darkness under the dock and the mud caked on them it was impossible to tell – fell back, whimpering, and as they did so a hank of filthy hair fell away from their face and she saw the slave-brand carved into their cheek.

“Oh…” she said, sitting back on her heels. She swallowed, hard. “Did you escape?”

No response.
“Were you abandoned?”

No response.

“What happened to you?”

And still no response.

“Will you at least tell me your name?”

That got a response: a flinch and a shudder as their arms came up reflexively to shield their head and Kaoru’s blood ran cold at the instinctive, protective response. She suddenly found it very hard to breathe.

“Please…” Her words were barely audible as her voice faltered and she swallowed again, trying to remember everything Sano had told her all at once, suddenly unable to sort one memory from another.

Like little kids, Sano had said. You gotta hold their hand every step of the way, some of ’em. Too far gone t’ do even the stuff they know they gotta do if there isn’t someone t’tell ’em t’do it.

She straightened her shoulders and used her best assistant-master-of-the-kamiya-kasshin-ryu voice. The voice she’d tried to cast after her father’s – the voice that expected to be obeyed, because that was simply the way things worked.

“Come with me. You can’t stay here. You have to come with me, now.”

The person looked up, sluggishly, as though their head was weighted down with lead. She nodded sharply, holding out her hand.

“You can’t stay here forever. It’s time to leave.”

They fell forward onto their hands and knees, achingly slowly, and began to crawl out from under the dock. Kaoru followed close behind, heart hammering in her chest. They moved so carefully, as though every motion caused them pain, and she had to bite back the urge to tell them to stop, wait here, she’d get help. Because it was the luck of the gods that they hadn’t been found by the patrols already, and if she wasted any time…

The two of them made it out from under the docks, and then the mud-caked person collapsed. They tried to get up again immediately, but their arms couldn’t support their weight and they fell again. And tried again. And fell –

Kaoru was immediately at their side, wrapping their arm around her shoulder.

“Don’t,” she said. “Let me help you.”

The man – she could see him better now, in the afternoon light – was shaking. His eyes were wide and shocky and his face, under the mud, was too pale to be healthy. But he seemed strong – lean muscle – so it was probably exhaustion and whatever wounds were hiding under that filth that had him weak and shaking, not malnutrition or poor health. He accepted the new position but refused to lean on her, only using her to brace himself as he stood.

Okay, Kaoru. Think. Home or Megumi? Megumi knows more, but home is closer…

She glanced at him again, saw his eyes beginning to glaze over, and chose home. She could send
Yahiko out for Megumi; she’d come quickly, once she heard.

“Okay,” she said, more for her sake than his. “Here we go. One foot in front of the other.”

By the time they made it to her home she was practically carrying him. She stumbled up the stairs to the main gate and pounded on it.

“Yahiko!”


“Help me get him into the bathhouse. Then get the first aid kit. Then I need you to run and get Megumi, understand?”

“What? I don’t get it…”

She tilted the man’s head and showed him the scar, and his objections died. He nodded grimly and helped her carry the man to the bathhouse. They lay him out in the dressing room and Kaoru began to strip him while Yahiko ran for the medicine box.

“Sorry,” she muttered, knowing that he probably couldn’t hear her in the state he was in and that even if he could he was unlikely to care. “Sorry, sorry.”

His filthy, sopping wet clothing was thrown into a corner to be summarily executed at a later date. She filled a bucket with lukewarm water from the tub and began to pour water over his skin, carefully, trying to wash away as much of the mud as she could without having to scrub.

He’d been beaten, more than once. Old and new bruises overlaid each other in a brutal collage, and there wasn’t an inch of his body not intersected by at least one ropey, ill-healed scar. She bit her lip hard to stay focused on the task at hand instead of her growing rage and tasted blood, salty on her tongue.

He’d taken several gashes to the chest, as well. Not sword-wounds – daggers, maybe. His shoulder had been pierced, and his ankle was sprained at the very least, possibly broken. And there were these odds, circular wounds interspersed with the ones she recognized…

Yahiko returned with the medicine kit.

“Help me sit him up,” she ordered

Yahiko complied, then raced off to get Megumi. The man slouched forward. Her jaw tensed as she poured water down his back, revealing old whip-marks and a few dozen new ones. As she’d thought.

“I’m so sorry…” she whispered, cleaning his back as gently as she could before laying him back down on a clean towel to protect his open wounds from the floor. She couldn’t tell if he was unconscious or just beyond caring. He wasn’t objecting to anything they were doing, but…

Tears pricked in the corner of her eyes and she dashed them furiously away. Later. Later, when Sano was back, then she’d cry and scream and rage. Right now, this man needed her help.
She bent over his unresisting body and began to clean him.

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Kaoru worked as gently as she could, knowing that the mud had to be gotten out of his wounds before they festered. He was a slender man, fine-boned, with long red hair and – god, he was beautiful. She felt awful for noticing, but it was impossible not to; muscular and compact and powerful, but she could see the grace in the lines of his bones and suddenly wanted very badly to watch him move.

The brand on his cheek was old and raised, as though it had been infected at some point. She swallowed and forced herself to breathe evenly, and then she heard Megumi’s footsteps clattering along the porch.

“I’m here, Kaoru, where is he – ” Megumi burst through the door and skidded to a stop. “…oh my god.”

Kaoru looked up. The color was draining from Megumi’s face as she clutched at her collar, looking as though she’d seen her own death.

“Megumi?”

“He – he’s one of Kanryu’s,” she said, eyes wide and chest heaving and if it wasn’t for the fact that Kaoru knew Megumi was totally fearless, she’d have thought the doctor was scared almost witless. “The manslayer – Kaoru, do you have any idea – ?”

“No,” Kaoru snapped. “Because you and Sano never tell me anything!”

Life and color slowly returned to Megumi’s face. She took a steadying breath.

“That man is – one of Kanryu’s particular… projects. A – a kind of guard dog, you could say. Kanryu called him the manslayer.”

“Called him? …doesn’t he have a name?”

“Yes,” Megumi said bleakly, her eyes very old. “But by the time I arrived, there was only one person besides Kanryu who still remembered it…”

She closed her eyes briefly and knelt down beside him, opening her medicine kit.

“That’s not uncommon, you understand,” she said, and was suddenly Megumi again – brisk and competent and utterly unflappable. “It was – it is – part of the process. Deny the name, reduce the person to a task, a tool. I saw it happen a hundred times…”

“He never did it to you?”

“I was… different,” she said quietly. Kaoru had the sense of walking suddenly onto very thin ice; the sudden realization that there was only the barest sheen of strength between her and a long, cold darkness. “That process is only for…” Megumi licked her lips. “…it doesn’t matter. That process was what was what made Kanryu famous, finding a way to kill the person but leave the functioning body behind. The manslayer was the first to survive the process…”
Kaoru’s hands curled in the mud-stained fabric of her clothes as she shuddered. Her stomach knotted and she fought the bile rising in her throat in order to keep her voice steady.

“Did you… know his name?”

Megumi looked up, surprise evident in her china-doll features. Kaoru met her gaze head-on.

“Can you tell me his name?”

She had a sudden feeling that Megumi was looking at her for the very first time. At her – not Sano’s “little lady,” not the brat’s teacher, not the woman who runs the sword school that Sano uses as a safehouse. At Kaoru Kamiya – looking at her, and seeing her.

Then Megumi turned back to her work.

“His name,” she said quietly, eyes fixed on her hands and his wounds, “is Kenshin. No one knew his family name.”

*Kenshin…*

She looked down at him. His eyes had opened but he wasn’t looking at anything, just staring straight ahead, no life in his eyes at all, no change in his expression even as Megumi poked and prodded and lifted and stitched skin together. It made something ache hollowly in her chest.

It wasn’t *right*.

“Hey,” she said, leaning over him. “Your name is Kenshin, right?”

He responded with a shudder and a drawn expression that vanished as soon as it appeared.

“It *is* Kenshin, isn’t it?” she asked again. He closed his eyes as if in pain.

“Stop it, Kaoru,” Megumi said shortly. “He can’t – he’s not allowed to respond.”

And suddenly that was too much, too horrible; that someone, anyone, could reduce another person like this, for any reason – to take even their *name* – the control that had been fraying since she’d seen the brand on his cheek finally gave way and she pounded her fist against the floor.

“No!” Kaoru shouted, fury snapping in her eyes. “Kanryu isn’t here! This is *my* home, not that slimebag’s – he doesn’t have to – I won’t have it, d’you hear?”

Kenshin flinched. Kaoru rounded on him, wanting to grab him and shake some sense into him but he was wounded and scared and she stopped herself midway, ending up hovering over him with her hands on either side of his (gorgeous) face.

“You listen up!” she said. “In *this* house, people have *names* and your *name* is Kenshin! *Kenshin*, do you understand?”

“Kaoru, what are you **doing**?”

Megumi was shouting at her from somewhere far away. Kaoru’s eyes were riveted on his and his on hers. He had the most extraordinary eyes, a shifting pale purple like lilac petals in a stream, and he was looking up at her with those incredible eyes like a man who’d given up entirely and it wasn’t *fair* and she was *not* *having* *with* *this*!

She slammed her hand against the floor again.
“So when I call your name, you had better respond! Understand, Kenshin?”

He’d shrunk back against the floor during her tirade, tensing like an animal that knew better than to try and run. Now he relaxed, suddenly, and there was a… shift… in his eyes. A surrendering. She pulled back, suddenly uncertain. His eyes stayed fixed on her.

“Yes, mistress,” he said, and passed out.

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Megumi grabbed her arm and hauled her away from Kenshin, dragging her bodily from the bathhouse. Kaoru, shocked, didn’t resist.

“You little idiot!” Megumi nearly screamed, shoving her so that she nearly fell off the porch. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

Kaoru caught herself on a pillar and planted her feet firmly on the floor. “I didn’t mean to do anything!”

“Well, you did!” Megumi shot back. “You thoughtless fool! Stay there! Don’t move, don’t speak, don’t even breathe if you can help it!”

With that, she stormed back inside and slammed the door behind her. Kaoru stared after her.

Then she sat down, heavily.

Yahiko crept out from around the corner.

“Ugly… what did you do?”

“I… I’m not sure,” she said absently, remembering. His eyes had been… Her breath caught.

“I haven’t seen Megumi this pissed since Sano forgot he wasn’t supposed to be using his right hand…” Yahiko continued. “Did you cop a feel or something?”

“Yahiko!” She slapped the back of his head, reflexively. “Where do you get those thoughts from? Go practice and stay out of the way – five hundred repetitions, and keep your sword-tip up this time!”

“Fine, fine,” he muttered, slouching away with his thumbs tucked in his belt. She shook her head, watching him go.

After a few more minutes, Megumi came out, wiping her hands. Her mouth was drawn in a thin, angry line, lips pressed flat.

“He’s stable, for now. And you and I are going to have a talk, Kamiya.”

“Fine,” she said, standing. “Let’s use the kitchen.”

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Megumi began making tea as soon as they went inside, anger snapping along the instinctively graceful curves of her movements. They sat in silence as it brewed; Kaoru didn’t know what to say, and Megumi wasn’t going to speak until she was ready.

Finally, the tea was ready to drink. Kaoru poured. Megumi took a sip and sighed.
“How much do you know about Kanryu?”

Her voice was calm again.

“Not much,” Kaoru let her tea sit. It was still too hot for her, and she wasn’t thirsty anyway. “He’s – he’s the head of the slave trade in Japan. Sano says he’s the reason it’s persisted. That if he was taken out, the trade would evaporate…”

“And how much do you know about the slave trade itself?”

“My family never kept slaves,” she said, fiddling with the end of her sleeves. “I – sometimes Sano brings escapees here, when they’re on their way out of the country. And there’s Yahiko… but he was only on his third strike when Sano picked him up, not branded.”

Megumi closed her eyes briefly. “The Kanryu family is the most powerful family in Japan. However, all of their power and wealth and influence is tied to the slave trade. If that trade were to end, they would have nothing. Conversely – if you could destroy that family, it would be much easier to push through the necessary reforms. But at this point, the Kanryu family is so completely entwined with the government that to move against them would probably destroy the existing government as well. Effectively, attacking Kanryu is attacking the government. Do you understand?”

Kaoru covered her mouth, light-headed with shock. “Oh…”

Helping escaped slaves was illegal. She knew that. She’d never cared; there was right and there was wrong and slavery was wrong. But this – Sano’s group, his “men of high purpose,” they didn’t only assist slaves in escaping the country. They actively opposed and undermined the Kanryu family. She knew that. Sano talked about it, sometimes, when he’d had too much sake after dinner.

Which meant they were attacking the government.

Which meant that they were traitors.

“I see that you do,” Megumi continued, taking another sip of tea. “I suppose Sagara thought ignorance would protect you. But those are the stakes in this game – they always have been. Nothing less.”

Kaoru folded her hands neatly in her lap, pressing them against each other to stop their shaking.

“I – I see.”

“Now. As you know, those who are not born into slavery can become slaves either through the Debtor’s Law, or by having three strikes on their criminal record. However – although this is technically illegal – some people are born free and made slaves by capture and indoctrination. I – am not sure, but I believe that the manslayer was one such victim.”

“Kenshin.”

Megumi blinked. Kaoru met her eyes, refusing to look away.

“His name is Kenshin.”

The doctor stared at her for a heartbeat, than seemed almost to smile.

“Alright. I believe that… Kenshin… was born free and made a slave by illegal means. The… what was done to him…” Megumi took a deep breath, and set her tea aside. Her hands were trembling.
“It’s an ancient technique, an old secret of the Kanryu family that the current heir – Takeda – revived. He’s the youngest son, you see, and originally he would never have inherited. So he went searching for something that would make his name, and he found that… method… buried in the family’s records. And he figured out how to use it. That was – after that, it was decided that he was more worthy than his brothers, and they stepped aside.”

“Megumi…”

“Don’t interrupt me.” She took another breath, swallowing it down. “I don’t – you don’t need to know most of the details. But the first step is to strip the victim of – everything. Even their name. Treat them as you would an animal, and… punish them… should they protest, or try to escape. Eventually, they come to accept that treatment, and believe that they are not human. During the process, the victim is kept heavily drugged, with a secret recipe – a combination of a sedative and a hallucinogen. Given the man… given Kenshin’s abilities, I don’t know how Kanryu managed to keep him prisoner, or keep him alive. A swordsman like that should have at least been able to death-will himself if escape proved impossible, even with the drug affecting his mind…”

Megumi closed her eyes, grief etched in her face. She lowered her head.

“Kenshin was the first captive to survive the process. Kanryu’s great achievement… in theory, the process is irreversible.”

“In theory…?” Something was trying to get Kaoru’s attention through the fog of horror. His eyes, when she’d called his name…

“…his name,” she said, leaning forward. “He still knows his name.”

“Yes.” Megumi nodded, a flicker of approval in her face. “It could be that Kenshin simply possesses an extraordinary will. It could also be that the process he was subjected to was still unrefined. But it does indicate the possibility that the process is not perfect – that it can be reversed. If that’s so…” She lifted her hand as though to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, then stopped.

“Megumi…” Kaoru realized, suddenly, how very little she knew about the woman in front of her. She felt dizzy with the weight of it all: and Megumi had carried this, this knowing for how many years? Yet she could be so calm when she spoke of it. She went about her life and her work with Sano without any outward trace of grief or fear or rage, only a single-minded focus.

Megumi seemed to see her thoughts written on her face, and smiled slightly.

“…it doesn’t matter. The point is, that man in your bathhouse effectively has no sense of self – whether his personality is truly obliterated or he’s simply learned to behave as though it doesn’t matter. He requires a master or a mistress to obey – he must be the possession of another person. He cannot act without orders, even to preserve his own life. And you’ve managed to convince him that you are his mistress now. That he is your possession.”

“No.” The world was slipping sideways again, cracking under her. Her mouth was dry; her head spun and her limbs felt heavy as lead. “No, that – that’s impossible. No! I don’t accept it!”

She slammed her fist into the mats without realizing; the sting brought her back to herself and she looked at her hand in amazement, watching the blood well up from the scrapes on her knuckles.

“That’s can’t be true,” she whispered through numb lips. “That’s… it’s evil.”

“Yes. But that is the current situation. I know that you didn’t understand what you were doing in there – I know that you didn’t intend to do what you did. But – this is what we have to work with.”
Megumi set her cup aside. “You don’t have to take on that role, Kaoru. In fact, I would recommend that you don’t. We can move him to the clinic while he’s still unconscious. We’ll take care of him, and you can just… forget this ever happened.”

Kaoru brushed at the blood on her hand, smearing it across her knuckles. Wordlessly, Megumi handed her a handkerchief, and she slowly cleaned the scrapes.

“…forget,” she murmured.

What Megumi was saying made sense. She wasn’t equipped to deal with something like this. It would be much, much better for everyone if she let Megumi and Sano handle things. They knew what Kenshin needed. They knew how to take care of him. She opened her mouth to say yes.

And instead she said, “No.”

“No?” Megumi narrowed her gaze.

And all she could think of were his eyes: they had been so lost. “No.” She gasped in a quick breath. “I – I can’t walk away, not now. I can’t just – leave this alone. I couldn’t sleep at night, knowing what I do now, knowing that I – that I just left someone in that state, after doing something like that, even though I didn’t mean to, and said that it wasn’t my problem.”

“It’s not your problem,” Megumi said sharply. “Or your responsibility. Kamiya, I can’t let you do this –”

“Why not?” Kaoru drew herself up, overcome with a sudden sense of purpose. “You don’t know how to start trying to undo that… process anymore than I do, right? And he’s – acknowledged me or whatever – right? Wouldn’t taking him away now just make things worse?”

“I… I don’t think so, not if it was done quickly.”

“But you don’t know.”

Megumi’s throat worked. Then she shook her head.

“And…” Kaoru swallowed. Her sense of purpose suddenly faltered and her voice grew very small. “I gave him back his name. That… that has to count for something, doesn’t it?”

“Kaoru.” Megumi leaned forward and touched her fingers to the back of Kaoru’s hand. Her skin was cool and dry and Kaoru realized that Megumi was speaking to her as an adult, as an equal, for the first time in their long acquaintance. “This isn’t like taking in a stray dog, or a feral cat, or those birds you’ve got half-tamed. This will be harder than anything you’ve ever done, and it may be for nothing. It may be that he will never be fixed, never be whole; that he’ll need you for his entire life. And the longer he stays with you, the more traumatic it will be should you ever decide that you’ve had enough. You’re talking about a lifetime commitment.”

“But if I don’t do it, then someone else will have to, right?” Acting on instinct, she took Megumi’s hand and held it, feeling her warmth seep into the other woman’s skin. “I found him. I took him in. I made him think – think that this was his new… home. I can’t say I don’t have any responsibility here. I can’t walk away.”

Megumi only looked at her for a long suspended moment. Then she turned away and nearly smiled, like the bitter twist of a rind burning in the fire.
“…that’s true, I suppose.” She drew her hand out of Kaoru’s and sat back, tossing her long hair.
“Well. If you’re determined to do the stupid thing, I don’t see how I can stop you. I’ll help as much as I can – I owe him that much.”

Kaoru wanted to ask but didn’t. Instead, she settled back on her cushion.

“What’s the first step?”

“The first step is to get him out of the bathhouse. Do you have a spare room?”

“Sure, next to Yahiko’s.”

“We’ll move him there while he’s recovering. Afterwards, of course, he’ll sleep in front of your door.”

Kaoru choked on her tea. “What?”

“Oh yes. Unless you want to tell him that he’s got no value to you.” There was a savage glint in Megumi’s eye. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“N – no! But that… that’s sick.”

“A beloved pet sleeps in the same room as their master, doesn’t it?” Megumi said, a sardonic edge in her voice as she rose to clear away the tea things. “It’s the same principle. And that’s what he understands right now. That’s his language. You’ll have to learn to speak it in order to convince him to trust you as well as serve you – and you can’t teach him your language – our language – until he does trust you. Does that make sense?”

Kaoru couldn’t suppress a shudder. “I… I wish it didn’t.”

Megumi cast a strange glance at her, both pitying and respectful, and she was reminded of how Grandmother Sumi had looked at her after her first moon-blood. As though there was some common bond between them now, unwanted and unwelcome but inevitable as the tide.

“We all feel that way, Kamiya,” she said quietly, through a crooked grin. “Welcome to the war.”

~*~

Kaoru knelt by the futon, watching Kenshin sleep. He was sleeping calmly now, bundled in every spare blanket they could find. Megumi had wanted to induce a mild fever in order to help burn out any infection.

She’d told Kaoru that the strange circular wounds were made by bullets. As far as Megumi could tell, none of the pellets remained in the wounds, but she had told Kaoru the signs of metal poisoning and made her recite them until she was satisfied that Kaoru knew them word-perfect, and Kaoru had sworn to fetch her if she even thought she saw the beginnings of it.

“…what happened to you?” she whispered. She wanted to brush the hair from his face, smooth the tension on his brow – but she didn’t, because she didn’t have that right, because the last thing she wanted to do, ever, was take his permission for granted.

So she knelt by his side and she watched him sleep, and she tried to understand what she’d gotten herself into.

He looked so young. At least ten years in slavery, Megumi had told her, possibly more, captured
when he was already skilled. He had to be older than he looked; he looked all of fifteen and achingly vulnerable when those unsettling blank eyes were closed.

And if Megumi was right – and she knew Megumi was, and she wanted her to be wrong more than anything, wanted it as much as she’d wanted the man from the army who told her your father is dead to be a dream – according to Megumi, he would do whatever she told him to. No matter how badly it hurt him, or how dangerous it was. She could tell him to cut off his own sword-hand and he wouldn’t refuse…

Kaoru realized that she was shaking. With anger, god yes, more anger than she knew what to do with, but above and beyond the rage… she was scared. There was a lump in her throat that she couldn’t swallow down, and while she’d meant every word of what she’d said to Megumi…

…how could she possibly be ready for this? How could anyone?

There was a scuffle outside the door. She turned to see Yahiko lurking just outside and smiled wanly.

“Did Megumi finish explaining things?”

“Yeah.” He kicked at the floor, slouching, and under other circumstances she would have told him to stand up straight and stop scratching her floorboards. Then she thought of the two cross-scars on each of Yahiko’s hands – mark of a twice-times-thief, one strike away from slavery – and all she wanted to do was hug her student tight and swear to him that she would never let anything bad happen to him ever again.

“So you know we can’t tell anyone he’s here just yet?”

Yahiko nodded. “Not ‘till we know if he escaped or not. Um.” He swallowed. “Um. If he did escape… then what?”

“I…” She looked over at Kenshin. “I don’t know. We can’t keep him hidden indefinitely… I suppose I’d – I’d have to leave the country, with him.”

“Oh.” His voice was small. “Um. What about me?”

She started. “Well – you’d come with me. If you wanted to. Or you could stay and watch over the school.”

“…you mean that?”

Now she looked at him – really looked, setting aside all her fears. He was almost huddling in the doorway, studying the floor. Her student. Ten years old and a mouth like a sewer, the biggest brat she’d ever met, thrice-caught thief who’d only escaped a branding because Sano happened to be walking by and bought him with a promise to mark him later, a promise never kept. Instead he’d brought Yahiko here.

She’d gotten his story from him in fits and starts, between insults and mockery. His parents had died in debt when he was so young that he could barely remember their names. There had been enough money when all their possessions were sold to save him from the auction block, but not enough to provide for him. He’d been cast out on the street, even the clothes on his back the charitable gift of a creditor’s wife. She’d pitied him enough to give him a single second-hand outfit, but not enough to take him in.

One day, Kaoru was going to find that woman and have a long talk with her about half-hearted
compassion, and how it shames both giver and recipient.

Yahiko had survived. Some of what he’d done and seen he’d talk about; some of it she only suspected from the nightmares she pretended not to know he had. But he’d turned thief eventually, gotten caught once, twice, three times and if Sano hadn’t happened to be passing through the slave market that day, hadn’t happened to be flush for once in his life…

“And absolutely,” she said firmly, smiling. “You’re my student – I can’t see my father’s dream fulfilled without you.”

He straightened a little, eyes suddenly brighter.

“That’s right! Better not forget it, Ugly.”

“How could I?” she said, rolling her eyes. “You never shut up about it.”

He stuck out his tongue at her and walked away, stretching his arms over his head. He walked a little taller now, head held high. Kaoru sighed, shaking her head, and wished that all her problems could be solved so easily. She glanced at Kenshin.

His eyes were open.

How much had he heard?

“Kenshin?”

He turned his head, focusing those emotionless eyes on her.

“Yes, mistress?”

She suppressed a shudder.

“How are you feeling?”

He blinked as though he didn’t understand the question.

“This worthless one is injured,” he said softly, after a pause that was almost too long.

“Yes, but – I mean, are you comfortable? Do you need an extra pillow? More blankets – well, you might want less, but Megumi says you need to stay warm.” She was babbling, hands twisting around each other in her lap, and she couldn’t seem to stop herself.

Another long, confused pause.

“This worthless one has no desires, mistress.”

He tensed as he said it, like a child who knew they were in trouble no matter what they did or said but wanted desperately to say the right thing. Kaoru tucked the observation away to examine later, when she could think more clearly. If later ever came.

“Okay. Um… there’s some medicine you’re supposed to take. Can you sit up and drink on your own?”

Instead of answering, he began struggling to do what she’d said. He never flinched or cried out, but she saw the shift and stress on his muscles, under the bandages, and realized that he had to be in pain.
“No!” she cried out, and he froze. She wrapped her arms around him without thinking. “Don’t strain yourself – here, lie back down –”

Kaoru helped him back down onto the futon and did a cursory check of the bandages for fresh bleeding, hoping that he hadn’t reopened or aggravated his wounds. Nothing seemed to have been hurt.

Why on earth had he –?

_He cannot act without orders, even to preserve his own life._ Megumi’s words echoed in her memory, and she covered her mouth with her hand in shock as she realized that of course, by extension, he had to obey, and she’d meant it as a question but –

_Well done, Kaoru, not fifteen minutes in and you’ve already screwed up._

She took a deep breath.

“Kenshin.”

“Yes, mistress?”

He was staring at the ceiling, hands flat at his sides on top of the blanket. She forced her spine straight and her head high. She could _do_ this.

“If you can sit up _without_ pain, or straining yourself, do so. If not, _say_ that you can’t.”

She thought she saw his eyes widen, almost imperceptible, in shock or confusion or – something she had no name for.

“…this worthless one cannot, mistress.”

_Now we’re getting somewhere._

Kaoru nodded.

“Alright. I’ll help you sit up, then. Let me get the medicine ready, first.”

She had brought a tray in with her: a water jug, a glass, and a covered bowl of congee with egg mixed in. He needed to build up his strength, after all. And Megumi has supervised the cooking, so it wasn’t likely to make him any _worse_. Kaoru took the medicine packet from her sleeve and poured a glass of water, mixing in the bitter powder. Then she touched Kenshin’s shoulder.

“I’m going to help you now. Don’t strain yourself; just lean into me, understand?”

“Yes, mistress.”

He let her slide her arm under his shoulders and lift him, curling obediently against her. She got him sitting up and leaning against her chest with her arms around him, then held the glass out to him.

“Here. Sorry, it’s going to be a little bitter. Can you – sorry. If you can drink without pain or strain, do so. If you can’t, tell me. In fact, from now on, if you can’t do something because it will hurt you, or if you need to stop doing something because you’re tired, or you’ve been hurt, tell me right away. Understand?”

“…yes, mistress.” And that indescribable look again, or at least she thought it was; she couldn’t see most of his face from the angle she held him at.
He took the cup from her hand and drank mechanically. When he was done, he held the cup until she took in from him, filled it again, and handed it back. He drank it down. Then she handed him the congee.

“Please, eat.”

He took the bowl and held it in one hand, scooping the congee out with the fingers of his other hand. She realized, too late, that she’d forgotten to give him the spoon. But only a few mouthfuls in, he stopped abruptly.

“Kenshin?”

She felt him shiver, and wished she knew if it was pain or fear.

“This worthless one cannot continue, mistress.” Was that a hitch in his voice? He was so contained… Yahiko had always let her know exactly what he was feeling and quite a few things she knew he really wasn’t. He’d been on the attack almost constantly his first few months, trying to find the limits of his new world. Whereas Kenshin was completely passive, as though he didn’t even have the will to react - except he was reacting, she could see him doing it. Reluctantly. As if he was afraid to; as if even this small loss of control meant doom.

She very deliberately did not clench her fists, and kept her voice carefully even.

“If you eat any more, will it make you sick? Or are you tired?”

“Tired, mistress.”

“Then let me feed you,” she said briskly, taking the bowl from his hands and trying not to think about how incredibly intimate the situation was as she reached for the spoon. He was a feverish weight against her chest, his own head barely higher than hers. It reminded her, absurdly, of the time Yahiko had been sick, a few months after he arrived – except that Yahiko had been thoroughly embarrassed by the entire thing, and Kenshin just… accepted it. It was like playing with a doll, except dolls didn’t breathe or run fevers or have strong, calloused hands that should have life in them instead of lying limply at his sides…

She shook her head slightly and focused on what she was doing. When he had eaten the entire bowl she lowered him back down to the futon and tucked him in automatically, smoothing the blankets over his chest.

“Just rest now, okay? Rest and heal. I’ll be checking on you. Tell me right away if you’re hungry or thirsty or need to, um, get up to, you know, use the— facilities.”

She flushed red as she said it, but he wasn’t the first invalid she’d nursed. And she wasn’t going to risk aggravating his wounds. She’d had to help Yahiko get to and from the bathroom when he was ill, and this wouldn’t be that much different, right?

“Concentrate on getting better, okay? That’s all I want from you.”

He turned his head towards her and for a second – just a second, so fast she almost missed it – he looked confused. Not his earlier animal confusion, like a dog who’d been given a command they didn’t understand. Real, human confusion – where am I, what’s going on, why is it happening?

And then it was gone.

“Yes, mistress,” he said, and closed his eyes.
Just a flash, nothing more. But she had to hope.
Sano dropped his pack outside the Kamiya gate and stretched his arms over his head, feeling the joints pop. Damn trip got longer every time he made it – and the East Sea Road was less and less safe, nowadays, as unregulated Western guns flooded the country and peasants turned to banditry to make ends meet. Not that he could blame them. What with inflation and the rising tax rate, it was that, starve, or sell your children into slavery.

He flexed his right hand, grimacing. There had been more slave caravans than usual; he had his theories about why, but that didn’t make it any easier to pass them without doing or saying something. He had to remember that it wasn’t just him anymore, and hadn’t been for a long time.

There was a plan. The plan was proceeding.

He would live to see a free Japan.

“Oi! Missy!” he called out. The gate was closed. That wasn’t usual, and always meant to proceed with caution. Sano waited a few moments, then called out again. “Kid? Is anyone home?”

Footsteps. The gate opened and Kaoru peered out. She smiled when she saw him, but there was a wan and brittle look in her eyes. His brow creased in concern.

“Sano! Welcome back,” she said, and opened the gate further. Seeing the look on his face, she broadened her grin. Sano cracked his knuckles and shot her a you’re-not-fooling-me look.

“What’s wrong, little lady?”

Her smile faded and she looked away.

“You’d better come inside first. It’s complicated.”

“That so?” He picked up his pack and slung it over his shoulder. “Guess I’m coming in, then.”

The compound was quiet. The high walls blocked what little noise filtered in from the streets, and Kaoru didn’t have that many neighbors to begin with. The isolation made it a useful place to hide things – and people – that he didn’t want found. That, and Kaoru’s reputation. Her parents had been respected in the community, and some of that glamour had worn off on their daughter. She didn’t really realize it, having never not had influence, but people extended her more than the ordinary courtesy and would never suspect her of harboring escaped slaves – or anything else illegal, for that matter.

It wasn’t only escapees that he funneled through here: there were the packages, and the “friends in need,” and maybe it was wrong to use her home as a safehouse for the cause but she never asked questions and it was so much safer for her if she didn’t know.

“Yahiko!” she called as they walked together towards the main house. “Sano’s back!”

“About time!” came an indignant shout from the training hall. Yahiko pelted out, barely stopping to slide on his sandals, and leapt in the air with his bamboo sword held high.

“Prepare yourself!”

Sano stepped idly to one side. Yahiko landed on the ground – he didn’t stumble this time, good on him, kid had been working hard – and charged again. Sano pressed his hand against the kid’s
forehead and held him casually at arm’s length as the kid swung his practice sword, furiously trying to score a hit.

“Later, kid, okay? Seems me ‘n the missy’ve got some business to take care of.”

And to Sano’s surprise, the kid left off immediately.

“Right,” he said, lowering the bamboo blade. “That guy. Um, Kaoru, should I…?”

“Go back to the training hall. When you’ve finished your exercises for today and cleaned up, you can go visit with Tsubame.”

“Got it.” He nodded and jogged off. Sano blinked.

“This must be serious,” he commented, and it was only half a joke.

“It is,” she said, pausing to take off her shoes. “Or at least, Megumi thinks so.”

He slid off his own sandals and followed her into the house.

“Well, don’t keep me hangin’ like this. What’s going on?”

“It’s probably easier to show you. Don’t fly off the handle, okay?” She stopped outside on the spare bedrooms and knocked on the wood frame of the screen. “Kenshin? I’m coming in.”

Kenshin? Sano frowned. He’d never heard that name before. What had Kaoru managed to get her tangled in during the two weeks he’d been gone? It couldn’t be too bad, or Megumi would have sent a messenger pigeon…

There was no response from inside the room, but Kaoru opened the screen anyway. It took Sano all of three seconds to recognize the bandaged man kneeling on the futon – red hair, slave brand on left cheek, strange blue eyes – and as soon as he did, he shoved Kaoru behind his back and brought up his fists.

“Kaoru, get out of here!”

“No!” She shoved past him; he grabbed the collar of her kimono and she cried out, temporarily choked. And then the manslayer was on his feet and lunging at them and Kaoru was in the way –

“Kenshin! Stop!”

– the manslayer’s legs folded under him. He collapsed onto the floor, shaking, and pressed his forehead to the matting. Sano’s jaw dropped. His grip on Kaoru’s collar loosened and she pulled away from him to kneel next to the manslayer, who flinched away from her.

“Mistress. Forgive this worthless one,” he murmured, and Sano saw his fingers dig slightly into the mats.

Sano stared, blood and adrenaline still pounding in his veins. Then the gears started turning and he sagged heavily against the door, emptying his lungs in a single, shocked breath.

“Holy shit.”

Kaoru ignored him, resting two fingers lightly on the manslayer’s sleeve. He started at the touch, bracing himself for a blow.
“It’s alright,” she said quietly, and Sano had known her for too long not to notice the banked rage in her eyes, even though she held herself so gently. “Sano startled me, too. But he’s my friend, and you can’t hurt him, understand?”

“Yes, mistress. There will be no further errors.”

Sano had never heard the manslayer speak before. He knew of the man, of course, had seen him a few times when Kanryu made public appearances and brought along a bodyguard, but he’d never heard him say a word. His voice was – not even a voice. It was a sound that made words. Voices had personality, told the listener about the person they belonged to. Kaoru’s voice was high and determined, Yahiko’s was brash and loud, Megumi’s was low and smooth as black silk… but there was nothing in the manslayer’s voice. It was just a sound.

He suppressed a shiver.

Kaoru coaxed the manslayer back onto the futon and slid off the top of his robe to check his bandages. Sano noticed, now, the full extent of his injuries, and closed his eyes briefly while he cursed himself for a fool. Of course. Of course, if she’d found someone in that state she’d have to help. She didn’t have it in her not to. And why would she think to be careful when he’d never told her that she had to be? He had been trying to protect her, for fuck’s sake.

He pressed the heel of his hand briefly against his forehead, feeling a headache coming on. Goddammit. Goddammit.

Sano’s eyes narrowed as he watched Kaoru tending the manslayer. He didn’t look like much, sitting on the futon as Kaoru checked for re-opened wounds. It would have made a sweet picture, the woman tending the injured warrior, if not for the total blankness in his eyes and the way he tracked every move she made. Like his life depended on anticipating her and yielding to her desires without being asked…

Something else clicked, and Sano choked on a string of words that he definitely didn’t want Kaoru to know he used regularly.

“Kaoru?”

“Yes?” she said, finishing her examination.

“How – exactly – did the manslayer end up here?”

“His name,” and Sano winced at the acid in her voice. “is Kenshin. Please use it.”

“Fine.” He clenched his fist, biting back a growing anger. “How did Kenshin – Kanryu’s rabid little pet – end up sleeping in your guestroom?”

The manslayer tensed, shrinking in on himself. His hands flexed as he reached for the blade that wasn’t at his side. At least Kaoru’d had that much sense.

Kaoru sighed and slid the manslayer’s robe back on before she stood up.

“Like I said, it’s complicated.”

“Well, fuckin’ enlighten me.” Anger and dread warred in him: anger at himself, at her, at the whole ugly mess. Dread, because he had a pretty good idea of what had happened – the rough outline, if not the details – and there was no way Kaoru would consider doing the smart thing. That was what he loved about her, why this place was the memory he clung to when he’d seen too much evil for
one person to bear and knew that he couldn’t take action without fucking everything up.

In this case, though, it stood a damn good chance of getting her killed.

He’d thought this might happen, eventually: she was too willing to give herself away. But he’d always dismissed the thought soon after, because he’d done his best to shield her from the real fight – and he’d never thought that keeping her ignorant might be what dragged her in. Although he really should have. Dammit, dammit, dammit.

“Fine, then. Come with me,” she said, tugging at Sano’s sleeve as she left the room. He followed her, glancing over his shoulder at the manslayer. He was kneeling on the futon again, immobile as a statue.

She took him into the kitchen and told him the story as she made lunch, and she was distracted enough that the meal turned out half-edible. Sano let her talk, half-listening to the story he’d already figured out and watching her instead.

Kaoru was scared. He didn’t like it. Kaoru didn’t get scared, she got angry, and although she was that, too – so angry he didn’t think she was any more aware of it than a fish was of water – it was mixed with a bone-shaking fear that didn’t sit right on her.

And it was his fault. He could have kept her totally in the dark, or he could have told her everything. Instead, he’d tried to compromise and ended up telling her just enough to get her into bad trouble.

“You’re not gonna give him up, are you?” he said when she was finished.

“…no.” Her voice was quiet. “I can’t. I’m committed.”

“Shit.” He stared glumly at his lunch, appetite gone. “I’m sorry, missy.”

She wrinkled her brow, picking at her own meal.

“What for?”

He scratched the back of his neck, sighing.

“‘Cause I shouldn’t ‘a kept things from you. Or I should ‘a just never told y’anything to begin with. One or the other.”

“I don’t think it would have mattered.” She finally took a bite and chewed slowly, not savoring it: like someone with a stomachache or recovering from the flu, eating only because they had to. She swallowed. “I don’t think anything would have changed the choices I made. I couldn’t – I can’t leave someone like that. Anyone.”

“So, Fox told y’about what I really do, other’n the – you know?”

She nodded. “It shocked me at first, but when I thought about it, it explained a lot. Like why you’re always going off to Kyoto. You’re not stopping there, are you?”

“Well – actually, I do stop there. ‘S where I meet with my contact. It’s, ah – we try not to know too much about each other, y’know?”

“A clandestine cell system.”

He blinked, surprised.
“I’m not totally ignorant,” she said tartly, eating a bit more. “You’re the head of the Edo cell, aren’t you? You know everyone in your cell, and your contact, but no one else. Everyone in the cell knows you, and might know one or two other people, but no one else. That way, no one person can bring down the organization.”

“Pretty much.” He weighed whether or not to tell her that he was actually the head of an Edo cell – technically, that wasn’t information he was supposed to have, but he had ears and people got sloppy. “Look – how involved d’you wanna be?”

“Aren’t I already pretty involved?” She looked up at him and glared, piercing him. “You haven’t just been passing escaped slaves through my home, right? How much danger have I already been in?”

“...look, they can’t get y’ on treason if you didn’t know, and helpin’ escaped slaves is just theft…”

“And do you really think I would have let you just – oh!” She jabbed her chopsticks at him, eyes snapping. “You stupid, idiot, selfish – ”

He raised his hands in a placating gesture.

“I fucked up. No excuse. I’m sorry.”

“Well… good.” She started eating with a will. “Now, Megumi said that you can find out what happened – if he was abandoned, or escaped, or what. I’ve been keeping him hidden, but I need to know what to do next.”

“Okay, okay.” He started eating, then, glad to see some light back in her eyes. “I gotta meet with my guy this evening anyway, I’ll talk to ‘im then. Sheesh.”

“Fine. And if I have to leave with Kenshin, and Yahiko won’t come, I expect you to take responsibility for him! And for my father’s school! I don’t want to come back one day and find the place in ruins, or turned into some kind of gambling den full of your loser friends!”

“Alright! I get it! Lay off, already!”

They ate lunch and squabbled, and Sano felt the dust of the road flaking off him: he was home now, and there was nothing he couldn’t handle.

~*~

Kaoru and Sano walked together as far as the first bridge before he turned off, citing the need to meet a friend – his “guy,” presumably – and Kaoru continued on to the market. The contentment she felt whenever Sano came home and her family reunited had only been a temporary relief. Now the tight knot in her stomach began to reassert itself, and she had to stop in the middle of the bridge to watch the water swirling at the base of the posts and breathe. Deep. Through the nose into the center of her being, the seat of power, and out again through the mouth, carrying disharmony away with it.

Then she continued on, reviewing her grocery list and the monthly budget. She could make it work – Sano had handed over some cash before he left – even with the extra mouth to feed.

She should have brought Yahiko with her. He’d need to know how to do this, if she had to leave. Or maybe not – maybe he’d decide to go with her. Which would leave Sano in charge of the school. He was a grown man, he could at least shop for groceries. Right?

…could she really leave Japan? She didn’t speak anything other than Japanese, she’d never even left Tokyo. But what if – could she just pack up and go? It wouldn’t be that bad, right? Sano’s
organization helped people do this all the time. There would be other Japanese people in the free countries, wouldn’t there? She wouldn’t be totally alone…

Her heart started racing and she had to pause again in the shade of a gingko tree.

Enough. She was borrowing trouble, and there’d be plenty of that when the bills came due without taking out a loan against the present moment.

Kaoru threw back her shoulders, lifted her chin, and marched off to market.

It was early afternoon, and the crowds were beginning to return after a collective break for lunch. There had always been slaves mixed in with the free citizens: following after their owners or walking alone, heads bowed. Lifting and carrying and running and fetching, branded with a simple cross on cheek or forehead – where it couldn’t be hidden – and wearing their masters’ crests on their clothes. Most of them, anyway. Some were marked with a tattoo on a forearm or inside of a wrist; those inked crests didn’t always match the ones on their clothes.

Kaoru had asked, once, why some slaves were marked that way and what happened if those slaves were sold. Sano’s face had gone dark, and he’d told her that she really didn’t want to know. She’d heard rumors anyway: that particularly attractive slaves would be singled out, for certain reasons, and sent to special training-houses…

Kenshin only had a cross burned on his cheek. She touched her own, absently, and thought for a moment that she felt the raised lines of a scar.

She’d never paid much attention to the slaves. It was hard to look at them without feeling sick, without wanting to do something and not knowing what it was. But she couldn’t avoid them, so she had taught herself not to notice them. Now, though, she watched them carefully: how they acted around their masters, around the free, around each other. Some of them were a little like Kenshin: silent and subdued, responding immediately to any offhand statement from their owners and otherwise unresponsive. Others were subservient, but at least looked around and took note of things when not dancing attendance. And some acted more like servants than anything else, talking respectfully but freely and even initiating conversations, albeit mostly with other slaves. The last group largely traveled alone, trusted to complete errands without supervision, and she wondered if that was what made the difference.

She couldn’t ask them, of course. Etiquette demanded that you never approach a stranger’s slave, any more than you would try to borrow their shopping basket without permission. And she doubted she’d get a straight answer even if she could. So she sighed instead and turned to her shopping, idly browsing through the vegetables.

“Something on your mind, miss?”

Kaoru looked up, startled, and smiled politely at the shopkeeper.

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Her eyes strayed to the young woman kneeling on the raised floor of the shop, behind the street stalls, sorting and weighing tied bunches of leeks. She turned to place her bundles in a basket, and Kaoru saw the cross burned on her cheek. Maybe…

“Well, if you have a moment…” She took a breath, focusing on the shopkeeper. He was an older man, with a gentle look in his eye. And yet he owned a slave.

“For various reasons, I’m considering buying a slave. I’ve never had one before – my family never needed one. But since my parents passed away…” she let her voice trail off. “…anyway, I was just
wondering…”

“Ah, I see.” He nodded sagely, clicking his tongue against the pipe in the corner of his mouth. “Well, well. And what kind of help are you needing?”

She shrugged. “Repairs. Gardening. I can’t do everything by myself, and I don’t have any older brothers – well, I have one, but he has to travel a lot.” That was true enough – Sano counted. More or less.

The old man rubbed his chin, a contemplative gleam in his eyes. “Sounds like you need a husband more than you do a slave.”

“Oh, no!” She flushed, not acting. “I can’t possibly – not yet, anyway. There are circumstances…”

Kaoru crossed her fingers in her sleeve, hoping the old man wouldn’t pry any further. Thankfully he only chuckled and tapped his finger to the side of his nose.

“Well, it’s your business. But, seein’ as you’re a woman alone, you might consider buying yourself a guard – you can always get ‘im trained to do the work you need, and it’s easier than training a domestic to be a guard, I can tell you that much, for all it costs a little extra.”

“A guard?”

“Ay.” He nodded firmly. “Used to be guards were the least reliable slave you could get. Puttin’ a weapon in a slave’s hands had a way of making them think they were near as good as citizens. ‘Bout ten years ago, though, the Kanryu group started selling guards that were just as docile as you please. Cut their own throats if you ordered it, even. I wouldn’t hesitate to recommend ‘em, even to a woman.”

“I… I see.” Her stomach lurched. She forced a smile over her nausea. “I’ll definitely keep that in mind. If I could just get these vegetables…? I really have to be getting back home soon.”

She concluded her business quickly and managed to walk away from the stall calmly, without rushing or appearing anything other than a young woman buying groceries. As soon as it was feasible, she turned into an alley, hid behind a pile of lumber, and was promptly and violently sick.

~*~

Yahiko paused outside the door to Kenshin’s room, chewing on his lower lip. He’d carried his practice sword in with him – something Kaoru frowned on, as a rule, but he felt older when he had it strapped to his back. Stronger. Like he could take on the world.

He started to reach for the door, changed his mind, and turned to leave. Then he changed it again, and opened the door.

Kenshin was kneeling on the futon, head bowed. His only reaction was a quick flick of his eyes towards the door when it opened; otherwise he held himself as still as a statue.

“Hey,” Yahiko said. There was a subtle tensing of Kenshin’s shoulders, a slight nod of his head. Nothing else.

“…my name’s Yahiko.” He took a step into the room. “I’m Kaoru’s student.”

Kenshin’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly. He turned to face Yahiko, bowed, and held it, moving as smoothly as a clockwork doll. Only the dolls had more personality.
“Young master,” he said flatly. The hairs on Yahiko’s neck stood up. It wasn’t only the lifelessness; he’d seen that before, and not only in slaves. The women of the pleasure quarters, the children who went away with the strange old men offering them food and shelter and came back changed…

He swallowed, hard.

There had been dogs in the slums. Vicious, starving things, more than half-wild and as dangerous as the people who owned them. Most of the dogs did have owners; were kept, not for love or companionship, but as weapons, as good as fists or firearms or hidden daggers – better, actually, since they were cheaper. They could find their own food, after all, and some bitch somewhere was always whelping.

He’d learned to spot the owned dogs quickly. The ferals slunk around and stole from the edges, but the guard dogs stalked openly through the muddied streets, carrying an air of animal menace with them. Violence waiting to break free: teeth that yearned to rip and tear because that was all they were. That meant the difference between starvation and satiation, between pain and not-pain, between a roof over their head or a shivering night in the frozen mud. It wasn’t a question of desire, not really. But a dog that didn’t fight had no use to its master, and a useless dog wasn’t even worth killing. They’d die soon enough on their own.

The man kneeling submissively on the futon felt like those dogs.

Yahiko forced himself to take another step, moving through air suddenly thick as water.

“I wanted to say…” His mouth was bone-dry and he worked his jaw, trying to moisten it. “I wanted to say – it’s strange being here, right? ‘Cause Kaoru’s doing her mom thing, and that’s not how it works. And I wanted to tell you – ”

He faltered there; then he remembered his own first days here, the strain of waiting for the masks to come off, and rallied.

“…I wanted to tell you, it’s not fake. She’s for real. Look.” He pushed up the sleeves he wore draping over his hands and let Kenshin see the thief-marks on his palms. “Three times a thief, see? I should be branded, but – Sano, he saved me. And he brought me here, and Kaoru – I know she’s kinda overbearing, and she’s ugly and has a bad temper and she can’t cook – but once she’s on your side, she’ll never – she doesn’t give up on people, and she doesn’t rat them out, no matter what. And she’s on your side now, so she won’t let anything bad happen to you. You’re safe. You don’t have to be afraid. Really.”

He searched Kenshin’s face for some sign that the other man understood. And there didn’t seem to be any – except then there was, just a flash of something: blue eyes that darkened in worry, just for a moment, and the sense of imminent violence suddenly receded.

“She won’t hurt you, ever,” Yahiko said, letting his sleeves fall over his hands again. “She won’t let anyone else hurt you either. So don’t be scared. That’s all.”

He nodded and turned to leave. In the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Kenshin reach out; but when he looked over his shoulder, he hadn’t moved at all.

~*~

Megumi was making wound salve.

The manslayer – no, Kenshin, he was Kenshin now, had always been deep down and it was important that she believe that with her very bones – had needed most of what she had in stock.
Sagara was due back today or tomorrow, and he would use what she had left. So she was making more. It kept for months, and would always be in demand.

The pestle ground against the mortar in quick, simple circles.

She did not weep, because the salt of her tears would alter the composition of the salve, and the salve would be needed.

She’d been so proud to be chosen. So proud to serve. Her family’s lord had called her to audience and assigned her specially to serve as Dr. Tsukuda’s assistant. It was very important, she’d been told. She’d been chosen because the absolute best was required. And she’d been so proud and so confident that she’d never asked what she was making, or why, and one day after Dr. Tsukuda had died she had been summoned to meet with his patron, her lord’s ally, the man she really worked for.

And then she’d known what she was. What she had allowed herself to become, in her pride; she had been so eager to prove herself that she had betrayed everything her family held dear. Kanryu had taken her down to the training pens and showed her, and sometimes she could go a full hour without remembering the stench or the screams.

His grip had nearly fractured her wrist, growing tighter every time she tried to close her eyes or turn away. It had left bruises, deep black handprints that he’d never allowed the chance to fade.

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, the pestle ground out, and her sin settled deeper into her bones.

And if she was a different woman, she might say: I had no choice. And if she was a different woman, she might say: I tried to stop it. And if she was a different woman, she might say: at least I escaped when I had the chance.

But she was herself, and she knew what she was, so she knelt on her bamboo mat and made wound salve and she did not weep, because the salt in her tears would alter the salve, and the salve would be needed.

Someone rang the bell at the gate and Megumi looked up, startled out of her meditations. She left her mortar and pestle and went outside, peering carefully through the peephole. It was Sagara, standing with his hands in his pockets and a disgruntled look.

“Yo, Fox, open up.”

“Polite as ever,” she sniffed, unlatching the gate and opening it. “So you’re back.”

“Yeah. And I stopped at Kaoru’s before I came here.”

Megumi froze for a moment, then made herself examine her nails as he stepped inside, shutting the gate behind him.

“So you know.”

“Takani.” Even now he kept himself under control; he didn’t use her name, because he knew that she couldn’t stand it when a man used her name. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

He kept his hands in his pockets, although she’d seen him like this before and she knew it was more his nature to grab her shoulders and give her a good shake. But he knew what it would make her remember if he did.

She hated him a little, for all the things that he knew.
“I was thinking that there wasn’t much point in crying over spilled milk.” She shrugged, walking back towards the house, and Sagara followed. “It’s not my fault you kept Kamiya ignorant. He’d already fixed on her, without being prompted – at least this way he’s with someone he can’t hurt.”

“Did it not occur t’you that it might be some kinda trick? That Kanryu’s just lookin’ t’get to you?”

“And why on earth would he send the man – would he send Kenshin to get under my skin?”

“…she’s got you doing it too, huh?” Sagara rubbed a weary hand over his face. “Because even I can tell that you pity the guy, and that you’re carryin’ a load of guilt around. ‘Course you’d jump at a chance to help him. And then – ” he smacked his closed fist against his open palm. “He’s got ya.”

“Shinomori would have warned us. In fact, since you’re here, doesn’t that mean he’ll be by soon? And if it is a trap, isn’t it better to have Kenshin staying far away from me?” She ushered him into the clinic, tossing her hair.

“And for your information, Kamiya doesn’t have me doing anything. Kenshin is his name. Now, sit and wait for Shinomori, I have work to finish – ”

“I am here.”

Megumi blanched, clutching her chest, and took a startled step back. Shinomori stepped out from a shadowy alcove in front of her. His blue eyes were shaded under his bangs, and he spared her only a passing glance.

“Aoshi,” Sagara said, nodding in greeting. “How’s tricks?”

“I have information for you.”

“Yeah, about that – do you know about who Kaoru found?”

Shinomori nodded. “I’m aware. He’s no threat.”

“That a fact?” Sagara raised an eyebrow. “Well, why don’t we all sit down, then, and you can tell us more. After that we’ll handle business.”

The spy inclined his head slightly. It wasn’t quite a nod; more a quiet recognition of Sagara’s priorities, and the fact that his fears needed to be soothed before they could get anything done. He stood aside and let Megumi lead them to the sitting room, where a tray of tea things stood ready near a cold brazier. She busied herself with lighting it and putting the kettle on while the men settled themselves.

“So,” Sagara said when she finally sat back on her heels, “What’s the story with this manslayer?”

“He has been abandoned.” Shinomori knelt, as Megumi did; only Sagara sat cross-legged, nearly lounging. “Kanryu has relinquished title and possession. All formalities have been observed.”

“What?” Megumi started forward and almost knocked over the brazier. “But – why would he?”

Shinomori turned to her and she forced herself not to quail under his impassive stare. They were on the same side, now, and she no reason to fear him.

“Because he was of no further use.” Shinomori reached into his messenger’s pouch and pulled out a sheaf of papers, spreading them out on the mats. “He is aging. His reflexes were slowing. And Kanryu believed that the conditioning was beginning to… malfunction. The manslayer was used as a training aide for some time, then turned out of the compound.”
Training aide. That explained the fresh wounds. Megumi folded her hands in her lap and stared at the kettle, blood draining from her face.

“Waitaminute.” Sagara straightened. “Whaddya mean, ‘malfunction’? Is the guy dangerous?”

“No,” Shinomori said, not looking up. “The core of the conditioning holds. He cannot harm his acknowledged master, or disobey his or her orders. However, recently, the manslayer began to exhibit… lapses in judgment. Inexplicable losses of memory. He appeared to be breaking down, and when the usual methods did not repair the damage, Kanryu concluded he had reached the end of his usefulness.” He finished arranging the papers to his satisfaction and looked up. “Kanryu is not a sentimental man.”

“No,” Megumi said numbly. “He isn’t.”

“If Miss Kamiya wishes to take possession, she may do so without legal encumbrance. If she does so, it will provide valuable cover. The situation has not changed since my last report; I have not been able to entirely dissuade my men from investigating her without jeopardizing my own position. No one would believe she was an abolitionist if she took a slave.”

“Even a useless one?” Sagara asked wryly. Shinomori shrugged.

“It is well-known that the Kamiya family is rich in honor but poor in funds. A woman, alone… she would take what was available. As for her parents’ liberal leanings…” he waved his hand. “Again, she is a young woman with many responsibilities and few resources. Perhaps that is why she chose one who had been abandoned – as a salve to her guilt. She would not be the first hypocrite.”

Megumi watched silently as Sagara’s mouth twisted into a scowl.

“Shinomori’s making sense,” she said quietly, after he’d had a few moments to process it.

“The little lady’s not gonna like it,” he said finally. “I mean, really not gonna like it.”

“Emancipating him is impractical at this juncture. Among other concerns, I do not believe he qualifies under law.” Shinomori sounded completely disinterested, as if he were only laying out the facts of the situation, and Megumi wondered sometimes if he really cared, or if he only assisted them to advance his own agenda. Whatever that might be.

“Kamiya won’t like it, no,” she said, looking pointedly at Sagara. “But she’ll do it. She’s taken up his cause now, and you know what she’s like. There’s nothing she won’t do to keep someone safe. Isn’t that why you’ve used her for so long?”

She had chosen the word deliberately and let a satisfied smirk flit across her lips as Sagara flinched. It was a cruel thing to say – but truth so often was. And regardless of his doubtless genuine care for the girl, he had been using her.

“Aww, fuck.” Sagara buried his face in his hands, scratching at his shock of brown hair. “Fuck. Fuck.” The last expletive was drawn out in a weary sigh. “Goddammit. Fine. You swear that Kanryu doesn’t want the guy back?”

“He has no further legal or personal interest in the manslayer. Miss Kamiya may assume title without impediment. I would recommend that she do so today if possible; tomorrow at the latest. The manslayer is well-known, and may be of interest to others even with a known defect.”

Sagara frowned. “Yeah, but I’ve gotta give you the latest…”
“I’ll go,” Megumi stood. “Where is she, the Maekawa’s?”

“Market.” Sagara looked up at her, puzzled. “Don’t you wanna hear?”

“You can fill me in later. Except,” and she turned to Shinomori. “The matter we discussed earlier…?”

He handed her a few papers, bound with string. “Kanryu remains aware of your whereabouts, and unconcerned so long as his supplies of the drug hold. I estimate that they will continue to do so for another year. After that…” He shook his head and met her eyes, and there was an unexpected spark of humanity in his gaze. “I am sorry, Miss Takani.”

“Well,” she said, smiling wanly. “We’ll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it.”

~*~

Kaoru adjusted her grip on the basket, sighing. Her throat ached. She had drunk from the public fountain and washed her face, hands shaking – her collar was still waterstained – but she still didn’t feel clean. There wasn’t much of a choice, though, because the groceries had to be bought, and taken home and put away. Dinner had to be made, and Kenshin’s bandages changed. After that she’d be able to take a bath. She planned to scrub herself raw.

The sun was sliding into the west, slanting mellow light across the city. The world was starting to smell of spring again, of flower petals and soil touched by rain. She stopped at the bridge that led to her neighborhood, leaning briefly against the railing and closing her eyes.

“Kamiya!” Someone called her name. She looked over her shoulder.

“Megumi?”

“I’m glad I caught up with you.” The older woman hurried to meet her. “Are you done shopping?” Kaoru nodded. “I was just heading home.”

“Good. We need to go by the municipal office before you do.”


“No, it’s not that,” Megumi shook her head. “You need to register title on Kenshin.”


“Ideally.”

Kaoru exhaled hard, sagging a little. “Why?”

“Kenshin’s a very interesting piece, you know,” Megumi’s voice was dry. Kaoru knew it wasn’t aimed at her. “Historically, that is. He’d make a wonderful addition to any collection.”

Her eyes widened and she felt weak. “People do that?”

“Some. Not many. It’s a rarified hobby. But it seems that he was abandoned after all, so you need to take title quickly, before anyone else figures out he’s up for grabs.”

…but…” Her arms were suddenly boneless. She set her bags down, half on the path and half on the wood of the bridge. “Sorry. Can I just – can I have a second?”
There was a bench nearby. She stumbled to it and sat down, cradling her head in her hands, and felt Megumi sit down beside her. The doctor didn’t say anything, only sat next to her while Kaoru tried to marshal her thoughts into something coherent.

She had convinced herself she’d have to leave the country. That would have been easy; frightening, but easy, because at least she could stay herself. But this… to make a living, thinking man her chattel, even if only for show…

“It’s not… that I’m having second thoughts,” she said abruptly, not lifting her head. “I just – I don’t understand.”

“I know,” Megumi said quietly. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how to make it easier.”

Her voice was raw and open, and Kaoru looked up, startled by the naked honesty there. Megumi was staring into the sunset, hands folded neatly in her lap, and Kaoru hadn’t realized until then that a person could cry without shedding a single tear.

“I could tell you to be glad that it is so hard for you, only I doubt that would help. I could tell you what I was taught at your age, all the reasons why slavery must exist. No one does this simply to be evil, you understand. So many believe, absolutely, that this is the natural order of things, and that we’re the ones inexplicably trying to destroy a way of life that harms no one. But even if I told you all that, even if you came to understand the apologetics involved… well, do you think it would help if I did?”

She was speaking as if in a trance. Kaoru slowly straightened. Megumi looked at her, finally, and smiled faintly.

“…maybe it would.” She swallowed, hard, unable to escape the sour taste of vomit. A feeling like cool rain poured down her spine, like the moment when she had first taken up a sword: slow and certain and absolute. “I have to know, Megumi. Really know. And I think – you’re probably the only person who can teach me. It’s not going to be real but – it’ll be real for him, won’t it? So if I don’t know what to do…”

Kaoru swallowed and let the words hang unspoken between them. Megumi closed her eyes.

“You’ve never asked about my past,” she said, and a casual listener might think it was a change of subject.

“No,” she said simply. “I don’t care about people’s pasts.”

“Isn’t that what got you into this mess?”

“It did. But that doesn’t change anything.”

Megumi very nearly laughed. Then she stood, narrowing her eyes in the dying light.

“Well, the first step is to register your title,” she said, and shot Kaoru one of those assessing looks. “Get up, Kamiya. I’ll give you the basics on the way.”

~*~

It was dark by the time she got home. The light from the houses spilled over their walls and out into the street, not quite as bright as day but not black as night either; light enough to see by. Megumi helped her bring the groceries in, and Yahiko, yawning, offered to escort her home. She accepted with a flirtatious flip of her hair, eyeing Kaoru with fox-gleaming eyes.
“You’ll be alright, Kamiya?”

Kaoru nodded and thought no, I won’t.

She made dinner. It was not impressive.

She brought Kenshin his dinner and then ate hers alone, kneeling in the dining room with the doors open and staring across the way to her parents’ memorial shrine. They would understand. Wouldn’t they?

The air felt very heavy.

After she cleared the dishes away, she lit incense at their altar and knelt for long minutes, praying for forgiveness. Then she went to the storehouse.

The hall to Kenshin’s room stretched longer than she remembered it. She walked it carefully, balancing her burdens. When she opened the door he was kneeling in the same spot he’d been in for the past three days, ever since he’d recovered enough to sit up. His empty dishes were stacked neatly on the tray, which had been placed next to the door. If not for that, she wouldn’t have known he’d moved at all.

The light from the room lantern illuminated his hair and cast his face in shadows. She couldn’t tell if his eyes were opened or closed; he could be a warrior deep in meditation, and she could be his sister or his daughter, his wife or his maid or his mother come to tend him, and any of those would have been preferable to the truth.

She only had a second to think this, because as soon as the door slid open completely he turned to face her and prostrated himself, and she had to choke back the urge to rush to his side, to hold him and chase away his pain and order him to never kneel to anyone again.

That wouldn’t help, she knew, now that Megumi had explained it to her. He didn’t remember what it meant, to have someone be kind. He must have known kindness, once – Megumi had told her about the night she ran away, about the choice he’d made. And it had been a choice. She had to believe that.

No one who didn’t understand kindness could make such a choice.

Megumi had told her a lot, on the walk to and from the municipal office. More than she’d wanted to know; not all that she needed to know. There were some things, too, that she simply couldn’t process yet. Wouldn’t. A person could only take in so much evil at a time.

“Sit up,” she told him, and he obeyed. “I’m going to change your bandages. Take off the top of your robe.”

You’re doing too much for him, Megumi had said, shaking her head, after Kaoru described the last few days: his silence and his stillness and her bewilderment. It’s supposed to be the other way around. It’s confusing him. You have to give him duties, Kaoru. Give him a way to serve you, a real way, or he’ll assume that he has no value and that you’re just toying with him. Usefulness is the only protection a slave has.

Her hands shook as she set out the medicinal salve and unwound the bandages.

“Face away from me and raise your arms.”

Telling him what you’re going to do is good, she’d continued. It will build trust. Explain things as
much as you can. Don’t make requests, though. Order him. Think of it like – like training a dog. Be clear, consistent, and confident.

She undid the knot that tied the white linen wrapped around his chest in place and unwound the bandages slowly, watching for any sign of pain. Her hands shook a little.

But I don’t want to hurt him, she’d protested. Megumi had shaken her head.

You can’t rely on him to stop you, even if you order him to. His idea of what hurts him and your idea are probably very different – remember, he’s a guard, not a domestic or a pleasure-slave. He’s supposed to be tough, to not complain. You’ll just have to watch him, all the time.

The wounds were healing nicely, and would barely scar. He probably didn’t need bandages anymore. A training aide… target practice. He had been ordered to stand and allow himself to be beaten until he could stand no more, then thrown into the pen at the end of the day to nurse himself as best he could until the next morning when it started all over again, at least until Kanryu determined he’d exhausted his usefulness as that, too.

And then he’d simply been carried away and dumped on the riverbank.

There was no salve left to apply, but her fingers kept tracing over his skin, trying to read the history written there. The lamplight flickered and danced, outlining muscle and bone. She tasted salt on her lips.

“…Mistress?”

He was asking her something, even if he didn’t quite dare voice the question. Triumph flared in her. And pain, to be so happy for such a small thing. She wiped her eyes and started wrapping him up again.

“Kanryu has relinquished title on you,” she said, not quite certain why, except that Megumi had told her it was good to explain things and she wanted him to know. “Do you understand what that means?”

She fastened the new bandages into place. He had frozen where he was as she spoke, and she thought that maybe she was learning to read him, a little, because it seemed to her that there was terror underneath it.

“Turn and face me. I need to do your arms, now.”

And even in that terror he obeyed with a fluid grace that hurt her heart to see.

She’d asked Megumi what, exactly, Kanryu had made Kenshin do. Megumi had told her that he’d been a guard and only that; when Kanryu left the compound he had taken Kenshin with him, but when Kanryu was in residence Kenshin was left to wander the grounds and deal with any trespassers. He’d slept in Kanryu’s room, hidden behind a screen, and when Kaoru had asked Megumi how she knew that the older woman had gotten that frozen, faraway look, and Kaoru hadn’t needed to be told.

And… Megumi had hesitated, then. Sometimes, he had Kenshin perform. For guests. Like you’d show off a trained animal, only with swordsmanship.

Rage stiffened her fingers and they slipped, barking bare knuckles against a half-healed scrape.

“I’m sorry. My fingers slipped.” She looked up into his eyes – those startling blue eyes, shading into
violet like a winter sunrise – and wanted to cry.

Megumi hadn’t understood. She had known, obscurely, that something about those performances was as bad as all the rest, sensed it through some mutual bond between masters even of vastly different domains. But she hadn’t understood, because she had never handled a sword in her life, so how could she?

How could she understand what it was to take what should be his pride and glory and turn it into a show, a trick that he performed – roll over, sit, beg, head-strike, body-strike…

Blasphemy.

She made herself steel as she finished bandaging his arms, winding herself with control as she wound his limbs with cloth. Then she slid the second tray in front of him and stood.

“As Kanryu has relinquished title to you,” she said through numb lips, thanking the long years of discipline that helped her do it and hating herself for tainting them, “I have claimed it. You are mine. You will wear my crest, obey me and no other. Do you understand, Kenshin?”

She looked down at him, chanting be steel, be steel, be iron and stone through the static in her head and the pain in her heart and praying that he wouldn’t see the truth written in her eyes.

He stared at the tray for a long moment – the neatly folded clothing stamped with the Kamiya crest (her father’s formal wear from when he was younger, and she prayed his spirit would understand); the arm guards, similarly emblazoned; and the wooden sword balanced carefully atop it.

Then he bowed, and she remembered that moment in the bathhouse, the first time he had called her mistress: his absolute surrender and a deathlike peace within it, the cold comfort of a man finally letting water into his lungs.

“Yes, mistress.”

“One other thing.”

And this wasn’t in the script she’d worked out with Megumi on that endless walk home, but she added it because there were some pieces of herself she would not sacrifice. She crouched in front of him, one knee resting on the floor so that she was still a few fingers taller than him.

“Look at me.”

He raised his head.

“I know why Kanryu abandoned you,” she said quietly. “I don’t care. You have value to me. You don’t need to know why,” and that was perhaps the most terrible lie ever to pass her lips, but Megumi had said he that wouldn’t understand and she had to trust Megumi to lead her through the darkness ahead. “All you need to know is that you do. You will always have value to me. I swear it on my family name and my own honor. This is your home now, and forever, no matter what happens. Do you understand?”

The lamp-oil crackled and the leaves in the courtyard rustled softly. He stared up at her, eyes wide, and there was that stark, human vulnerability again, a brief flash of self and longing.

“…this worthless one understands, mistress.” It was barely more than a whisper.

“Good.”
She stood up again. “Now, get some sleep. First thing in the morning, I want you to go to the bathhouse and give yourself a good scrubbing and a proper soak; Megumi says you should be up for more than a lick and promise, so it’s time you did. Don’t worry about the bandages – you’re nearly healed as it is. I’ll redo them if it’s needed. And then...” she paused for a moment. She usually woke an hour or so after dawn and every day that he’d been here, he’d been awake before her. “If I’m not up by the time you’re done, wait in the kitchen. We’ll go over your duties there.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“Goodnight, Kenshin. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Kaoru left him without looking over her shoulder. She took a bath, and scrubbed until her skin was red and aching. She went into her room. She changed into her sleeping clothes. She got into bed. And then she stared at the ceiling for a long, long time, and did not weep.
When Kaoru went into the kitchen the next morning Kenshin was already kneeling by the stove, dressed in the clothing she’d given him last night. The wooden sword was tucked in his belt, and he’d pulled his hair up in a neat, high ponytail. It made his face sharp, and somehow cold.

He greeted her as he usually did, with a low bow and murmured “mistress.” She stepped down from the dining room into the kitchen, stomach roiling.

“How are – ” she started to ask, then stopped herself. “Let me see your wounds.”

He shrugged off his top and stood for her inspection. She only needed a glance; he was healing nicely, and as long as he took it easy there was no danger of further damage.

“We don’t need to bandage you up today,” she said firmly. “Give things a chance to air out. Now, let me see... Kenshin, could you – no, wait, I’ll do it. Can you get a fire going?”

“Yes, mistress.” He pulled his top back on, then knelt and gathered a few logs of wood from the rack. She grabbed a bucket and headed for the well.

Yahiko was already there, dumping a cold bucket of water over himself and shivering. He’d been doing that religiously every morning since a month ago, when Sano had told him it would toughen him up.

“You’re going to get sick again,” Kaoru warned.

“S-shut up,” he insisted through chattering teeth. “I’m n-not a little kid anvym-more. If S-sano can do it, then s-so can I!”

“Fine, don’t listen to me,” she said, lowering the bucket into the well. “Suffer. Maybe you’ll learn something.”

“Hey, Kaoru?” His voice was abruptly serious. The wind picked up slightly, carrying the hint of spring on its breath.

“Yes?”

“So... Kenshin’s gonna be staying here a while, isn’t he?”

Kaoru didn’t answer him right away. She rested her hands on the edge of the well, gazing into the depths. Her reflection was a black smudge along the edge of the rim, shimmering and distorted, her face unclear.
“…did Megumi tell you anything when you walked her home last night?”

“Some.” He scuffed at the ground, eyes fierce. “Like. That he can’t be free yet. So you have to – ”

“We,” Kaoru said firmly. “Have to help him learn. And it’s going to be very strange for a while.”

“Yeah, but, I mean…” Yahiko looked up her, finally, and scowled. “Megumi said you took title on him.”

He said the words like a curse, and Kaoru couldn’t blame him. She felt cursed. Her hands shook as she pulled the bucket back up from the well, shattering the wavering images.

“Yes,” she said simply. “Megumi and Sano think that’s best. So that no one else can try and – and take him.”

“And they’re sure he can’t be free?” Yahiko’s voice was high as the child that he was, not his usual forced gruffness at all. She’d only heard him that way a few times, and always when he was on the very edge of breaking down. “They’re sure?”

Kaoru pulled the bucket out and set it down, turning to face her student.

“You know that they are,” she said quietly. “Otherwise they wouldn’t have suggested it.”

His clenched fist slammed into his thigh. She winced for him, for his shock at a world sent suddenly off-kilter, and wished there was another way.

“It’s not fair!”

“Of course it’s not!” Fury sparked in her breast, sudden and satisfying. “But it’s the way things are. What am I supposed to do, leave him?”

“Yeah, I know that!” Yahiko shouted back. “That doesn’t mean I gotta like it any!”

“Oh, and you think I do?” Kaoru crossed her arms over her chest, glaring down at him. “Do you think that I enjoy having a human being – behaving that way – towards me? Do you think I’m that much of a – ”

She couldn’t finish the sentence. Her throat closed and her eyes stung, and she turned abruptly away from Yahiko to pick up the water bucket. She couldn’t blame him for thinking that she was a liar and a monster and hypocrite, not really.

“If that’s what you think, then go and live with Dr. Oguni,” she said dully. It was an unfair thing to say; she knew that as soon as she said it. It wasn’t Yahiko’s fault. She knew that. But she couldn’t bear to be his punching bag this time, not in this, when his blows actually hurt. It said nothing good or kind about her that she could accept what she was doing.

She started to walk away.

A small hand grabbed her sleeve.

“That’s not what I think.” Yahiko was glaring up at her, determined.

“Then what do you think, Yahiko?” she demanded. But she didn’t pull away.

“That…” He swallowed hard. “That I don’t know what to do.”
Kaoru knew her student. She knew what that cost him; and even if she hadn’t known him, in all his stubborn pride, she would have been able to tell from the fear and anger in his eyes. Just like hers, she had to imagine.

“Well, I don’t either,” she said, more gently. She was the elder, she was the teacher, she had to be patient. It was important to remember that. “But I trust Megumi. Don’t you?”

“…yeah.”

He let go of her sleeve. Kaoru sighed.

“Truce?”

“Truce,” Yahiko agreed. And then, quite unprompted, he took the water bucket from her and headed for the house.

“Come on, Ugly, I’m starving.”

~*~

Kenshin was crouched in front of the fire under the stove, feeding it carefully. His eyes were fixed on the flames, watching them grow and dance as though they were some great mystery of the universe.

“How’s the fire going?” she said briskly.

“The fire is ready, mistress,” he said, taking a step backwards while still low to the ground, and imbuing what should have been awkward movement with effortless grace.

“Great. Thank you, Kenshin. Yahiko, just put the bucket down here, by the stove. Show Kenshin where we keep the miso and the rice, okay?”

Kaoru turned to the stove, hoisting the bucket up and pouring some of the well water into two pots. The rest she kept to clean the rice with before it was cooked. Behind her, she heard cupboards opening and Yahiko talking quietly to Kenshin.

“Yahiko, do you remember how to make miso?”

“Better then you,” he retorted, and that bratty tone was back. She smiled a little.

“Okay then, master chef, you and Kenshin get started on that. I’ll deal with the fish and the rice.”

“Try not to turn it into charcoal this time.”

“You’re gonna regret saying that in an hour or so,” Kaoru sing-songed, turning to face them both and twirling the ladle in her hand. “I’ve been thinking it’s time you had a little hand-to-hand training, and this morning seems like the perfect time to start.”

“I thought I was supposed to learn swords.”

“The philosophy of the kamiya kasshin style is to protect yourself and those around you,” she said, a bit smug. “You can’t afford to be helpless just because you don’t have a weapon.”

“Just ‘cause you’re stupid enough to get caught without one doesn’t mean I’ll be.” He crossed his arms. “Ugly.”
And that, more than anything else, assured her that things were back to normal between them. Without missing a beat, she swept up a dried bean from the basket on the table and flicked it at him. It hit square in the middle of his forehead and he clasped his hand over the bump.

“That hurt!”

“Manners, brat.”

“Yeah, yeah…”

She caught a glimpse of Kenshin watching them as he carefully strained rice through the leftover water. His eyes were wide; not frightened but – as though he was remembering something that he didn’t quite want to. Then his gaze flicked towards her and his face was impassive again.

Rice was easy; all she had to do was put it in the pot and hope for the best. It was the fish that Kaoru was worried about. Despite her best efforts, she couldn’t keep the heat even and they ended up scorched on one side and slightly undercooked on the other. Furthermore, she’d oversalted them. She tried to fix it by scraping the salt off and adding a little extra citrus, but that only made them salty and sour. At that point she gave up.

“How’s the miso going?” she asked, hoping that Yahiko had had better luck.

Yahiko was standing to one side of the stove, watching as Kenshin carefully stirred the miso. The rice was boiling softly, not overflowing as it generally did when she cooked it, and the smell wafting from the soup pot was delicate and savory instead of spicy or burnt. Or both.

“…that smells amazing,” she said, surprised. “Yahiko, have you been taking lessons from Tsubame?”

He shook his head. “Nuh-uh. Kenshin’s a really good cook.”

“Kenshin?” He looked up when she said his name, expressionless eyes fixed on her with the calm focus of a well-trained dog. She suppressed a shudder.

“Yes, mistress?”

“Are you – do you already know how to cook?”

“A little, mistress.”

“How much is a little?”

His shoulders stiffened a little. “This worthless one is capable of cooking most common dishes, mistress.”

The sheer weirdness of the situation overtook her and she had to stifle a hysterical giggle. It could have been a normal conversation – it was such a normal thing for two new acquaintances to discuss as they cooked together for the first time – except there was nothing even remotely normal about it.

“That’s good to know,” she said finally. “It’ll definitely be useful.”

Kaoru turned and started dishing up breakfast. Three trays; she wasn’t sure whether Kenshin should eat in the dining room or the kitchen. The table, she supposed, was right out. Too close to equality. Too close to being human.

Her lips twisted into a bitter grin, the same one she’d seen on Megumi too many times. She
wondered, vaguely, if she’d ever be able to really smile again.

In the end, she simply gave him his tray and took her own, trying to act as though she expected him to know what to do. He went and knelt in a corner of the kitchen, near the entrance to the dining room. He didn’t hesitate, as he had before, as though she was blocking off all his exits and he knew that anything he did would lead, inevitably, to pain.

She and Yahiko chatted lightly as they ate, about his job at the Akabeko, about Tsubame and Tae and swordsmanship. When they were done, she sent him to the training hall to warm up and gathered up the dishes. Kenshin had already washed his and set them out to dry. He was kneeling in the same spot by the dining room as she entered the kitchen, still as stone. Kaoru set the dishes in the sink and walked over to him.

“Kenshin?” Her stomach lurched. She swallowed down bile.

“Yes, mistress?”

“About your.” Her throat was tight, and she could barely speak the words. “About your duties.”

That subtle straightening, again. Kaoru cleared her throat, static filling her head as it had the night before, when she’d laid her claim on him like he was a dog or a plot of land.

*Say it. Just say it. Be as stone.*

“I understand that you were a – guard, previously.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“Well, that’s going to be one of your jobs here.” It was something familiar, she’d reasoned as she’d stared at her ceiling last night. That was how she’d done it with Yahiko, and with the stray animals she sometimes took in: let them have things that they were used to, even if those things were strange. The only difference here was in the degree.

That, and the way her heart quailed in horror at thinking of it that way. A stray dog’s need for an easy exit; a wounded cat’s urge to hide; Yahiko’s bad mouth and the food-hoarding he’d done for *months* after she’d taken him in – those were all normal things, natural things, instinct designed to protect the small, frightened life inside those terribly fragile bodies. This… Kenshin had been *trained* to this. This was not who he was. This wasn’t about survival.

“I don’t want you to kill anyone, though,” she continued. “Which is why I didn’t give you a steel blade. I don’t use a steel sword, and neither does Yahiko – the Kamiya Kasshin style is the sword that *protects* life. If you have to hurt someone, fine, but don’t kill anyone – and try not to cripple them if you can possibly avoid it.”

He seemed to tilt his head slightly. Or maybe it was only a trick of the light slanting in, shimmering in his auburn hair.

Kaoru took a deep breath.

“Yahiko and I train together in the morning. After lunch, he has a part-time job, and I either go to market or to teach at another school. When I’m gone, I want you to watch over the place. Sano and Megumi – you remember them?”

“Yes, mistress.”
She went on. “They can come in whenever they want, and it’s alright if they bring someone with them. And of course Yahiko lives here, as you know, so he can come and go as he pleases. Anyone else, just tell them that I’m not home, and take a message if they have one. You can tell them where I’ve gone, if they say it’s important. When I’m home…”

This was the part she felt most ashamed of. But she hadn’t lied to that awful grocery vendor, earlier: she desperately needed the help, and Megumi had said that a slave knew their only protection was their utility. That the more she could give him to do, the safer he would feel. It wasn’t as though she was asking for anything she didn’t normally ask of her lodgers – except that he couldn’t refuse, and that was all the difference in the world.

“When I’m home, I want you to help me take care of the house. It’s a little too big for me to look after by myself – we’re always behind in the laundry and cleaning, and the garden is a mess. Yahiko tries, but he’s… well, he’s not very good at it. And last –”

She colored a bit.

“You’re a better cook than me and Yahiko both,” she said bluntly. “So I’d like you to take over meals, for the time being. Is that – I mean, do you understand?”

Because, of course, he couldn’t say if it was alright or not.

He looked up at her for another one of those suspended moments, and her heart ached. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t _fair_.

It was the way things were.

That wasn’t an excuse.

But what else could she _do_?

“This worthless one understands, mistress."

“Good,” she said, rubbing her hands together briskly and feeling as if she would never be clean again. “Let’s get these dishes washed, then, and I’ll help you start on the laundry.”

~*~

Sano woke up with his face in a gutter, a splitting headache, and the taste of cheap sake fermenting in his mouth.

Mind you, it was hardly the first time.

He hauled himself up and sat morosely at the edge of the street, wiping his face with his sleeve. Since his sleeve was about as filthy as his face, this really only had the effect of transferring dirt from sleeve to face and vice versa, to broaden its horizons and allow it the chance to make new friends. Eventually he staggered to his feet and set off in the general direction of not-here, doing his best to avoid remembering why he had spent his first night home drinking and looking for a fight.

By the feel of his ribs, he’d found one. He should probably get that looked at.

*Where am I, anyway?*

Not far from the clinic. Might be a good idea to go get patched up before he went home to face the music. The angry, angry music. That Kaoru would play. On his skull.
So he lurched for the clinic, and hoped that Megumi would be out.

She wasn’t.

Megumi took one look at him as he stumbled into the waiting room and grabbed his elbow, yanking him into a side room.

“You are a disgrace,” she hissed, shoving hard against his chest. He went down without a fight. “How dare you. You inconsiderate, selfish –”

“Hey, hey!” he protested, raising his hands. “What the hell? What’d I do?”

Megumi always gave him shit when he went out on a bender, but this wasn’t that. This was rage, real and pure and venomous, and it kind of made him want to either run screaming or pull her down on top of him and kiss her senseless. Except not that last one, not ever, because that would be the worst idea he’d ever had in a lifetime of terrible fucking ideas. He knew what she’d been through, dammit.

Didn’t stop him wanting to, though.

“…are you listening to me?” She crossed her arms over her chest and glowered down at him.

“Um…” he licked his lips, cringing. “…no?”

For a moment it looked as if she might explode; then, suddenly, all the fight went out of her.

“Oh, why do I bother?” she muttered. “Wait here. I’ll see to you later. That’s what you want, isn’t it? To avoid going back to Kamiya’s?”

“Avoid – ? Now, hold on!” Okay, so it was true, but she wasn’t supposed to know that. “I ain’t avoidin’ anything!”

“Yes, you are. But I can’t blame you for it; you’re only a self-centered, chicken-headed manchild, after all.”

“Oi!” He shot up onto his feet at that. “You wake up on the wrong side of the bed or somethin’?”

“I woke up fully aware that Kamiya has just agreed to carry a greater burden than any of us had the right to ask of her. You woke up drunk in a gutter. And she woke up alone. But again – given what you are, I shouldn’t expect too much from you. And Kamiya’s strong; she’ll get by without your support.”

Sano’s jaw dropped. Megumi raised her chin and glared at him, and he felt far too naked under her relentless gaze. His head hurt; his heart hurt; he thought of Kaoru waking that morning and knowing what she had just done, what she had become – a slave owner – and having to face that knowledge completely alone.

He sat back down again, heavily.

“Aw, fuck. I’m an asshole.” He buried his head in his hands.

“We’ve all noticed, Sagara.” Megumi turned to leave. “Sit there and ponder it for a while, I have patients to see. When you’re properly steeped, we’ll all go over to the dojo – you, I, Dr. Oguni and the girls. She needs to know that she’s not alone.”

“Hey, Fox,” Sano lay back down in an effort to ease the throbbing in his head. He studied the
ceiling, examining the shadows cast by the late-morning night for patterns. “You’re takin’ Kaoru’s side pretty strongly here. What gives?”

There was a long pause, and he thought for a moment that she had just walked away. It would be like her.

“That girl,” Megumi said finally, “has taken one of my sins on her back. Since I couldn’t stop her, the least I can do is give her my full support.”

“Your sins…?” He wanted to look at her but knew that he shouldn’t. Charging her head-on was the surest way to make her shy and run. “I thought the guy was long gone by the time you got involved.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Then what do y’mean?”

She sighed. “It’s no concern of yours. But I owe her, now.”

“If you say so…” He closed his eyes. “I need t’tell you what Aoshi’s report said. And the news from the big man himself.”

“Later. In fact…” He heard her sigh again. “While you’re contemplating your own idiocy, you should contemplate this, too: it’s past time you brought Kamiya in on things. I know you have the discretion to add members, and she shouldn’t be fumbling blind through this. Furthermore… that man… he’s a powerful symbol, Sagara.”

“I know.” He knew too damn well. He knew it so well that he’d needed about two jugs of sake to drown the knowledge out. “I just… like you said. I keep usin’ her. I don’t wanna.”

“Then stop. Tell her what she needs to know, so that she can choose.”

It was his turn to sigh, deep and aching, from somewhere hollow that hadn’t existed until he’d seen that – man, Kanryu’s manslayer – kneeling on Kaoru’s spare futon. Distorting the one place that all of the sickness had never managed to touch. Because he’d kept it that way. Because he’d used her, and kept her ignorant, so that he could keep using her. Not just for the Cause, but for himself, so that he would have one place left that was clean…

“Yeah,” he said. Megumi left, closing the door behind her.

~*~

Today had been a private-lesson day. Kaoru still had a few of those, little girls and young ladies whose parents wanted them to learn the basics of self-defense but didn’t want them exposed to the rough-and-tumble male world of martial arts. There were some families that still believed a samurai woman had a duty to learn how to physically defend her home and person, although it had become somewhat unfashionable with the influx of Western customs.

They were her students, and she was grateful for it, but they weren’t really students of her style. Samurai wives and daughters traditionally used glaives and daggers, not swords. Kamiya Kasshin encompassed several weapons beside the sword, of course – you can’t always choose the tools available – but it was a sword style at heart. And none of the girls wanted to learn the sword, not even bright-eyed little Akane who loved weaponswork so.

Swords are for boys, she’d explained solemnly, eyeing Kaoru under her mop of tangled bangs. Boys
don’t like it when you’re good at their things. And if boys don’t like you, you’ll never get married.

That had hurt far more than Akane had intended, and Kaoru had dropped the subject.

The fact still remained, though: currently, the Kamiya Kasshin style had only one disciple and one assistant master. And the private lessons, however well they paid, only rubbed her nose in her failure to rebuild her father’s school. If only he’d successfully promoted her to master before…

As if that would have helped. If she had been born a man, it wouldn’t matter that her father had passed on before elevating her. But since she had been born a woman, she could have been an eighth-rank master for ten years when the style passed to her and it still wouldn’t count for anything.

Kaoru kicked a rock into the river and felt a little bit better. Then she sighed heavily and threw herself down on the riverbank, wrapping her arms around her knees. The water rushed past, fierce with snowmelt and last night’s rain. Sticks bobbed and whirled around patches of dancing foam. She picked up another stone and tossed it in, watching it sink without making even a single ripple.

Like her father’s school.

…which she was not going to rebuild if she sat around feeling sorry for herself.

And usually that thought was enough to get her on her feet again. Today, though…

She tilted her head up to the sky. It had been clear and bright today, but clouds were gathering on the horizon. It would rain again by nightfall, or earlier. The light was already changing.

Sano hadn’t come home last night.

He always spent his first night back at home, catching up. Always. She had been doing her best all day not to think about what his staying away might mean, and it had worked because there was so much else to do and there was always a chance he’d come slinking in like a scolded cat later on in the morning. There was always a chance that he’d been trying for considerate, in that backhanded way of his. Trying not to make a nuisance of himself at a difficult time.

But if that were the case, he’d have been home in the morning. And now it was midafternoon.

The wind was picking up. It was blowing the clouds towards the city; rain before nightfall was now virtually certain if the breeze didn’t die down. It had been a dry winter, and the plants needed it. And she’d always liked the rain, liked the sound of it playing on the roof and the clean smell rising from the soil in the aftermath. Even the ozone-laced potential of a thunderstorm. She had spent every storm of her life kneeling wide-eyed on the porch, watching the lightning dance. She’d never feared them. In fact, her father had been hard-pressed to keep her from running out and dancing in them.

Maybe a storm would help her feel clean again.

It had been easier when Kenshin was injured and cringing. That, at least, she understood: pain and fear and giving a wounded creature space to nurse its wounds. Eventually they would calm down and heal and understand that they were safe. Except that he didn’t – or if he did, she couldn’t see that he did. He had done everything asked of him without question or protest, and with the same expressionless face. If not for those occasional flickers, always of fear or confusion, she would think he wasn’t human at all.

Kaoru closed her eyes and shivered in the crisp spring air. Her skin was going numb.
Then she jumped abruptly to her feet and stomped briskly, working some heat back into her limbs.

“Cheer up, Kaoru!” she said aloud. “You’re committed now, so you have to make the best of it!”

And it would have sounded convincing if her voice hadn’t broken halfway through.

~*~

Kenshin met her at the gate, blank-faced and submissive. He trailed her as she put her equipment away in the dojo, always two steps behind and one to the left, and would have followed her into her room if she hadn’t told him firmly to stay in the hall. So he settled himself just outside her door, instead, and she changed as quickly and bashfully as if he had actually been in the room with her.

Her eyes strayed to the space she’d set up for him behind a screen, catty-cornered to her own futon and close to the door. Megumi’s words echoed. A beloved pet...

Her palms stung. She looked at them, surprised, and saw blood welling up in eight crescent cuts. Her fingernails were faintly red.

“Mistress,” Kenshin said flatly, from beyond the door. Kaoru tried for a smile, failed, and forced a neutral expression.

“Yes, Kenshin?”

“There are guests coming.”

The gate bell rang. Not the dojo entrance, but the main gate. She smoothed her hands down over her clothing and checked her hair one last time before she went to see who it was. Kenshin followed her, bound by an invisible leash.

Her steps slowed as she reached the gate, suddenly uncertain. How would she explain? Kenshin – was what he was, there was no hiding it, and almost everyone she knew had abolitionist sympathies. She didn’t think she could stand to see their faces when they realized. Not right now.

Maybe she should pretend she wasn’t home.

“Hey, little lady! You home?”

“…Sano?”

Her heart swelled, quite suddenly, and she hurried the rest of the way to the gate. Kenshin got there first and opened it for her, one hand resting lightly on his wooden sword. It was Sano – and Megumi, and Dr. Gensai, and Ayame and Suzume. Her adopted brother met her eyes briefly, then looked quickly away. A faint wash of color reddened his face.

“Sorry I didn’t come home last night, missy,” he mumbled. “Got a little caught up.”

And she should have been angry with him; she wanted to be. But in that particular moment, all she could be was inexpressibly glad that he didn’t hate her.

“It’s alright,” she said simply. “Things have been strange.”

He started to say something, but Megumi elbowed him.

“Big sister, big sister!” The girls ran up and hugged her around the legs, giggling. She bent down to ruffle their hair.
“Welcome, everyone,” Kaoru said. “I’m so glad to see you – um…” She couldn’t help glancing over at Kenshin. “As you can see, we have a new addition to the household…”

Dr. Gensai smiled reassuringly. “Megumi explained the situation to me, Kaoru, don’t worry. I understand perfectly.”

“…you do?”

“Oh, yes. There’s virtue in showing kindness to strangers, after all, whatever form that kindness may take.”

“…I see.” She didn’t see, actually, but Dr. Gensai had his cryptic-zen-master face on, and she wasn’t going to get more than koans out of him for now.

Ayame and Suzume were eyeing Kenshin now, curious and shy. He stayed at his self-appointed place behind Kaoru’s left shoulder.

“Big sister?” Ayame tugged on her sleeve. “Will big brother play with us?”

“Um…”

Megumi shook her head, once.

“Maybe later, okay?” Kaoru told them. They nodded, and Kaoru couldn’t help glancing at Kenshin, again. His mouth was set in the same thin line as always, but his eyes… she couldn’t see his eyes. He’d inclined his head ever-so-slightly and his bangs had fallen over his face. What on earth could that mean?

“We thought we’d come over for dinner, to catch up. I’m sure that Sano’s brought all kinds of exciting news from Kyoto,” Dr. Gensai went on to say, cheerfully oblivious to the undercurrents. “If that’s not too much of an imposition, of course.”

“Oh – oh no, of course not!” Kaoru said, rallying. She even managed a shaky smile. “We’d love to have you stay. Yahiko should be back soon, if you don’t mind waiting a little while…?”

“Not at all,” Dr. Gensai said, stepping over the threshold. “Ayame, Suzume, come along now. Kaoru, dear, I think Dr. Takani and Sano had some things they wanted to discuss with you, so if you don’t mind, that sunny spot on your porch is calling my name.”

“Go right ahead, Doctor,” Kaoru said, relaxing a little. “We’ll be right there.”

Kaoru watched as the doctor and his granddaughters vanished around the side of the house. Then she turned back to Sano and Megumi.

“What did you want to talk about?”

“Just some stuff.” Sano rubbed the back of his neck. “But, like… just us, you know?” And he nodded towards Kenshin.

“Oh.” Kaoru stepped away from Kenshin. “Kenshin, would you go and get started on dinner?”

He nodded, a little stiffly.

“…yes, mistress.”

But she’d heard the catch in his voice before he responded, knew immediately that she’d done
something wrong, and looked helplessly at Megumi. Megumi held out a basket.

“Here, Kaoru. We stopped by the market on the way here and picked up some mackerel. Do you think you can do anything with it?”

“Oh, how kind.” She started to take the basket, confused; once again, Kenshin beat her to it. Megumi gave Kaoru a meaningful look, and that was when Kaoru figured it out. Orders. He needs to know what to make.

“Kenshin, you can prepare this, right?”

“This worthless one is capable, mistress,” he murmured. His grip on the basket was very tight.

“Alright, then!” Kaoru said, forcing cheer into her voice. “I’m sure you’ll do a great job,” she went on, and she saw Megumi frantically mouthing no, no out of the corner of her eye. But she was babbling now, and couldn’t seem to stop herself. “I’m really looking forward to it, okay? Do your best!”

He bowed to them all and left, and she was sure she wasn’t imagining the extra tension in his gait. Behind her, Megumi sighed.

“Well, that’s done it. You’d better love whatever he comes up with, Kamiya, or else he’ll expect to be punished.”

Kaoru whirled around, blood draining from her face. Megumi smirked at her, eyes alight with that strange, bitter humor.

“What?”

“Think about what you just told him,” Megumi said simply. “And remember what he is.”

Kaoru stared at her for a moment, running over what she’d said. She’d meant it to be encouraging. I’m looking forward to it, do your best, I’m sure it’ll be great…

…and the first day he’d been here, when she’d asked if he could sit up, and he’d taken it to mean that he must sit up…

Kaoru buried her face in her hands and groaned.

“Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes.” Megumi was merciless, crossing her arms and staring down at Kaoru. “You have to be more self-aware, Kamiya.”

“I’m sorry…” Her throat tightened.

“Don’t apologize, just do better.” She tossed her hair. “Anyway, Sagara has something to say to you.”

Sano was watching them both with a look that hung halfway between outrage and confusion. He cleared his throat when Megumi cued him in, scratching again at his neck.

“Yeah, so, missy…” He took a deep breath. “Remember how yesterday I asked how involved d’you wanna be, and all that?”

Kaoru nodded.
“Well, it seems t’me that y’had a point. About you already being pretty dam involved, an’ that means I’ve been lettin’ you down, y’know? So…” He blew out air. “Figure it’s time you got the proper briefing. As a member of the team. If you want.”

And a day ago, she would have said yes without thinking. A day ago, so many things had still been theoretical: a day ago, she had still been convinced that there was some way to make things… not what they were. That an action taken with good intent could somehow avoid its natural consequence.

That was before she’d stood in front of a thinking, feeling human being and claimed him. Placed her mark on him, as if he were property – no. He was property. Legally, socially, he was as much her possession as her home and clothing. She could do anything – beat him, starve him, maim and murder him – and he had no recourse. She held his entire being in her hands: her word was his gospel and his law, even when she didn’t intend it to be.

All she had wanted was to be kind.

If she chose this, there would be a price.

This I choose, she thought vaguely, half-remembered words her father had spoken long and long ago. A kind of oath. If there is a price, I choose to pay. Where this takes me, I choose to go. I choose. This I choose to do.

She had never really understood that passage in her father’s teachings until now.

Kaoru straightened her shoulders.

“Let’s go into the sitting room and talk.”

~*~

After dinner, as everyone was settling onto the porch, Ayame stood in front of Kaoru and scuffed at the ground.

“Big sister? Can big brother play with us now?”

Kaoru glanced backwards, first at Megumi – who did not shake her head this time but watched Kaoru carefully, like an unusual specimen under her magnifying lens – and then at Kenshin, standing always nearby with his hand resting on his wooden sword. He hid his eyes again, but not quite fast enough. And there was something there, in that moment before his bangs came forward to shield him. Something like what had been there that morning as she and Yahiko squabbled: not fear or confusion or dread. A look of remembrance.

She made a decision.

“Alright,” she said, sitting down on the edge of the porch. “But Kenshin was very badly hurt a little while ago, you understand? He’s still recovering, so don’t wear him out. Kenshin?”

“Mistress.”

“Would you play with the girls for a little while?”

“…as you wish. Mistress.”

And that was different. She shot Megumi a triumphant look; the doctor raised a single cynical
eyebrow in return. Kenshin stepped off the porch. Ayame took one of his hands, Suzume grabbed the other, and the two of them led him off to play.

“Sano?” Kaoru asked as he sauntered out and leaned against a pillar. “Do we have anything else to talk about?

They had talked until Yahiko came home; then they’d talked more, until Kenshin informed them blankly that dinner was ready. Sano had confirmed that he was the head of the Edo cell, which belonged to a resistance movement hailing from a province he couldn’t name, except that it wasn’t Kanto. Although the government tended to treat them as one and the same, there were several different movements hailing from different provinces, and for a long time they hadn’t bothered to coordinate their efforts. That was changing, now. The head of Sano’s group – sorry, Missy, can’t tell you his name. You know why – was reaching out to the others, trying to unite them so that they could come out of the shadows.

The plan, in short, was this: armed, open rebellion. Kaoru had stilled and gone very pale, and Sano had glanced helplessly at Megumi.

*There will be war,* Megumi had said, far too calmly. *It’s unavoidable. However, whether it’s long and bloody or relatively short… that’s for us to determine, by the actions that we take now.*

And she’d laid the part that the Edo cell played in that plan, which was all any of them needed to know.

Over the past year or so, the cell had been smuggling arms and allies into Edo. Meanwhile, their leader was working to form an alliance with the other provinces. Once they were ready, and all the various groups stood united, the Edo cell would fire the opening shot by attacking Kanryu, and hopefully take one of the major players at least partially off the board right as the war began. The alliance that Sano’s superior (and god, that was a weird thought) needed, however, had suffered a setback, which had resulted in a delay.

*But…* she’d asked, bewildered by the sheer scope of it. *Megumi… I thought you were…*

*I am.* Megumi had folded her hands in her lap. *Kanryu… for the moment, he doesn’t care what I do. Having escaped him, I’m not presently worth the resources required to drag me back. When I became involved in the cell last year, the belief was that we would be moving very shortly, but the delay…*

She had been very pale. Kaoru had ventured another question, quiet and almost afraid to ask.

*…How long?*

*I have a year,* Megumi had said, face still and certain as the grave, full of a cold fire that Kaoru had never seen before. *However, a year in politics is a very long time.*

There had been more after that, mostly a fuller account of the political maneuverings underlying the situation: of the alliance that had stumbled at the last moment and resulted in the current problem, of overseas support and the need to attack all of Kanryu’s estates simultaneously, and the importance of taking out his primary residence in Edo above all.

*So, Sagara the rooster here actually has a fairly important job,* Megumi had commented dryly. *Imagine my surprise when I found out.*

And Sano had protested that he was a perfectly reliable guy, thank you, at least when it was something that mattered. Megumi had scoffed and said something witty and derogatory, and they
had gone back and forth and Kaoru had laughed until she wanted to cry because nothing and everything had changed.

But she hadn’t cried, because they had come to her as an adult and trusted her with an adult’s secrets. And because she was a revolutionary now: a traitor plotting to overthrow the government by force. It didn’t matter what she might or might not be called upon to do. She knew, and had no plans to tell. That would be enough to condemn her.

Second thoughts, Kamiya? Megumi had asked her dryly, seeing her eyes glisten.

She’d glared back, setting her jaw like iron. I’ve made my choice.

And Megumi had examined her nails carefully, raising one delicate eyebrow.

“Nah,” Sano said, drawing Kaoru back to the present. “I figure we about covered things.”

Dr. Gensai puttered out, holding a tray of sake cups and a few flasks.

“I knew that I remembered to put a jug in that basket before we left the clinic,” he said triumphantly. “Let’s have a drink, then, to celebrate another successful induction!”

Kaoru blinked.

“Dr. Gensai, you…?”

“Oh, of course,” he said, pouring Megumi a cup. “Why do you think I took in our Dr. Takani?”

For the first time, Sano poured Kaoru a cup of sake without prompting. She supposed that made her an adult now; not the act of drinking, but the respect inherent in the gesture. She took it from him and he ruffled her hair.

“Go easy on that now, missy. You make a mean drunk, if I remember right.”

Still his little sister, after all. Just older, now. She smiled and took a sip, and the knot in her gut started to ease.

The girls’ laughter drifted over from where they were playing. Kaoru watched them engage Kenshin in some sort of deceptively simple-looking game involving an inflatable ball and a numbered grid drawn in the dirt. He played with them with the same emotionless perfection that he did everything else.

She could see why Sano had been so frightened; she was a little unnerved herself, to think that he might slaughter men and cook breakfast and play with children with the same unblinking efficiency. As though each action carried an equal weight.

But she believed in what she had seen in his strange eyes: those few flashes of bewildered humanity she had startled from him.

Kenshin and the girls were playing over by the pond, in the shadow of the sole cherry tree. There were still clouds on the horizon, but the wind had died down in the past few hours and it looked like the rain, if it came, would come in the night or the early morning. For now the sky was still the clear, pale blue of early spring, and the air was crisp with a hint of impending storm. She took a deep breath and held it in her lungs.

“Oi! Ugly!” Yahiko bounced a rice cracker off her head. “Quit woolgathering, willya? I asked
you a question!”

If she was ever caught, Yahiko might be implicated as well…

Kaoru closed her eyes for a moment, a sudden pain stabbing into her heart. She hadn’t even considered that. Is that how it was for Sano, too?

“What is it, Yahiko?” She plastered a smile on her face, determined not to let it drop for the rest of the evening. He eyed her warily.

“Hey, are you feelin’ all right?”

“I’m fine.” She reached over and patted his hand. “It’s just been a really long day. What was your question?”

“I asked if Kenshin’s gonna be doing the cooking from now on.”

She glanced reflexively at Kenshin, and hoped she wasn’t imagining that he was holding himself a little less tightly.

“That’s the plan,” she said, trying to inject some cheer into her voice. “It’s a lot easier than the two of us fighting it out every morning, don’t you think?”

“It wouldn’t be such a problem if you weren’t such a lousy cook.”

“Oh, because you do such a great job?” Despite everything that had happened, irritation flared in her. She nearly laughed: at least everything hadn’t changed. “Who was it that almost scorched a hole in my grandmother’s best frying pan?”

“That was one time!” he protested. “It doesn’t count! At least I don’t undercook the rice!”

“No, you turn it into rice pudding.”

Yahiko drew in breath for a retort, couldn’t think of anything, and let it all out with a slow, blistering glare.

“…ugly,” he muttered, and crossed his arms with true samurai hauteur, refusing to look at her.

Sano cracked up. Megumi hid a smile behind her hand, and Dr. Gensai shook his head.

“Such energy!” he said. “You two really have a wonderful relationship.”

“That’s one word for it,” Sano commented, laying back on one elbow. He nudged Megumi and held out his empty cup. “Hey, Fox, fill me up?”

“After the state you were in this morning? Why should I encourage your delinquency, Sagara?”

“I’ve only had one cup, that’s nothin’ to a guy like me!”

They started sniping at each other with an easy camaraderie; Dr. Gensai tried to mediate with little success while Yahiko egged them on indiscriminately from the sidelines. Eventually Sano told him to keep his undergrown beak out of it. Yahiko tackled his hero in retaliation for implying that he was less than a full-grown man. The two of them wrestled their way off the porch and scuffled in the dirt, to Megumi’s genuine amusement and poorly-feigned disgust. The girls kept playing with Kenshin. Kaoru’s smile never faded.
The storm clouds lingered on the edges of the bright, achingly blue sky.

~*~

Before they went home, Megumi pulled Kaoru aside and warned her, again. Kenshin’s not Yahiko. You can’t expect too much from him.

And Kaoru had stared up at her, defiant for no reason other than her own instincts screaming out at her and crossed her arms. Maybe you shouldn’t expect so little.

Megumi had raised an eyebrow at her, again, and tossed her long black hair. But Kaoru could read her a little better now, and knew that it meant she was conceding the point. We’ll see.

Ayame and Suzume had nearly wailed themselves hoarse when Dr. Gensai told them it was time to go. Only a promise that they could come back and play another time had silenced them; that, and Sano’s offer of shoulder rides all the way home. Kaoru walked them to the gate, Kenshin trailing behind her as closely as her own shadow.

“Take care!” she said, waving goodbye. “Sano, I’m leaving the gate unlocked, so remember to lock it when you get back in, okay?”

“Got it, missy,” he said, saluting. “I’ll be back as soon as I see this lot home.”

Normally, he wouldn’t bother to reassure her. But these weren’t normal times. Kaoru sighed heavily and closed the gate.

“…Mistress?” Kenshin’s eyes were hidden again. His thumb brushed over the hilt of his sword.

“It’s nothing. Just a long day.”

Yahiko was sprawled on the porch, hands tucked behind his head. He’d eventually badgered his way into a few cups of sake and was well past tipsy – not that he cared. She nudged him with her foot.

“If you sleep out here, you’ll catch a cold.”

He raised his head and stared up at her with a muzzy dignity. “Yahiko Myojin is not sleeping. I’m merely watching the stars.”

“Oh, is that so?” She bit back a smile. “Well, don’t watch the stars too long. You don’t want to be tired for practice in the morning, do you?”

“It takes more than a few measly drinks to knock out a samurai of Edo.” He sat up and promptly knocked his shoulder into a pillar. “I could drink a hundred jars and still be ready to go in the morning.”

“I’m sure. But why don’t you go to your room anyway? Otherwise Sano might step on you in the dark when he gets back.”

“That’s true.” He stumbled to his feet, wavered for a moment, and then found his balance. “Um. Kaoru?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry about this morning.”
She blinked back a sudden surge of tears, and knew her shoulders had trembled for a moment. In all the time he’d been with her, Yahiko had never once told her that he was sorry, for anything. He’d apologized in other ways, with actions and decisions, but he’d never said the words. He’d always been too scared to show her that much underbelly.

It took her a moment to compose herself enough to speak clearly around the lump in her throat. She would not to shame his courage.

“It’s already forgotten, Yahiko.”

“’kay. G’night, Ugly.”

“Sleep well, brat.”

He stumbled off to bed, yawning.

Kaoru continued to her own room, pulse pounding hard in her ears. Kenshin followed behind her, quiet as a cat, and despite her best efforts she felt a hot blush creeping up her face. Of all the benightedly childish things – given the circumstances – it wasn’t as if he was her lover!

But he was still a man. And a part of her reasoned, quietly, that if she thought otherwise – if she decided that it didn’t matter because of his condition – that was only a semantic quibble away from saying that it didn’t matter because he was only a slave, and slaves aren’t people.

So she would just have to be embarrassed.

As she entered her room, she pointed to the pile of bedding behind the screen.

“You’ll sleep there. But first I need to change, so stay out here until I let you in.”

Kenshin took an obedient step backwards, turned, and knelt on the floor before her room in one graceful motion. As he did so, she got a good look at his ponytail for the first time and noticed that his hair was badly tangled. It would mat up soon, if it wasn’t brushed. Had he not taken care of it?

Then it occurred to her: there was no hairbrush in the bathhouse, and she hadn’t told him to find and use one.

Kaoru smacked herself on the forehead, sheer annoyance cutting through the fog of embarrassment and angst. You have to be more self-aware, Kamiya. Thank you, Megumi, for the understatement of the year.

She closed the door, firmly, and changed in record time. Then she picked up her hairbrush and looked at it for a long moment.

You have to learn to speak his language.

Rules, obedience, punishment, reward.

“Kenshin,” she called softly. “You can come in now.”

Kenshin ghosted in and closed the door behind him, eyes cast carefully down. As they always were.

“Come here.”

He saw the brush in her hand and his shoulders tensed, but he came and knelt before her with that heart-stopping grace nonetheless. His fingertips brushed the floor as he bowed, and there was
something conciliatory in the lines of his body. Like he expected… something. Something unpleasant.

"Turn around, please."

She saw him swallow, hard, and had to clench her fist hard around the brush’s handle. He turned, bracing himself for – whatever it was he had been taught to expect.

Kaoru took a deep breath and drew the tie out of his hair. He started, pulling away, and she stopped.

"I'm sorry," she said, hardly daring to breath as he caught himself and forced his head back to where it had been, frozen like a rabbit in a hawk’s gaze. "Did I pull your hair?"

"...no, Mistress," he said quietly, and he was almost shaking.

"Good," she said firmly, but took a hank of his hair in her hand before she began to brush, to make sure that she wouldn't.

His hair was fine and soft, like silk strands against her fingers, and she worked gently at the knots and snarls. It was slow going at first, and every time she thought she’d gotten them all, she tried to run the brush all the way through and found more. But eventually they were all untangled and she was sliding the bristles easily through his hair, in an almost meditative rhythm.

Kenshin had gone as still as the birds at her feeder did when she stepped outside each morning.

She found herself wondering if anyone had ever done this for him before, and wishing that they hadn’t. That he could have at least one thing that wasn’t associated with horror. Just one clean thing.

*If I can do nothing else, let me give him one clean thing.*

"There," she said finally, setting aside the brush and running her fingers fully through his hair, top to bottom, and then pulling it back in a quick, loose braid that sat at the nape of his neck. His hair was almost as long as hers, and this would keep it from tangling overnight.

He turned to face her automatically. The new hairstyle framed his face differently, softened the lines and made him less fearsome.

“Thank you,” she said. “Dinner really was lovely. And Ayame and Suzume loved playing with you. You did very well with them.”

He bowed, acknowledging her praise. And fearing it.

“There’s a futon for you behind the screen,” she said, pointing towards it. “You’ll sleep in here, now. I – I’m told that’s custom.”

She said that for her own benefit, and for the sake of some distant, impossible future when he might be whole again, and remember. He bowed once more and went behind the screen. Kaoru clibed into her own bed and curled into a ball under the covers, listening to him breathe.

When she woke up the next morning he had already gone to cook breakfast. The bedding was untouched.
Yahiko glanced uneasily behind him as he walked to market with Kaoru. Kenshin was still there, two steps behind Kaoru and one to her left. No hint of emotion in his face, no flicker of thought in his eyes. He walked with an even gait, slowing down or speeding up as Kaoru did, and kept the exact same distance between them, always. Two steps behind her and one to her left.

Three weeks had passed since Kaoru had half-carried him home; two weeks since she'd taken title on him – a thought that still felt like ashes and bile – and this was Kenshin's first time out of the house. Kaoru claimed it was out of worry for his health, but Yahiko was certain it had more to do with shame.

\textit{And she should be ashamed}, he thought furiously, before guilt had time to stab into him. \textit{Just 'cause it's the least bad option doesn't mean it's right.}

He looked up at his teacher. She was pale, and her face was slightly drawn; there were shadows under her eyes. Then she noticed him watching and smiled a little too brightly.

"Isn't it a nice day, Yahiko?" she chirped. "Maybe we should go to the Akabeko for lunch?"

"Uh… yeah," he muttered, shame squirming in his stomach like a badly-digested meal. He knew that she knew what he knew, that good intentions were no excuse for what she had become, and he knew that she wasn't sleeping well. Hell, he'd have known it even if he didn't wake up almost every night to the sound of her pacing restlessly through the house and garden. She kept getting distracted, lately, staring off into space, and her throwing arm wasn't nearly as strong as it used to be. It was harder and harder to get a rise out of her.

And it would be great if he could blame Kenshin for it, but he couldn't because it wasn't his fault. It wasn't anyone's fault – no, that wasn't true, it was Kanryu's fault, but he might as well declare a vendetta on Mt. Fuji for all the good it would do him. At least he could walk to Fuji and kick a few rocks to get it out of his system. There was no chance of a branded street rat like him getting close enough to Kanryu's estate to even spit on the door.

If he was older, maybe. If he was \textit{stronger}.

"…maybe we shouldn't go to the Akabeko," Kaoru said, sighing. "We have to be more budget-conscious, now."

"Or maybe you shouldn't eat so much," he sneered, hoping – although he'd never admit it – that she'd smack him or start chasing him or \textit{something}. Something \textit{normal}.

Instead she ruffled his hair idly, pulling his head briefly against her side. Annoying and embarrassing, but still more of an embrace than anything else.

"Watch your mouth, brat," she said absently. "I'm still your teacher."

He pulled away, brushing his hair back into position, and didn't say the natural comeback – \textit{only because I feel sorry for you} – because he'd overheard her last night, when she'd lost her temper for a moment and Kenshin had cowered at her feet. Yahiko wasn't even sure what had set her off: he'd only just been coming into the dining room when he'd heard her voice raise, sharp and exasperated and sounding more like herself than she had in days. When he'd looked into the kitchen Kenshin had already been on his knees, face pressed against the dirt floor, and Kaoru had been standing in front of him with her arms tight across her chest as she was trying to hold something in.
When he'd gone to bug her to get out of the bath, he'd heard her crying and decided to just go without for the evening.

"You're probably right," he groused. "Maybe I should be working instead of eating."

"Isn't it your day off?"

"Well, yeah, but it's not like I've got anything better to do. And a warrior shouldn't shrink from hard work." Tsubame would be working today, too. Which didn't matter to him at all, of course. It was kind of nice that she liked seeing him, though.

"Hnnm. Well. I don't suppose I really need you to help me with the groceries anymore, do I?" Kaoru smiled down at him, and this one wasn't so strained. "I'm sure Tsubame will be happy to see you."

"That's got nothin' to do with it," he protested, annoyed. So like a girl to try and stick romance into everything. Tsubame was kind of cute, but he didn't have time for that right now. "I'm just trying to help out."

"I know," she said, sounding genuinely cheerful. "And I appreciate it, really. But you should have some fun, too."

Yahiko crossed his arms and scowled. "I have plenty of fun. I'm not a little kid, Kaoru, don't pat me on the head and tell me to run along and play."

She wouldn't tell Sano not to worry about things. He wasn't any less a man than Sano was. So why was she always trying to protect him?

"Maybe I'm not as good as Sano yet," he said, scuffing a foot in the dirt. "But I can still help."

"You're not useless, Yahiko." Kaoru looked gravely at him. "Really. I just don't want anyone else to have to –"

"Don't be selfish." His face heated. "It's my home too, y'know."

"...I know."

They had stopped walking at some point in the conversation. Kenshin had stopped with them. Kaoru glanced at him, and her eyes shaded in that way they'd done recently – like she was going somewhere where no one could find her until she was ready to be found. Then she looked back to Yahiko.

"It's always going to be your home, Yahiko. You understand that, right?" And her voice was far, far too gentle.

"Of course I do! I'm not an idiot!" But something in his chest eased anyway, leaving a hollow, sad place behind. He turned and started walking away. "I won't go, then, if it's so important to you. C'mon. If we don't hurry, there won't be anything fresh left."

"Alright, alright," she said, and hurried to catch up with him.

~*~

Yahiko started regretting his decision as soon as they made it to market. Today was a bulk-purchase day. There were a lot of heavy things. And he while would grudgingly admit that even Kaoru had her good points, tactical grocery shopping wasn't one of them. She never remembered to get the heavy stuff last, and when he pointed out that it was smarter to do it that way she always had some
reason why they couldn't or shouldn't and she'd do that girl thing where she talked so fast that he ended circling around and suggesting the very thing he was trying to get her not to do.

His load wasn't as heavy as it normally was, but he couldn't even be pleased about that, because the reason it wasn't as heavy was that Kenshin was there, also, and Kenshin had to be given something to do. Otherwise people would notice. And – Megumi had explained this to him already, but Kaoru kept repeating it and he knew it was for her own sake as much as his – he had to be given things to do, otherwise he wouldn't feel safe.

Yahiko understood that much. He thought maybe he understood better than Kaoru did, what it was to *not know* why someone wanted you around. There were a lot of reasons a person might take in someone as worthless as an abandoned slave or a three-times-thief, might spend the time and energy feeding them up and getting them nice clothing and healing their wounds. And when you'd lived your life knowing exactly how little you mattered, your first thought wasn't going to be that they were doing it out of the goodness of their hearts. His certainly hadn't been.

It was just – frustrating, to have to watch his own thoughts so carefully, and then end up feeling guilty for the frustration because *none of this was Kenshin's fault*. Or Kaoru's, or Sano's, or his own, or even Megumi's. He kept coming back to that – how it wasn't anyone's fault, except the one person whom he couldn't touch. It ran around and around in his head like the refrain of some stupid song: *there's nothing you can do about it, nothing at all, nothing nothing nothing, helpless powerless weak* –

Just like when mom and dad died, and the creditors had taken everything, and he'd wanted so badly to refuse the clothing that he'd been *given*, out of *pity*, but he'd known better. So he'd let the woman chuck him under the chin and tell him to *try his best, don't give up* and throw him out on the street and not protested, because you had to take what you could get.

He growled to himself and shifted the pole on his shoulder, looking back at Kenshin. The – former? Current? Technically-but-not-in-the-ways-that-counted-except-maybe-he-was? – slave was still following behind Kaoru, still blank as he carried the baskets she had given him. He hadn't protested or given any sign that it was too much weight, but she kept checking. It was comforting, in a way; even after two weeks had passed, she hadn't relaxed into her new status.

Maybe they'd get through this after all.

Against his will, he remembered Megumi's words. *She might never be able to let him go, Yahiko* – he'd never seen her eyes so grave and terrible – *he might need to stay with her for the rest of his life*. *Does she know that?* he'd asked, shaking.

*Yes.* Megumi had looked away, then. *You know her, Myojin. She won't give up on him, not now. No matter how bad it gets.*

And he'd thought to himself: *so I'll have to be strong for her, for my home, starting now.*

He just couldn't help wishing that strong wasn't so damn hard to reconcile with the hissing hatred that accompanied any thought of *slaveowner*, even when the person he was thinking about was the closest thing he had to a family.

"Well, that's it!" Kaoru said, brushing her hands briskly together. "I guess we should get back home!"

"Huh?" He looked around. "Did we get the vegetables already?"
Kaoru's smile faltered. "Oh – no, no, we didn't. I suppose we should."

But she didn't move.

"…what's wrong?" He adjusted the barrels again, squinting up to her in the bright afternoon light. "Kaoru?"

"Nothing," she said after a pause that went on a little too long. "Let's go, Yahiko."

She almost walked right past her usual vendor; he had to call out to her and wave before she noticed. He was an older man, a widower, and he relied on his house-slave to help around the shop. Kaoru didn't like to buy from vendors who owned slaves, but most of them did and the dojo didn't bring in enough money that they could afford to get too picky.

*Why is it easier to accept that then it is to accept Kenshin?*

The old man smiled as Kaoru approached. Yahiko could swear there was a hitch in her step.

"Well!" he said jovially, nodding towards Kenshin. "I see you've bought your slave."

"Oh – um – yes." Kaoru's fingers twisted nervously in her kimono. "This is Kenshin…"

The old man looked Kenshin up and down like a prospective buyer inspecting a likely draft horse. Yahiko's eyes narrowed.

"He doesn't look like much. Awfully pretty, though, which I suppose might turn a girl's head," the vendor said. "He's a guard, you say?"

"Yes." Kaoru's hands started shaking and she hid them in her sleeves. "Excuse me, but we are in a bit of a hurry…"

"There's no rush, little lady, didn't you want my advice earlier?"

Yahiko almost snarled. What did he mean, *advice*?"

"…I did," Kaoru said, reluctantly, coloring a little. The old man patted her on the shoulder in a grandfatherly way.

"No need to be shy. I remember the first slave I bought on my own, good hard worker he was. Wish I'd had someone to set me straight in those days, I let him get away with a lot more than I should have, let me tell you! Well, it all worked out in the end, anyway. Now, how does he run? Obedient? Does exactly what you say? You've got to watch out for when they start taking liberties, you know, even helpful ones. Sometimes it means they're just real loyal, but most times it leads to 'em getting ideas above their station – "

Kaoru looked like she was going to be sick. The vendor ignored her and prattled on, and finally Yahiko had had enough.

"Hey, teacher!" he said, tossing his bangs out of his eyes. "You can do this later, okay? I wanna get back and learn that kata you've been promising!"

"Yahiko!" She glared down at him, but there was relief in her eyes. "Don't be rude!"

"And who's this?" The old man peered down at him. Yahiko flashed his toothiest merry-little-scamp grin up at the vendor, jerking his thumb towards his chest and knowing that there was no way the old fart would pick up on the rage seething in his veins.
"I'm Yahiko Myojin," he said, "and I'm Kaoru's best student."

"I see. Well, well. I suppose you're the reason she's always buying so much food, aren't you? I remember how much my sons ate when they were your age."

"Hey, I gotta eat a lot. Otherwise I won't be strong. But anyway, teach," he said, "I wanna go back and train. Can't you do this later?"

"Awfully straightforward, isn't he?" The old man chuckled. "I hope you take a firmer hand with your slave than with your students, little miss."

"He's just very energetic," Kaoru said with a thin smile and quick, grateful look at Yahiko. "But he actually has a point. There's a kata I've been promising to teach him, now that he's learned the move it uses, and I've been really distracted lately with settling Kenshin and all. So I'm terribly sorry to be rude, but we really will have to do this later."

There was no kata, of course. But an excuse was an excuse, and the old man let them buy their vegetables and go without inflicting further advice on them.

"What was that all about?" he asked Kaoru as they walked away. She was trembling a little.

"Oh, Yahiko, it's nothing – just a stupid idea I had, before Megumi agreed to help, about trying to figure out how slaves were treated – I'm sorry. Yahiko, Kenshin, I'm really sorry. We're going to have to find a new vegetable seller, I think. Excuse me, I need to sit down…"

They found a bench nearby and Kaoru settled onto it with a sigh. Kenshin stood beside her; Yahiko hopped up to sit next to her.

"Kenshin, put those down for a while," Kaoru said, rubbing at her temples. "Rest a bit."

He knelt on the ground, arranging his baskets neatly beside him. Kaoru looked at him, clearly considering telling him to sit on the bench.

"…oh, what's the point?" she whispered, so softly that Yahiko almost didn't hear it, and buried her face in her hands.

Yahiko kicked idly at the pole resting across the top of the rice and miso barrels, watching it roll back and forth, and wished there was something he could say. Sano would know what to do: Sano would have a joke, or a sly comment, something vulgar about the vegetable seller's bald head or wrinkles or something, and it would probably be dumb but it'd be the kind of dumb that you laughed at anyway. He'd be able to cheer Kaoru up, to break past the wall she'd put around herself. She trusted Sano – no, that wasn't fair. She trusted Yahiko, too, but…

Sano was older. Sano was stronger. Sano made her feel safe.

And at the end of the day, Yahiko was still just a kid.

So he sat silently, kid that he was, and waited for her to pull herself together. Kenshin knelt motionless at her knee, ponytail draping over his shoulder. He really didn't look like much, folded in on himself in Kaoru's shadow. When he moved, though… Yahiko was still new to swordsmanship, but even he could see Kenshin's power and agility. He'd have known that Kenshin was a master even if Megumi hadn't told him some of his history.

Which made Kenshin's utter submission even worse.
Kenshin was strong. He'd been strong and he had still been broken; he'd been strong and this had still happened to him. And if being strong wasn't enough to stop bad things from happening, what was the point?

Yahiko tore his eyes away and watched the people passing by, trying not to dwell on it. A cluster of girls, giggling and swinging brightly-painted parasols; a mobile steamed-yam seller, pushing his cart along and calling out for customers; a gang of work-slaves led by their overseer, carrying bundles of bamboo and lumber on their shoulders. Business as usual. Every now and then a rickshaw would pelt by, carrying older couples or women with large packages.

A carriage came up the road. He assessed it automatically: very western, garish but expensively so. An elaborate crest he didn't recognize on the door, and team of decently-matched horses in so-so condition. As it got closer he could see that the coach was bright with paint and still shone like new, so either whoever owned it cared more about their carriage than they did their horses or the carriage itself was new. Probably the latter.

Almost no one in their neighborhood could afford a carriage, so they were probably some recently-wealthy merchant come to do business, especially since they were headed for the market. He dismissed it as irrelevant and was just about to suggest to Kaoru that it was time to head home when he realized that the carriage had stopped across the street, right in front of them.

"Hey, Kaoru," he said, nudging her.

She looked up.

The coach driver hopped down from his perch and opened the door, unfolding a little step, and then stood back. He had a cross carved into his cheek. Yahiko bristled.

Kenshin stayed where he was.

A small, middle-aged man emerged from the shadows of the coach. His clothing, like his carriage, was fine but gaudy and very new. He was soft and fat with too much rich food and not enough exercise, and his face was fixed in a grin that Yahiko knew entirely too well; the grin of a wolf ready to scam a sheep. This was trouble.

"Kaoru, we should go." He hopped off the bench, tugging at her sleeve, and put all the urgency that he could in his voice.

"What?" She glanced over at him, then at the short, fat predator coming towards them. "What's wrong?"

"I've just got a bad feeling, okay? We shouldn't talk to this guy."

"What do you mean…?"

But the fat creep was already at their bench.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Kamiya," he said unctuously, bowing far too deeply – deeply enough that it almost went past courtesy and straight into bald mockery. "Do forgive the imposition, but I was hoping I might ask for a moment of your time."

"My time…?" She blinked, and Yahiko interposed himself between her and the fat man. Kaoru was in no shape for this, not with that dazed look in her eyes.

"Hey, now's not a good time," he lied. "She's feeling kinda sick, okay? We're actually heading to the
"My name is Kihei Hiruma," the creep said, smiling in a way that was meant to be ingratiating and ignoring Yahiko entirely. "And I understand that you recently acquired a fine specimen of Takeda Kanryu's earliest work – I believe that's him, in fact." He gestured towards Kenshin. "I was hoping that you might be persuaded to part with the piece – for adequate compensation, of course."

Kaoru stared at him for a long, terrible moment, long enough that Yahiko thought she might not be able to respond. Then the fog in her eyes cleared, her spine snapped straight, and she was herself again, with no trace of the fainting flower.

"Absolutely not," she bit out. "Kenshin is not for sale."

"I must ask you to reconsider," Kihei said, wringing his hands with a look of cloying concern. "Whoever sold him to you must not have been clear – he's rather badly damaged, far too much so for someone as young and inexperienced as yourself. Really, he's only of any interest to collectors; he's nearly useless for normal duties. But I'm more than willing to pay whatever his purchase price was, and a little extra for your trouble. Say, half again the original price?"

"I didn't pay anything," she said. Her hand came down to rest on the top of Kenshin's head, gently possessive. Yahiko frowned and looked a little closer. Kenshin was gripping her skirt with one hand, hidden from view by the fall of his sleeve and Kaoru's legs. His knuckles were white.

"Kenshin was abandoned," Kaoru continued, icily enough to give Megumi a run for her money. "I found him and held him for three days, as the law requires. His former owner did not seek to re-establish his claim, so I took title. He is mine, and he is not for sale. At any price."

She took a deep breath. "Now, excuse me, Mr. Hiruma, but I must be getting home. Kenshin, Yahiko, come along."

Kaoru stood. Kenshin gathered up the baskets and stood with her. Yahiko quickly picked up his own burdens, heart hammering in his chest. The sooner they could be away from this man, the better. He smelled like rancid perfume.

"Are you sure I can't change your mind?" Kihei asked, too sweetly.

"Absolutely."

Kaoru walked off, Kenshin in his place behind her. Yahiko followed them. As he did, he looked back over his shoulder and caught Kihei's smile transforming into a furious snarl.

~*~

They walked back home in silence. Kaoru was lost in thought again, and Yahiko couldn't think of anything to say. Kenshin, of course, never spoke unless spoken to. Yahiko trailed a little bit behind the two of them, keeping an eye out, and it seemed to him that Kenshin was walking with a touch of hesitancy in his step. His eyes were downcast like they always were, but his head was bowed a little, too, and his eyes were almost hidden behind his bangs.

He wondered if Kaoru had noticed.

When they got home she sighed heavily and stretched as though she'd just put down a great weight.

"Well, I think I'm going to change and get some training in. Yahiko, put the groceries away and help Kenshin get started on dinner, okay?"
"Sure." Yahiko started towards the kitchen, knowing that Kenshin would follow.

"Kenshin, wait just a second?"

Yahiko turned around, curious. Kenshin had paused obediently in his tracks, face perfectly blank. Now he bowed his head further and faced her, and Yahiko thought his grip on the baskets tightened a little.

"Kenshin, look at me," Kaoru said softly. Her hand twitched like she wanted to reach out to him but didn't quite dare. "Please?"

As if he could refuse. Yahiko's throat closed in anger as Kenshin lifted his head, letting his bangs fall out of his eyes. He had a sudden sense of trespassing on something not his business, something cloistered and secret and shameful, and had to fight the urge to look away.

Come to think of it, he wasn't sure why he was fighting the urge – except that he wanted to be sure of… something he didn't quite have a name for.

"I'm not going to sell you, Kenshin." Kaoru was looking deep into his eyes, as if she was trying to read something hidden there, or convince him of something written in hers. "I promised you that this was your home forever, now, no matter what, and I always keep my promises. There's nothing that could ever happen that would make me sell you. So don't worry, okay?"

She searched his face. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, mistress."

Which he would have said even if he didn't understand. Even if he didn't believe. And by the wry, pained look on her face, Kaoru knew it too.

"Alright. Go on, then, I'll be in the training hall."

Another murmured yes, mistress; then she was heading for her room and he was walking towards the kitchen and Yahiko had to scramble for a moment to keep up.

"She's telling the truth, you know," he said as they got to the kitchen, not entirely sure why he was saying it. "Really."

Kenshin seemed to hesitate for a moment as he unloaded his groceries. Yahiko slid the pole off his shoulders and started pushing the miso barrel into its proper place.

"Like I said before – " he grunted a little " – I know she's a pain, but she doesn't break her promises."

Suddenly there was no more barrel and he pitched forward, catching himself just in time. Kenshin had lifted the barrel up and was carrying it over to the pantry.

"…yeah, maybe I should let you do the heavy stuff," Yahiko muttered, and hopped up onto a stool to sort through the lighter goods.

They worked quickly – at least Kenshin did – and in a silence that would have been peaceful if Yahiko could've managed to forget the circumstances. He'd avoided spending time with Kenshin for exactly that reason: it was scary, thinking about what he was and what he'd made Kaoru, who never knew when to give up.

'Course, if she'd known when to give up he might not be here, in the warm, with a full belly and a
future. But he shoved that thought away as soon as it arrived.

Kaoru had said to help Kenshin. This seemed to translate, once the groceries were put away, to Yahiko sitting idle and watching while Kenshin cooked dinner with effortless grace and absolutely no emotion. He'd offered help, but all he'd gotten was *this worthless one requires no assistance* and his stomach shriveled in on itself when he tried to talk to him the way Kaoru did, like an endless game of twenty freakin' questions.

He sighed. Kenshin paused as he was chopping up spring onions for the miso.

"Hey, Kenshin?"

"Yes, young master?" Kenshin put the knife down and turned to face Yahiko, hands falling to his side.

"What are you making, exactly?"

"This worthless one is preparing miso, rice, pickled radish, and grilled fish."

A normal, simple dinner. Yahiko scratched the back of his head.

"Will ya let me chop the vegetables, at least? I mean, I know you don't need it and all, but Kaoru told me to help out and I feel lousy just sitting here."

That wasn't how Kaoru would have said it. It probably wasn't the way Megumi would have told him to say it. But he didn't *want* to do what they said, not with this. He understood the reasons and he trusted his teacher and the lady doctor, but – it just didn't sit right with him. How could treating him like a slave help him not be one anymore?

Kenshin stood aside and let Yahiko take his place at the cutting board. He started chopping while Kenshin began to stoke the fire for grilling the fish. It was a still a touch too cold to grill outside; in a few weeks, though, Kaoru would probably start insisting on eating outdoors at least a few days a week.

Yahiko said as much, for lack of anything else to do. Kenshin didn't respond, but Yahiko didn't see him shying away, either. He had a way of collapsing in on himself, sometimes, like a stray dog trying to will himself invisible.

So Yahiko kept talking, about stupid things like his job at the Akabeko and his lessons with Kaoru and the story about Why Sano Doesn't Fish and the one time Kaoru and Tae had tried to make a Western dish called a *suufure* and coated the kitchen in flour and egg whites. He talked because it was better than dealing with Kenshin's tense, subservient silence, and because as long as he was talking he could pretend there was something normal about this, and that Kenshin was just an unusually quiet houseguest.

Dinner was ready right as he was starting to get tired of talking, and he cut Kenshin off as he went to leave the kitchen.

"I'll get Kaoru, okay? You just get everything set up."

"Yes, young master," Kenshin said obediently, settling the various dishes on their trays.

It was a very clear evening, one of those times when you can pretty much see forever. The sun was hovering on the horizon like a bronze disc, and stars were already starting to come out. The green smell of new growth hovered in the air and Yahiko sucked it in until he felt his lungs would burst.
He didn't hear the usual sounds of Kaoru doing her kata: the swish of her wooden sword and the piercing battle cry that – although he would never in a million years cop to it – sent a little thrill of fright down his spine. So he paused a second before he went in, peering through the slight crack in the door in case she was meditating or something.

She was kneeling in front of the shrine that held her father's sealed sword, but she wasn't meditating. Her shoulders were shaking a little.

"...father," he heard her say, and realized that he definitely should not be watching this.

But he stayed anyway.

"I'm sorry. I – I don't know what to do. I promised you that I'd be strong, and I'd carry the sword that protects, and I thought I could do it, but – what if it's not enough? What if I'm not...?"

She paused, as if to breathe.

"...Yahiko's so confused, and I don't know what to tell him. I'm his teacher and I don't have the answers. Sano's hurting, and it's not his fault but he won't believe it. Megumi is – I never realized how much she's carrying, and I never did a single thing to help her, because I never looked. And Kenshin..."

Her head bowed.

"What if he's never any better than he is now? It's only been two weeks, I shouldn't expect miracles but – he was doing so well until last night. Until I snapped at him – and then that awful man in the market – and what if it's not enough, father? What if I'm not good enough? I'm the heir to the Kamiya Kasshin style, and I can't even keep my lousy stupid temper."

She wiped furiously at her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Maybe I am being too hard on myself," she said after a moment. "But that's not an excuse. Megumi's right. I'm so selfish; I've always been able to apologize and make things right again, but it's not that simple anymore, is it? Not when I'm dealing with Kenshin. So I just have to – I have to be better. I took this on, I can't give up now. I just – I just can't afford to be a little girl anymore, even in small things, can I?"

There was a lump in Yahiko's throat that he couldn't quite swallow down. There was something he could do, he knew it, he just wasn't seeing it. Couldn't figure it out.

Because I'm not strong enough, he thought automatically. If I was strong enough, I'd know what to do.

And then he remembered Kenshin, with all his power and lethal grace, huddled on the ground at Kaoru's feet and clutching her skirts in a wordless plea. Begging her not to sell him, not to hurt him. Unable to change his own fate.

Strength hadn't helped him one goddamn bit, had it?

Yahiko knocked on the door.

"Hey, Ugly! Dinner's ready!"

A brief pause. And then: "Alright, Yahiko, I'll be there in a second!"
She sounded completely normal. When she came out of the training hall she had her usual bright smile on and she even bounced on the balls of her feet and stretched, exclaiming about how satisfying it was to have a good meal after a workout. He mocked her about her weight; she snapped back at him, and they bickered all the way to the dining room.

And he kept turning the question over and over, in the back of his mind: if simply *being strong* wasn't enough, then what was?


~*~

It was a lovely night. Daigoro smiled genially at nothing, shoving his glasses up his nose. They kept falling down. It made the world awfully spinnin – or maybe that was the sake. No, it couldn't be the sake. He hadn't had more than a flask! Or two. Possibly three. But that was alright. He was celebrating. Miss Itsuko. Yes. She'd said yes – well, her father had said yes, but that meant she had said yes because he never would have said yes if he hadn't said yes –

The point. Was. The point was, he was going to marry Miss Itsuko.

He tripped over a loose brick and collided with Tatsuma, who stumbled into a wall.

"*Daigoro*..." his foster brother muttered, shoving him away. "Can't you hold your liquor at all?"

Normally he would have flinched at the harsh remark, but the sake had filled him with a warm, tingly, golden sort of feeling and his usual fears of not measuring up were too far away. Besides, Tatsuma didn't really mean it.

"Nope!" he said cheerfully, slinging his arm around his foster-brother's neck. "Have to 'member that for thaweddin', can't drink a'th'reception or Miss'tsuko will be mad at meee..."

Tatsuma tried to stand up straight, but between Daigoro's weight and his own inebriation he ended up half-slouched against the wall and slowly, inevitably, sliding towards the gutter.

"Get off me," he grunted, trying to keep on his feet. "Or we're gonna end up passing out here and then Miss Itsuko will *really* be mad."

"'s allowed," Daigoro mumbled into his shoulder. "Celebratin' and suchlike..."

Tatsuma gave up and let himself fall. Daigoro sprawled on top of him and started snoring.

"...idiot," he said fondly, and tilted his head back against the wall. Oh well.

He heard footsteps approaching and waved blearily in their direction.

"Don't mind us," he slurred. "Just a couple'a drunks too dizzy to find our way home..."

The footsteps paused. Tastuma grinned in their general direction.

"We're celebrating." He pushed Daigoro a little, who obligingly rolled over on his back. "Or at least four-eyes here is. 'Cause he's getting married. I'm just helping."

"How wonderful," said a sickly-sweet voice. Tatsuma blinked into the night-fog that shrouded the street, trying to focus. "Such a pity that the young couple must be separated. The fates can be so cruel."

"...whazza?" Tastuma had time to ask.
Then the blade came down.

~*~

Megumi didn't hear the news until mid-afternoon, when Mrs. Nakamura came in to pick up her prescription and fluttered it all over the waiting room like the gossipy hen that she was.

"Oh, it's dreadful!" she said, eyes aglow with excitement. "Those two dear boys, murdered in the street! And poor Miss Kamiya, to have such a thing happen right at her doorstep!"

"What?" Megumi stood. "A murder? Near the Kamiya school?"

"Yes!" The older woman's eyes grew sly. "Aren't you friends with the Kamiya girl?" she simpered. "I suppose that if you are, I should tell you what else I heard."

"Please do," Megumi said, fear drawing around her like a cloak.

"Did you already know that she's finally gone and gotten herself a slave?" Megumi nodded. Mrs. Nakamura continued. "Well, I heard that the police have a witness saying that they saw her new slave fleeing the scene!"

"Really." Megumi let a hint of contempt through in her voice. "And why on earth would a Kamiya be involved in something like that?"

"Oh, I hardly mean to suggest that Koushijiro's daughter would be a murderer!" Mrs. Nakamura twittered. "But that slave of hers, did you know that he was abandoned? She took him in out of the goodness of her heart, and you know how slaves repay that. He probably attacked them and lied to her – and she's just too naïve to believe that he could!"

"I see."

Megumi closed her eyes, biting back words that would mean nothing and accomplish less. When she opened them again, she was smiling: or at any rate, baring her teeth.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Nakamura. What a helpful person you are. Here's your medication; the instructions are on the package."

"Oh, it's no trouble at all! Thank you for your time."

Mrs. Nakamura left. Megumi settled herself into her chair for a moment, cupping her hands loosely in the lap, and breathed three slow breaths.

Then she got up and put on her coat.

"Dr. Oguni? I'm going to the Kamiya school. I probably won't be back today."

"Oh, is that so?" He looked up from his paperwork. "Well, don't forget your key. I'll be locking the gate at sundown – we can't be too careful, with a murderer about."

He looked perfectly serene, but she knew better. She waited in the doorway for a second, in case he had something else to say.

"And tell Kaoru…" He paused for a moment. "…tell her that I know her father would be proud of the woman she has become."

Dr. Oguni returned to his papers as he said it, taking a sip of tea. Outside, the girls shrieked with
laughter.

Megumi left.

She wasn't the only person walking towards the Kamiya school. There was a sharp aura in the air: the feeling of a flock of carrion-birds gathering, waiting for the unseen signal to take flight. When she finally arrived, she wasn't at all surprised to find a small mob already gathered at the gates, headed by a handful of policemen. Many of the officers were nursing bruised wrists; one was only semi-conscious and supported between two of his colleagues. Kaoru and Sano were facing off against them, Kenshin standing stiffly in his place just behind his mistress. Yahiko was well inside the gate, crouched on the ground and cradling his arm.

"…and what witness is this?" Kaoru was demanding as Megumi insinuated herself into the crowd. "You keep talking about a witness, but you won't tell me who they are!"

She put her hands on her hips, one of them clutching her wooden sword. She was still in her training clothes; they were sweat-stained, but Kaoru wasn't sweating anymore, and Megumi wondered exactly how long she'd been here.

"We can't give you the witness' name, miss," the officer said, shifting uncomfortably under Kaoru's glare and the crowd's growing anticipation. "For their protection."

"Protection?" Kaoru reared up, venomous. "Are you accusing me of plotting a murder?"

"No!" He wiped his forehead anxiously. "That is – it's procedure, that's all."

"Oh, I see." She tossed her head back, spitting fury. "So it's procedure to break into my home and confiscate my property without my presence or permission? It's procedure for me to come back from a hard day's work and find armed officers trying to break down my door? My father was a loyal servant of the shōgun for his entire life. Is this is his reward for it?"

"I'm sorry for the trouble, Miss Kamiya," the officer said wearily. "My men were impulsive and rash, and they will be disciplined."

"They had better be! And they should count themselves lucky I don't arm Kenshin with live steel, and that only one of them actually made it onto the grounds! If Yahiko hadn't been home – and that reminds me, I should press charges for what your men did to his arm!"

"Be that as it may – " he started to say, and was cut off as one of the policemen pushed his way past them.

"That thing's a menace!" He jabbed a finger towards Kenshin. "She's crazed, keeping an animal like that around! It should be put down!"

"Say that again," Kaoru snarled, bringing up her sword. The officer interposed himself between the two of them.

"That thing's a menace!" He jabbed a finger towards Kenshin. "She's crazed, keeping an animal like that around! It should be put down!"

"Say that again," Kaoru snarled, bringing up her sword. The officer interposed himself between the two of them.

"That's enough, Gasuake, you know the law, she was within her rights to have a guard set and you're in the wrong for not checking…"

But the policeman wasn't listening. He shoved his superior aside and grabbed at Kaoru, who took a single step back. The policeman feinted right, trying to get under her guard. She brought up her hilt to block him – stupid girl, Megumi thought briefly, he's out to hurt you, don't show mercy – and then there was a flash of red hair and the sick crack of breaking bone. The policeman flew back into the crowd. Kenshin was standing in front of Kaoru now, his own wooden sword drawn, and there was
nothing at all in his eyes. The crowd gasped. An electric current of whispers ran through it.

Sano stepped forward, cracking his knuckles.

"I think maybe you oughta take your guys an' go, before this gets any messier," he said quietly, in a reasonable tone that carried just the slightest hint of a snake's rattle. "Don't you agree?"

The officer looked back at his men, and then at the crowd. They hadn't taken a side, yet; the police were the police, but Kaoru was Kaoru, Koushijiro's daughter, and Megumi could feel the confusion radiating from them in waves. Confusion could turn so easily to anger. It wouldn't take much to set them off, and there was no telling where that wave would break.

Something was very off about this. If the police had been authorized to make a forced entry, the officer wouldn't be standing here trying to negotiate. The police didn't normally make a mistake this dire. If there was one thing the government hated, it was paying for things, and unauthorized forced entries onto guarded compounds almost always ended in the force having to pay compensation for the loss of property.

The officer licked his lips. "Miss Kamiya, please try to understand," he said with a hint of pleading, flicking his eyes nervously towards Kenshin. "Our witness is very clear – it was your slave they saw fleeing the scene, with a bloody sword. The murders happened outside your school. And half the town already knows! If I don't do something…"

He spread his hands helplessly. Megumi pursed her lips. Kaoru looked like she was on the verge of losing it, and if she said or did the wrong thing here, if she forgot that she was a slaveowner and should only be outraged over the offense to her property, not because these men were threatening to take Kenshin away…

"May I make a suggestion?" she said, stepping forward and keeping her voice sugar-sweet.

"I'm sorry, miss, but I'm going to have to ask bystanders to stay out of this." The officer rubbed the back of his neck. "It's a very sensitive situation."

Kenshin angled himself to keep both the officer and Megumi within striking range. Kaoru touched his shoulder, lightly.

"It's alright, Kenshin," she said, stepping up beside him. "Don't worry. Megumi is a friend," she said to the officer. "I'd like to hear what she has to say."

Her eyes said please fix this and Megumi raised an eyebrow. She did have a solution, a terrible one, one that Kaoru was bound to hate – but it was better than the alternatives. The police couldn't be allowed to take Kenshin, but demanding that they do nothing would be terribly suspicious. None of them could afford that kind of attention

"…fine." The officer crossed his arms. "What's your suggestion?"

"Kamiya. I'm sure you see his point – if the news is already out, and the police aren't seen to act, it's going to cause problems for everyone." She looked meaningfully at the younger girl. Everyone, Kamiya, do you understand?

"I'm not letting him take Kenshin." There was a mulish set to her mouth, and Megumi risked an approving smile.

"As you shouldn't. His men tried to take an illegal action. They violated your home and your rights. But there's a middle ground – don't you have a storehouse?"
Kaoru blinked, and then looked straight into Megumi's eyes. Her brows were drawn and fierce.

"Are you suggesting…?"

"No one loses face this way," Megumi said softly, willing Kaoru to make the rest of the connection. This situation stank to high heaven; it felt like someone was trying to maneuver them around the board, and they needed time to figure out who was doing it and why. They needed to police willing to work with them. They needed to appear willing to cooperate. They needed to do nothing that would draw more attention. "Surely you can see the logic."

Kaoru firmed her jaw and looked away. Megumi knew the look in her eyes – she'd seen it too many times in her own. When the best option isn't the right one…

She was very careful not to look at Kenshin. She didn't want to know – didn't want to see if he was having one of those precious flashes of awareness, or if he was as dull-eyed and resigned as always. Either one would break her heart.

"Fine. Officer –"

"Ryunosuke."

"Ryunosuke. I'm willing to keep Kenshin – secured – on the premises until all this is resolved. Would that be acceptable?"

Kaoru's eyes were steel. He ran his a hand over his face.

"I don't see how I have much of a choice," he said ruefully, like a man glad to see a way out of a tricky situation. Which was what he was, of course, and Megumi felt cold hatred bloom in her, slow and easy and comfortable. Kenshin wasn't a man to him, just evidence in an ongoing investigation. "Will you let me put a police seal on the doors?"

Megumi nodded at Kaoru when she glanced uncertainly towards her. Kaoru's lips compressed into a thin, bloodless line.

"Fine," she said. "Come with me."

"Let me deal with this, first." The officer turned to the crowd. "Show's over, folks!" he cried, waving them away. "When I come back out I don't want to see anyone lingering, alright? Go about your business!"

The civilians began to disperse, grumbling and gossiping. The policemen left, too, after a wordless look from their superior. Ryunosuke nodded to Kaoru, touching his fingers to his cap.

"After you, miss."

Kaoru turned on her heel and stalked off, gesturing for Kenshin and the officer to follow. They did – Ryunosuke with a bit of a spring in his step, and Kenshin with a catch in his. Sano lingered by the gate, casting fierce glances at anyone who didn't move away quickly enough. Megumi knelt by Yahiko.

"Let me see your arm," she said, as gently as she could.

"It's fine," he muttered. She grabbed his wrist anyway and pulled up his sleeve, flicking him in the forehead when he tried to pull away. There was a long, shallow cut down the entire length of his arm.
"One of 'em had a knife," Yahiko said sullenly. "Tried to get me when I rushed him. Kenshin grabbed me outta the way, but I got grazed."

"It's already stopped bleeding," she said, letting go of his wrist. "Disinfect it and wrap it up for a few days, and you'll be fine."

"Thanks." He looked up at her. "Hey, um – you're going to figure out who's framing Kenshin, right?"

"That's the plan," she said, standing. "Why do you ask?"

Yahiko's eyes were very fierce. "There was a guy in the marketplace yesterday. Kihei Hiruma. He tried to get Kaoru to sell Kenshin to him, but she wouldn't. He – he felt like bad news."

The name did sound familiar. Megumi furrowed her brow, trying to remember. Hadn't he been…?

Her eyes widened as understanding hit her.

"I see," she said, mainly to herself. "Thank you, Yahiko. Thank you very much."

~*~

It took everything Kaoru had not to slap the officer when he turned to her with a smile and thanked her for her cooperation after he sealed the storehouse doors. She looked sharply away from him, instead, and clenched her free hand in her clothes.

"Now get off my property," she snapped, tense beyond bearing. "And don't do something like this again, you understand?"

"Of course, Miss." He touched his fingers to his cap again. "Again, I'm very sorry, and my men will be disciplined."

"Just go." She stuck her wooden sword through her belt. "Quickly."

He turned on his heel and left. She watched long enough to be sure that he was truly gone, and then she flew up the stairs to the sealed door and stood on her toes, peering through the small, barred window. Kenshin was kneeling on the floor inside, head bowed.

"Kenshin…" Her hands gripped the bars and she rested her forehead against them, heat gathering in her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry. We'll figure this out – I promise. I promise it'll be okay."

He didn't look up.

"Kamiya," Megumi said from behind her. "We need to talk."

Kaoru's fist slammed against the door. Kenshin jumped at that and his head snapped up, eyes wide. She whirled around to face Megumi.

"If it's about how I didn't handle it right and I need to be more careful or I'm too impetuous or anything else about all the things I do wrong then I don't want to hear about it!" she snarled. "The only thing I want to hear right now is some kind of plan for getting Kenshin out of this mess!"

Megumi raised a single elegant eyebrow, examining her nails.

"Should I come back when you're done with your tantrum?" she asked, acidly sweet.
Kaoru clenched her fists and very deliberately didn't stomp her foot. *No more childish things,* she thought briefly, taking a deep breath. She held it for a moment, then relaxed her hands and let it out, slowly.

"…okay. Someone is framing Kenshin, and we need to know who, and why."

"Kenshin?" Megumi gave her a sly look out of the corner of her eye. "Who would bother to frame a slave?"

"…I don't know. Someone who wanted to get at their master?" Kaoru shook her head, trying to clear the fog. "But I don't have any enemies like that…"

She couldn't think. Not with Kenshin locked up behind her – not when every nerve in her body was screaming outrage, because she'd come home to find her home invaded and Yahiko crouched behind Kenshin, holding his arm, and she'd died a thousand small deaths before she could force her way past the scrum and see that he was only scratched a little.

Then she'd died a thousand more, thinking about what *could* have happened.

*If Kenshin hadn't been there…*

If Kenshin hadn't been there, would this even have happened?

No. She wouldn't start down that path. It had happened, and Kenshin had been there, and he had protected her home and her student. And she'd rewarded him by locking him away like a criminal – no, worse, like a badly behaved *dog.*

The realization unstrung her and she gasped, spinning back around.

"Kenshin!"

He was standing now, in that strange loose tension that meant he didn't understand. She wrapped her fingers around the bars, hating the wrongness of it.

"Thank you," she said softly. His head seemed to tilt to one side, like a bird examining something new.

"Thank you," she said again, a little stronger now. "For protecting Yahiko. If you hadn't – he's going to be okay, you know, because you pulled him away in time. *Thank* you. And this isn't your fault," she continued, urgent, wanting him to understand and knowing that she could never be sure that he did. "I know you didn't do anything wrong, and I'm going to prove it. Hang in there, okay?"

His eyes met hers and she swallowed, grip tightening. They were awash with a pale purple, like the moments before sunrise, and brighter than she had ever seen them – except for that first night, when she'd said *all I want is for you to heal* and just for a moment he'd looked at her like he was a human being. Lost, frightened, broken, but still human. Still aware.

He was looking at her as though he understood.

"…hang in there," she repeated in a whisper, and her hands loosened to press flat against the bars.

Then he lowered his head and knelt. She turned back to Megumi. The doctor was regarding her with another one of those strange looks of hers, as though she'd been confronted with an unexpected discrepancy in her formulas.
"Where's Sano and Yahiko? We should all be here for this."

"They're getting Yahiko bandaged. We can go inside…"

"No." Kaoru shook her head. "We should all be here. Kenshin's involved, too."

She went and fetched them. They came without too much complaining. Sano wanted to chase down the policemen and rough them up, but it was easy to talk him out of it. He was only scared, after all. Yahiko was different – he slouched along, sullen as ever, and she knew it would take a while for him to stop being furious at himself for failing to protect his home.

"Alright," she said, when they had all assembled outside the sealed storehouse. "So. Does anyone have any idea what's going on?"

"Kihei Hiruma," Megumi said from the step where she'd perched herself, ankles neatly crossed. "That's what's going on."

"Who?" Kaoru blinked, surprised.

"From yesterday," Yahiko added. "The creep who wanted you to sell Kenshin."

A picture form slowly in her mind – that small, fat man who'd smelled like too much western perfume, squinting his eyes up at her with an oily grin. The tug on her skirts and glancing down to see Kenshin's hand wrapped in them, white-knuckled; the soft silk of his hair under her fingers.

"He did this?" She grasped the hilt of her sword, stroking her thumb over the grain. Calm. The sword that protects. "Why?"

"Kihei and his brother are collectors," Megumi said with that deceptive mildness of hers. "Of slaves. They were hangers-on of Kanryu's, never terribly important but he invited them to the more public banquets. Kihei had a particular… fascination… with Kenshin."

Kaoru was pretty sure that fascination was supposed to imply something, but she didn't know what and, more importantly, didn't care.

"So why frame him for murder?" she demanded. "Killer slaves get executed."

Understanding lit Sano's face and he cursed roundly, snapping his fingers.

"That ain't the point. It's makin' him too damn inconvenient to keep – they're why the witness' story is spreadin' so far, ain't they?"

"Yes," Megumi said, folding her hands neatly in her lap. "And the officer who invaded your home was probably on their payroll. They didn't intend to confiscate Kenshin at all – just to cause a fuss, and lay the groundwork for more rumor mongering. And when things are at their worst, they'll offer to make all the trouble go away if you'll only sell to them."

Kaoru's head spun and she sat down abruptly. Yahiko growled low in his throat.

"Bastards."

"Language, Yahiko," she said absently, twisting her fingers around and around each other. Sano and Megumi started talking over her, about strategy and investigations, working carefully around the secret that Yahiko didn't share. Yahiko only stared fiercely at the ground, as if glaring at it would force it to yield up its secrets
Exhaustion lay across her shoulders like a heavy blanket. This was how it went, she knew that, it had been this way with Yahiko and every other wounded creature – two steps forward, one step back. But the steps forward had never been so small before, and the step back was so huge…

This I choose to do.

She pressed her hands firmly against her thighs and stood up.

"Sano, you've got friends in the underworld, right?"

He stopped in the middle of countering Megumi on some minor point and blinked at her, scratching his head.

"Yeah."

"Find out who really committed those murders. They had to have hired someone, right? So if we can produce the real killer, that's one problem solved."

"They'll find another way," Megumi pointed out.

"And we'll stop them when they do," she said firmly, cold purpose in her veins. "Megumi – people are always gossiping at the clinic, right? Can you keep us updated, so that we don't get caught off-guard like this again?"

"Of course."

"Good. Now. We should all think hard about a more permanent solution," she said, taking a deep breath, "but for now, all we're doing is running in circles. So Sano, Megumi, you do what I've asked, and we'll meet again later when we have more information, okay?"

Now Sano was the one looking strangely at her. She looked right back, daring him to come out and say whatever was on his mind. The anger roaring inside her had collapsed into something diamond-hard and clean as a new blade. She'd only felt this surety once before, when she'd knelt before her father's memorial altar and sworn to carry on his work despite everything, his former students' laughter ringing in her ears.

"What should I do?" Yahiko asked, looking up for the first time.

"The same as Megumi. A lot of people pass through the Akabeko – if they're going to use rumours, we need to know what those rumours are." The answer came so easily to her, in this still place of absolute purpose.

To carry the sword that protects means that it's up to you, always up to you. You are not permitted to fail. Your life is not the only one at stake; should you falter, should you fall, those whom you protect fall with you.

She hadn't known until now how little she'd truly understood her father's teachings.

Yahiko nodded, a fierce glow in his face. Megumi smiled her approval, elegant and sanguine. Sano looked away.

"Now. I'm going to make dinner. We'll meet tomorrow."

Kaoru glanced over her shoulder, once, and thought she saw Kenshin standing at the sealed door before she strode away, already making plans.
Megumi stayed to help make dinner, so it turned out edible. The four of them ate quickly, in silence, and Kaoru faster than the others. As soon as she was done she brought a tray out to Kenshin, along with a small oil lamp. There wasn't any light in the shed, and the day was darkening quickly.

As she was leaving, Megumi touched her forearm, lightly, and said that Dr. Oguni had a message for her.

*Your father would be proud of the woman you've become,* she recited, and Kaoru had thanked her and not needed to blink away the tears until she'd hurried away to where Megumi couldn't see.

Kenshin's fingers covered hers briefly as she passed the tray and the lamp to him through the hatch set below the window in the right-hand door. The sun was already setting, and it was hard to see.

"The lamp's for you," she said quietly. "There's a matchbook, too, so you can light it. Um – and there should be some spare bedding in the big cabinet, across from the ladder. You can use it for now, until we get you out of there. Which we will," she said, feeling a bit repetitive but not knowing what else to say.

He moved away from the windows. There was the sulphur-snap of a lighting match and a flare of fire that settled into a calm glow. It moved across the interior of the storehouse, casting distorted shadows, then stilled. She guessed that he'd put the lamp on the ladder.

With a low susurrus of cloth he returned to the window, head bowed. His face was cast in shadow by the light behind him.

"Mistress," he said, not quite flatly. "Forgive this worthless one."

"Forgive?" Kaoru shook her head. "This is Kihei's fault, not yours. You didn't do anything wrong, so there's nothing to forgive."

His hand pressed, very carefully, against the bars. She ducked her head, trying to look past his bangs and the shadows, trying to see his face. A long moment passed, and his head bowed further. His hand started to slide away, his eyes completely hidden.

Like when she'd asked him to play with the girls.

Like when she'd refused to sell him.

She pressed her hand very carefully against the bars, mirroring his. Her pulse pounded hard in her temples.

His hand stopped moving. They stood there, not touching, and after too many rabbit-quick heartbeats his head rose slowly until she could see his eyes. Something was growing there – she could see it, not quite at the surface but so, so heartbreakingly close and she urged it on, silently. His throat worked.

Then his hand left the bars and he stepped away, bowing. She closed her eyes briefly, smiling, a little rueful. *I can't expect miracles, after all.*

"Goodnight, Kenshin," she said softly. "And don't worry. We'll fix this."

It was hard to get to sleep that night; her room felt strange and empty without the sound of his breathing.
"Sorry, Sano." Nishita shook his head. "I haven't heard anything about it."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, damn." Sano scratched the back of his neck. "This keeps up, I'm gonna have to start breaking heads," he said casually, hoping Nishita would get the message.

"N-no need for that!" Nishita's grin widened into a strained grimace. "I'm sure someone knows about the job! B-but I don't! You know I don't deal in wetwork."

Message received.

"That's true," Sano said, sticking his hands back in his pockets and slouching towards the door. "But you just spread the word, okay? I'm real interested in finding out who's givin' the little lady a hard time, and soon. I ain't got a lotta patience under the best of circumstances, so…"

"I got it, I got it!" Nishita wiped at his brow, smiling more earnestly now that Sano was on his way out of the store. "I'll make sure everyone knows, okay? Man, though, they must be friggin' amateurs, going after your girl like that…"

"Keep speculating about my personal life an' I might just forget how useful you've been," Sano said, keeping his voice as friendly as he could. He felt rather than saw Nishita flinch and grinned savagely as he stepped out into the street.

Then the grin faded as quickly as it had appeared. Fuckin' hell. As if scarin' a small operator like Nishita was anything to be proud of. But he hadn't been a lot to cheer him up in the past week: there hadn't been any more murders, which was great for property values but didn't do jack to clear Kenshin. The police were starting to lean on Kaoru. As days had passed without any more deaths, and she still refused to turn Kenshin over, they had started to make noises like they thought that maybe she was complicit, somehow. Hiruma's contact in the department was doing his best to make it the working theory, and not just a possibility.

Damn.

The rumor mill was churning, too. Public sentiment was slowly shifting against Kaoru: she was being selfish, the whispers went, refusing to hand over her mad slave because her pride had been offended by the police officer's actions. She was endangering the entire community because of a childish grudge. It was unconscionable. And so on. It wouldn't be long until someone got riled up enough to do something stupid.

Sano checked the sun and scowled, chewing thoughtfully on the fishbone in his mouth. It had been about two days since he'd left the signal for Shinomori, and that was about how long it usually took
him to get a response out. Maybe it was worth wandering over there.

Besides, he'd run out of contacts.

~*~

There were about a dozen dead drops scattered around Edo that he knew about: he was certain that there were more, but they were probably used by those other cells he wasn't supposed to know existed. It wasn't that anyone lacked confidence in him or his abilities, but Edo was too damn big for one person to handle. Sano was pretty sure that his group was the keystone, though. Or maybe he was supposed to think that. He tried not to think about it, actually, because you needed a mind like a goddamn corkscrew to plan this shit and the headaches just weren't worth it.

He still wasn't sure why the captain had tapped him to lead instead of someone with a twistier psyche. But after watching Megumi and Shinomori plot for a few weeks, he'd started to think that maybe it'd been because he wasn't professionally paranoid. That the captain had chosen him because he wasn't a genius, and he knew that he wasn't: he would listen to the sneaky folk and make sure they had the time and space they needed to do their jobs instead of getting so far up his own ass that he could see daylight coming the other way. He could receive sensitive information without needing to speculate on it, and he was loyal to the cause for its own sake.

And he'd do whatever it took to protect his people. Which would have been more valuable to the captain than the ability to overthink a bowl of natto.

The dead drop he'd used this time was an abandoned shrine on the outskirts of what had been a fashionable neighborhood about ten years ago. There had been a fire, however, and the area had never really recovered. It wasn't exactly a slum, but it wasn't the kind of place that respectable people did more than pass through on their way to somewhere else. The shrine had been dedicated to the local guardian deity, who had apparently been asleep on the job when the fire swept through.

He'd left the signal for Shinomori wrapped around a branch of the old offering-tree; it was gone, so he'd at least gotten the message. But there wasn't anything wrapped in its place, so he either didn't have or hadn't yet acquired the information. Sano kicked a rock, for lack of anything more useful to do, and turned to leave.

Shinomori was standing under the shrine gate.

"Sagara."

"Aoshi."

Shinomori nodded as he approached, his cold eyes looking right through Sano. It had annoyed the hell out of him, at first, until he'd realized that Shinomori wasn't trying to talk down to him. He was just naturally icy. But it still got under Sano's skin a little, so he'd started using Shinomori's first name as if they were old friends. If Shinomori cared, he'd never shown it.

"You got what I asked for?"

"No." He stopped as he said it, well out of Sano's range. Sano eyed him warily; Shinomori was a competent enough fighter to be doing it deliberately.

"No like you haven't gotten it yet or no like you ain't gonna be able to get it, period?"

"The latter." Shinomori's voice was even and calm, but he drew back a little bit, bracing himself. Sano sneered, as angry about the spy's apparent belief that he couldn't control himself as the news
he'd just been given. Sometimes you didn't get what you were after. It happened. You found another way. Maybe Shinomori wanted them to believe he was a god, but Sano knew for a damn fact that he bled the same as anyone.

"You mind if I ask why?" he asked, careful not to clench his fists.

"I cannot justify the expenditure of my resources." There was nothing in Shinomori's face, now, not even the professional caution that had been there a minute ago.

It took Sano a minute to parse the sentence. Then his fists did clench, as black fury – hey there, buddy, long time no see – rose out of the pit under his heart.

"What you mean," Sano said, very carefully, because it was important to get this right, "is that you can, but you ain't gonna."

"Correct."

Impulse became action and Sano launched himself at Shinomori, snarling. It was stupid; he knew it was stupid as soon as he did it. He was just past caring, because Kaoru was in danger and Kaoru was a slaveowner and the little life he'd managed to carve out for himself beyond the struggle had gone all to shit and he had nothing left to remind him that there would be an after-the-war.

Shinomori stepped aside, batting at Sano's extended fist. Sano was expecting it: he ducked the counter and spun on his heel, bringing his knee up for a kick. But Shinomori was gone. He'd retreated instead of engaging, sliding a good few yards down the path, and held up his hands in the most conciliatory gesture Sano had ever seen from the cold-blooded bastard.

"Sagara," he said, calm as ever, but there might have been a hint of compassion buried behind his eyes. "This is foolish."

"So we're supposed to do fucking what, exactly? Sit around with our thumbs up our ass and let the missy deal with it?" Sano cracked his knuckles, advancing. Shinomori held his ground. "Cause if nothing else, a paranoid fuck like you oughta know that if she goes down, she'll take the rest of us down with her no matter how hard she tries not to."

"No." Shinomori fell into an easy fighting stance, and Sano grinned savagely. So he was only willing to let the first attack go. Good. The man had some fucking pride after all. "Sagara. I do not suggest that you leave Miss Kamiya unprotected."

"Then what are you suggesting?" Sano held his stance, but he held his position, too. Because as much as the rage was screaming for sweat and struggle and blood on the pavement, for something simple and easy and clean –

– he was the leader. He had a job to do. The captain had trusted him, and he wouldn't betray that trust.

Deep breath.

He let his hands fall to his side.

"Talk," he ground out, barely conscious of the world outside the blood pounding in his ears.

"Kihei Hiruma desires the manslayer, does he not?" Shinomori seemed to shrug, almost. "Let him have what he wants."
Sano stared for a second, gaping. It was simple – simple and brutal and perfectly rational, and it hadn't even crossed his mind.

"Missy'll never stand for it," he said automatically.

"It is no longer her decision to make." Shinomori relaxed, insofar as the man ever relaxed, and his hand stopped hovering near his shortsword. "She is not the only person involved in this, Sagara. Will you jeopardize everything for one girl's foolish ideals?"

There was the strangest light in his eyes: flickering like fire but cold as winter. Sano looked away.

He could. If there was any situation that called for invoking his authority, it was this one. If Hiruma stepped up his game, there was every chance that he'd uncover the cell. Operational security had to be maintained, at any cost – there was too much at stake. The potential payoff of Kaoru's project was what, exactly? One maybe rehabilitated slave, who may one day be able to function as a normal human being? How did that benefit the cause? How did that help plan for the coming storm?

It didn't. One potential, future fighter, weighed against the entire Edo operation… there was no contest.

Sano knew the equations. He knew the answer that the leader of the revolutionaries in Edo had to give. And he knew what he believed: he knew the answer that Sanosuke Sagara carried burning in him like a brand.

"Difficult decisions must be made in times of war," Shinomori said, softly. "She will come to understand this."

No, Sano wanted to say, she won't. Except he thought maybe she would: there had been a sheen in her eyes like the light on a blade lately, like something hard and relentless was revealing itself inside her. She'd mourn and she'd rage and she'd hate him for making the call. A month ago, he'd have known that she'd never forgive him for it. But now…

Now, she might understand. Because she'd had to make her own hard choices.

And that – that she had come to this point, after he'd tried so damn hard to keep her out of it – made him want to turn the manslayer over just for spite. Which made him want to puke and hit something. Or possibly himself. For being the pettiest fucking asshole this side of China.

That didn't mean that turning Kenshin over wasn't the best decision. Shinomori wouldn't have suggested it if it wasn't. Could he justify refusing just 'cause he was worried about looking like a petty asshole?

Sano turned his head and spat, trying to get the bad taste out of his mouth. Shinomori didn't say anything, just stood and watched. Sano looked at him, then at the sky, then at the ground, hoping to see something written there. Hoping for time, and wisdom that he didn't have. Hoping against hope that he'd see the captain walking towards him, with that small smile and calm air, the way Sano tried to remember him; hoping that he'd come and take this decision away.

He didn't find anything. The captain was dead, and staying that way.

With a snarl, he spun around and started to walk away.

"Where are you going?"

"To fucking think about it!" he spat over his shoulder, and left.
He'd lied.

About five hours, two brawls, a jug of sake and more money lost than he actually had to hand later, that was the one thing he couldn't get out of his head. He'd told Shinomori: *I'm going to think about it* and he hadn't thought about it at all. He'd thrown himself headlong into a bright whirl, like a goddamn coward, and no wonder the fox-lady thought he was scum. Every time things got tough he ran for the hills.

He was aware, dimly, that he'd reached the maudlin self-loathing stage of the proceedings, and that if he didn't find a fight soon he was going to end up bawling in a corner.

Good thing he only drank where he was sure to find a fight.

Oh, look: here one came now, in the form of a very foolish young samurai with a fresh-shaved topknot and a sword he'd probably gotten from his daddy that very morning. Excellent. Sano pushed his jug to one side as the pup swaggered over, one hand on his sword hilt. He was a skinny little bastard, and still had traces of adolescent acne.

"Are you Sanosuke Sagara?" the pup demanded, voice breaking on the last syllable.

"Depends." Sano considered the kid, noting his resemblance to an inbred terrier, and decided that he would do quite nicely. No challenge in and of himself, of course, but if he couldn't goad the idiot into starting a full-on tavern brawl then he really was getting old. "Who's askin'?"

"I am." The boy smirked and hooked an ankle around the stool, pulling it out and sitting down with his elbows propped on the table.

"I don't recall invitin' you to sit, kid."

"I have information about the murders outside your woman's dojo."

Sano caught himself just before he rolled his eyes. That particular rumor really had some legs to it; he didn't mind it, exactly, since it kept Yahiko and the missy safe from most of the criminal elements, but he dreaded the day it got back to Kaoru.

"That so?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "Now how is it that some pretty-boy samurai whose balls just dropped knows somethin' no one's heard dick about?"

"Because they're not my father's son." The boy's eyes were cold, and he spat the sentence like a curse. "My father owes a gambling debt to a certain individual. In payment for that debt, he allows that man's brother and his filthy followers to defile a training hall which was once part of my family's estate. I can bring you there, for a price."

"And what price would that be?" Sano leaned forward despite himself, the sake wearing away at his ability to control his excitement. It was the only lead he'd had all week. And if it was legit, he wouldn't have to make the choice at all…

"A favor." The boy met his eyes squarely, and Sano grudgingly gave him a single point for effort. "I may have need of your services in the future."

"Sounds like you're getting' them now." Sano forced himself to lean back and lace his hands behind his head. "Defile's a pretty strong word. Seems to me that if you could get those folks out on your own, you would'a done it already."
The boy flushed and looked away. Sano chuckled, feeling suddenly generous; maybe it was the resemblance to Yahiko in the pup's profile.

"Look," he said. "You're new at this, an' I'm in a good mood right now, so I'll cut you a break. You take me to this training hall 'a yours, and dependin' on what we find there, we'll negotiate. If nothing else, kid," he added when the boy seemed to balk, "I'll remember your face as a useful kinda guy. My opinion's worth a fair bit 'round here."

"Fine," the boy grated out from between clenched teeth. "Come with me, Sagara."

The training hall he was talking about was situated on the very outskirts of Edo, in a patch of forest that bore the hallmarks of cultivated land left to run wild. Trees still bore echoes of the elegant shapes they'd been pruned and wired to grow in, and there were flowers putting forth blooms that didn't grow outside of gardens. It was getting dark by the time they arrived, and their shadows stretched long and mingled in front of them.

There wasn't anyone there. There were signs that people did come there – cracked pipes and struck matches abandoned in the weeds, footprints, a half-dozen demolished training dummies and a certain odor, of blood and sweat and stale alcohol. Sano told the kid to stay put and went inside the hall proper.

No one had trained here for a long time. There were some cushions, and dice for gambling; a corner full of weapons and gear; and a long, low table covered in paper. He went for the paperwork and his heart stopped.

In the center of the table, in a cleared space, was a map of Kaoru's neighborhood with a dagger through her home and a note – a single word.

*Tonight.*

~*_~

Dinner was quiet. Dinner had been quiet for the past week, ever since the police had come and tried to take Kenshin away. Neither Kaoru nor Yahiko had anything to say.

Kaoru knew that she should say something to her student. He'd been attacked, which was nothing in and of itself, but he'd been attacked and not seen it coming, not been able to stop it. Had his home invaded and had to rely on someone else to defend it. It rankled in him; she could see the frustration building up behind his eyes. He was pushing himself even harder than usual, to the point where it was doing more harm than good, and Tae had confided in her today that she'd found Tsubame crying after she and Yahiko had quarreled over something trivial.

She sighed heavily.

"What?" he asked, not looking up.

*It's nothing,* she started to say, and changed her mind.

"Tae tells me you got into a fight with Tsubame yesterday," she said mildly. His grip on his chopsticks tightened.

"So what?"

"Well, Tsubame seemed pretty upset..."
"Should I care?" he said abruptly, sneering. "She's just a girl. It's not like she understands anything."

"I thought she was your friend."

He put his rice bowl down with a decisive thump.

"Well, you thought wrong. She's just someone I know. That's all."

"I see." Kaoru took a sip of her soup, trying not to taste it. She'd added too much miso – or, well, she thought that was what was wrong, maybe there wasn't enough stock – anyway, the end result had somehow ended up spicy enough to burn and at the same time, completely tasteless.

"What did you fight about?" she asked, grimacing as she swallowed.

"Nothing." Yahiko chewed ferociously on the piece of fish. "She's stupid, that's all."

"Yahiko…"

"What?"

Kaoru closed her eyes, giving up on dinner. She wasn't that hungry, anyway, and this needed to happen. Something had to break the tension inside him, and it wouldn't be the first time she'd deliberately made herself his target to get out whatever poison was building inside him.

"I know you're upset about what's happening," she said, fixing Yahiko with her firmest teacher's look, "but that's no reason to be cruel to Tsubame. You need to apologize to her."

"No." He folded his arms over his chest, glaring at her.

"Yahiko."

"Make me."

"Yahiko." She slammed her hand flat against the wooden table, snapping his name like a battle cry, and he jumped a good half a foot in the air. "That is enough. There is no excuse for how you treated Tsubame and you will make things right with her!"

"Why should I?" He was suddenly on his feet, red-faced, clenching his fists, and the veins in his neck were straining. "What's the point? What's the point of your stupid school, anyway? What's the point of being strong when it doesn't stop bad things from happening?"

"Why should I?" He was suddenly on his feet, red-faced, clenching his fists, and the veins in his neck were straining. "What's the point? What's the point of your stupid school, anyway? What's the point of being strong when it doesn't stop bad things from happening?"

Yahiko's voice broke. Kaoru sat back, staring at her student as his chest heaved with the effort of controlling himself. Tears of rage formed in the corners of his eyes.

He threw out one arm, gesturing violently in the general direction of the storehouse. "You didn't see him, Kaoru. He's the best fighter I've ever seen! He's better than you, he might even be better than Sano!" His voice was hoarse. "And look at him – look what happened to him! So why should I bother being strong, why should I go through all this bullshit with protecting people and helping them when that's not enough? Might as well give up, right? I mean – "

He fell on one knee, suddenly, slamming his fist into the floor with an incoherent cry.

"...if it's never gonna be enough, no matter how strong I get…"

And then he couldn't speak anymore. He was breathing hard, sucking in long gasps of air, holding them tight and panting them out again. Kaoru stood.
"…Yahiko."

He flinched away from her as she knelt back down next to him, but that was the only resistance he offered as she pulled him into a tight hug.

She'd been cruel to him. To all of them, really, but especially to him. He needed safety so badly; needed to know that tomorrow would be like today, and that today had been like yesterday. He'd spent most of his life never knowing where his next meal would come from or who he could trust, and it didn't matter how much he knew that things would never get that bad again. Not when the police came with knives and broke down his door.

Yahiko wasn't frustrated; he was terrified. And it was a mark of how badly frightened he was that he wasn't protesting at the top of his lungs over being held close. Instead he only curled up more tightly.

He was always so full of himself, it was easy to forget that he was still just a child.

Eventually he shoved away and she let him go. He knelt in front of her with his hands fisted on his knees, shaking.

"…I think I kind of hate him, a little," he said finally. "If he hadn't come here, none of this would have happened. If you hadn't found him…"

Kaoru's heart froze in her chest.

"I'm sorry," she offered, lowering her eyes. "I don't know what else to say."

He sniffed one last time and got up.

"Yeah, I know. Uh. I should take dinner out there, shouldn't I?"

"You don't have to," she said, heart aching. "He's my responsibility."

"It's not his fault." Yahiko scuffed at the ground. "I know it's not. But – I don't have anyone else to blame, you know?"

Blame me, she wanted to say, but couldn't quite make the words come out. Blame me, because this was all her fault – she'd just charged ahead, without thinking, let her rage carry her over the cliff and now everyone else was falling with her. She was supposed to be the one protecting them. Making sure that they had a home where they were safe. Giving, never taking; and she was asking so much of them…

What else could she have done, though? When Kenshin's eyes had widened and fixed on her like a compass on the north star… how could she have turned away from someone who needed her so badly?

Yahiko gathered up a tray, quiet, and then turned to leave.

"Yahiko."

He stopped.

"Wait." Kaoru took a deep breath, not knowing what she was going to say but feeling the words in her throat, the dim shape of them like a mountain on the far horizon. "It's not… being strong isn't… you're right." She swallowed. "Just being strong isn't enough. There's more to it than that – it's not just fighting. It's – it's…"
She closed her eyes for a moment.

"It's not as simple as just fighting."

It felt almost right: like she'd put the best words she could around it because she didn't know the right ones, not yet. Yahiko nodded.

"Yeah," he said, a little ruefully. "I figured as much. I just – I think, like, I don't want it to be. You know?"

"I know." She exhaled again, too strong to be just a sigh. "And I'm sorry, Yahiko, I really am."

He shrugged, standing in the doorway and silhouetted against the dying light, and looked for a moment like the man he was going to become.

"It can't be helped, right?"

And then he left. Kaoru began to put the dishes away. Neither of them had eaten much. And she'd barely been sleeping; she kept waking up in the dark, heart racing, looking around for the source of the disturbance and finding nothing. Because it wasn't a presence, it was an absence. Kenshin was part of her life, now, and having him not there felt like – like reaching for teakettle you think is full, and finding that it's empty. Or searching for something small and important and not finding it no matter how hard you looked.

Except that she knew exactly where he was. She made sure to stop and check on him every time she crossed the yard; she went to see him even if she had no reason and he was never any different. Kneeling in the center of the floor, answering any direct query but otherwise silent. There had been no repeat of the first night, when he'd almost touched her through the bars and he'd been close enough for her to feel his heat.

It wasn't only guilt at locking him away. It wasn't only her duty as the sole heir to the Kamiya Kasshin, to the sword that protects. It was that…

It was that Kenshin was hers.

She thought it quietly, in the hopes that the gods wouldn't hear. But she couldn't not feel it: when she'd come home to find the police trying to take him there had been a split second of instinctive, possessive rage that someone had dared lay a hand on him.

Kaoru shuddered, nearly convulsing, and almost dropped the plates. She shouldn't feel that way, shouldn't… she should only be outraged because he was a person in trouble, a person being treated unfairly. She had no right to feel – the way she felt when someone threatened Yahiko only darker, because Yahiko could at least fight back and Kenshin couldn't. Kenshin had no choice. If she didn't protect him, no one would; if she hadn't claimed him, anyone would have been able to pick him up and hurt him…

She dumped the dishes in the sink with enough force that one of them cracked. Scoffing at herself, she threw it out.

"Excuses, excuses," she muttered, and got to scrubbing.

~*~

The lantern inside the storage shed cast a low, steady light outwards, split by the shadows of the bars in the doors. Yahiko hesitated at the bottom of the steps, biting his lip. He felt hollowed-out and
shaky, uncertain of his footing.

"Hey, Kenshin," he called out, voice wavering. "I brought dinner."

He set the tray down for a second to open the hatch. Kenshin was already standing by the door; from Yahiko's low angle, he could only see the cloth of his shirt. There were a few tricky moments as he lifted the tray through but it worked out fine in the end, with no spills. He heard the quiet thud of the tray being set on the floor, and then Kenshin passed the old one back through.

"Thanks," Yahiko muttered, and started to walk away.

Then he stopped.

"Kenshin."

His heart was loud, pounding rabbit-fast in his throat, and he wasn't sure exactly what he was going to say. Except that – that he wasn't done, dammit, he couldn't possibly have kept going after Kaoru – after the way she'd reacted, but there was still this oily dark thing curled up in his gut that needed to be spat out. And it was Kenshin's fault, at least a little bit.

"Yes, young master?"

"You know," he said, breath coming sharp and hard again, knowing that he was being cruel and too tangled up to care, "Do you know? How much trouble you're causing for us?"

Kenshin didn't respond, not with words. But there was a sense of withdrawal, of a wounded animal searching for ground to go to, and Yahiko couldn't stop a snarl from escaping.

"Don't run away, dammit!" he snapped, and spun around the face the storehouse. He was far enough away now that he could see Kenshin framed in the barred windows, bangs falling forward to hide his eyes. "This is your fault, you know! All this is happening because – because she's never gonna give up on you now, 'cause she made you a promise, and she'll keep it even if it kills her. Do you understand that? Can you? Do you care about anything that's happened? About what's happening to her?"

He kicked the step, hard, because it was that or stomp his foot and he was being enough of a child for today.

"I don't get you!" he cried. "Do you got any idea how much she's putting on the line for you? And you just sit there, not doing anything – and Magumi and Kaoru say it's not your fault but I don't buy it, alright? I think you know, you just don't wanna. Like you're scared or something. Well, if you haven't figured out by now that all she wants to do is help then you're never gonna, so you should do us all a favor and leave if you're not going to try to meet her halfway a little, okay? Because the only reason any of this is happening is 'cause she wants to protect you!"

Yahiko glared up at him, fists clenched tight, and his nails dug into the skin of his palms. Kenshin stared back, eyes wide and pale through his bangs, looking like he'd just been slapped. Like Tsubame had, when he'd exploded at her; that same shocky, trembling look of a person who just doesn't understand and never will because they've never felt that way; because asking them too was like asking a blind man to describe the color blue...

All of the anger suddenly ran out of his bones.

"Just… she's really trying, okay?" he muttered, looking away as his face flushed with shame. "I mean, I don't – I get it. I get what happened to you. I know I shouldn't blame you for it, but… I don't
like it, okay? I don't like that she's doing so much for you when you're probably never gonna be able to give anything back. Not anything that counts, anyway."

He shook his head and started to turn around to leave. There was a low chuckle behind him. Yahiko froze, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end.

"I wouldn't," a deep voice drawled, rich with amusement. "We can't afford to have witnesses, after all. It'd be a shame if you got a good look at our faces when you have your whole life ahead of you."

"Hey," said a second voice, nasal and cackling. "Isn't he that girl's little brother or something? You think she might cooperate if we demonstrated the consequences on him, first?"

Yahiko closed his eyes, ignoring the threat, and tried to figure out how many there were. He could feel them standing behind him – two? Maybe three? – and he hadn't even heard them, he'd been so busy yelling.

He didn't even have his practice sword.

"Hmm. You've got a point." Deep-voice, again. "Sorry, kid. If you hold still, it'll be over soon."

A meaty hand landed on his shoulder.

"Get fucked," Yahiko growled, and bit down on it. Warm copper burst across his tongue and the man attacking him howled, loosening his grip. Yahiko lunged forward and slammed his shoulder into his attacker's gut; he stumbled backward, and Yahiko ran for it. There were too many – and he had to warn Kaoru –

There were three of them: one short, squat fellow, clutching his hand; one rail-thin and grinning; and the last one heavily muscled. All of them had blades. Skinny stuck out his sheathed sword and tripped him. Yahiko rolled with the fall, grabbing a handful of dirt, and flung it up towards Muscle's face. He coughed, batting at the particles, and Yahiko tried to break right, away from Fatso. But Skinny had moved to block him and he found himself boxed in, with nowhere to go except back up the stairs to the storehouse.

"So much for the easy way," Skinny leered, unsheathing his sword and licking along the blade. "Well, at least we'll get to have some fun."

Yahiko crouched, wild fear building inside him. His heart hammered loud in his chest and he bared his teeth.

No. Not his heart. Too loud for that.

The storehouse door. As if someone was throwing themselves against it, methodically, trying to force it open. Yahiko looked over his shoulder, eyes wide, in time to hear wood crack and see the door burst apart as Kenshin launched himself at the attackers.

~*~

Kaoru finished the dishes in record time, scrubbing them until her hands were raw. They'd never been so clean; she'd never felt so filthy. She ran her fingers ruefully over the chapped back of one hand, shaking her head. Well. There was no helping it.

She'd do a few kata before bed, tonight. Maybe it would help her sleep.

Her room was one the way to the training hall and she decided to walk outside, instead of through
the halls. It was a wonderful night, with a charge in the air that spoke of a coming storm. Rain would be welcome; a storm even more so. The sound might lull her to sleep; and even if it didn't, at least she'd be able to watch it as she stayed up.

And then she thought of Kenshin, alone in the storehouse. Was the roof still sound? She thought so… what if he didn't like storms? What if…?

Kaoru shook her head and paused, torn between her room and practice clothes and going to check on Kenshin. She decided on Kenshin, first; check on him, make sure the storehouse roof wasn't going to leak, and then train.

She had just passed the bathhouse, absorbed in her thoughts, when she realized that she wasn't the only one breathing in the shadows and froze.

"Who's there?"

A figure emerged from the shadows: a monster of a man, flanked by half a dozen others, all armed with blades and leering at her. Kaoru took a step back, thinking over the distance between her current position and the training hall – just far enough to be dangerous – and cast her senses out, hoping she could detect anyone standing between her and the hall. There didn't seem to be; it seemed that they were relying on a show of force, not their wits.

Kihei stepped out from the giant's wake. A silent snarl wrenched itself from her throat.

"I do apologize for the interruption, Miss Kamiya," he smarmed. "I had hoped to do this through legal means, but you did insist on being stubborn. You brought this on yourself, you know."

Kaoru didn't wait around for the festivities to start. She bolted for the training hall, the giant and his thugs hot on her heels. She had just enough time to grab a wooden sword from the rack before they caught up with her. The giant advanced; the thugs hung back, block the exits.

"So…" he sneered. "You're the little girl who's been giving my brother so much trouble. Not much to look at, are you?"

She brought to sword down in front of her in a ready stance, keeping her gaze level even as her heart tried to hammer its way out of her chest.

"Why don't you come and find out?"

He grinned, yellowed teeth flashing in the dim light.

"Don't mind if I do."

He charged. She stepped neatly to one side, striking at his wrist; the hit was clean, but he was wearing gauntlets under his sleeves and she only cracked the armor. He recovered quickly and slashed at her side; she spun away just in time, feeling the tip of his blade catch and tear through the side of her kimono. Kaoru thrust at his kidneys and hit a rib instead. The bone gave way with a crack, and he roared with laughter.

"I suppose I have to take you seriously now!"

He raised his blade and struck down at her head; she blocked it, barely, but her wooden sword splintered uselessly in her hands. She stared at the remains for a moment – a moment more than she could afford – and the giant grabbed her with one hand by the front of her kimono and lifted her straight off the ground. Kaoru kicked out, clawing at his hands, but his arm was too long and her legs
were too short to hit him.

"Well, that was more interesting than I thought it would be," he said, smug with triumph. "But something tells me that you haven't learned your lesson yet, have you, little girl?"

"Go… to hell…" she choked out, vision dimming. "Won't… get away with it…"

The giant just laughed, and she had never felt this helpless before. He turned to face his thugs, holding her up like a prize, displaying her like the enemy's captured flag.

"Well? Who here wants the first taste?"

Outside, the storm broke.

~*~

Kenshin hit the three men like a tsunami. They were armed and he wasn't, but that didn't seem to matter one bit; he sent Fatso flying ass-over-teakettle with a careless toss and slammed the blade of his hand into Muscle's neck in the same movement. The blow became a grab, and suddenly Muscle was on the ground, clutching his throat and coughing.

Skinny had time to draw his sword and try to strike. Kenshin caught his wrist and twisted him off his feet, slamming him into the ground. Then the man's sword was in Kenshin's hand.

Yahiko scrambled back reflexively as Kenshin turned to him, the blade gleaming in the lantern light pouring from the storehouse doors. The three men were either unconscious or smart enough to stay down. Kenshin stared down at Yahiko, eyes not dull. Not dull at all.

"Kaoru," Yahiko said, forcing himself onto shaking feet. "Have to warn – "

But Kenshin was already flying across the yard, sword in hand. Yahiko followed as fast as he could, leaving the three thugs to their own devices. The sky opened up with a peal of thunder as the long-promised storm poured down, turning the ground to splattered mud.

~*~

Kaoru was blacking out. That was probably a mercy. The giant still had her hoisted in his hand for now, but the thugs were gathering around her with leers that had nothing to do with bloodlust. Despite it all, her lungs still gasped for air; the reflex to breathe was too strong and there was just enough slack in the giant's grip to prevent her from passing out.

He looked up at her, smirking, and she realized that he was doing it on purpose. To keep her from doing anything but breathing.

"Now, now, no pushing," he said, almost jovially. "Wait your turn. There's plenty to go around."

He began to lower her to the floor, and all hell broke loose. The men closest to the doors screamed; the screams were cut short and they went flying in a flurry of bodies and blood spattering against the wood. There was a flash of lightning and she saw flame-red hair slithering through the mob, leaving devastation in its wake. In the space between the lightning and the thunder the thugs were all tossed against walls or thrown to the floor, and the next flash revealed only Kenshin standing in the center of the training hall, blood dripping off his sword.

No… she had time to think, and then the giant threw her aside. The impact of the wall on her back knocked the breath from her and she slid to the ground, coughing.
"Well…" the giant rumbled. "So much for obsolete!"

He charged, raising his sword above his head and Kenshin was suddenly gone. Kaoru forced her head up in time to see the giant's eyes raise towards the ceiling; in time to see Kenshin falling towards him like a meteor and she wanted to turn away from the spray of blood and brains that she knew would follow but she would not –

The sword hit and the giant fell, skull still intact. No blood.

...what?

Kaoru lay stunned as Kenshin walked over to her, sword still loose in his hand. She squinted at it, barely able to make it out in the dim light and her own dizziness.

…the blunt side… he reversed the blade…

He looked down on her, eyes bright with something beyond rage or pain or fear: this is was not the frightened, unresponsive man she'd known. This was someone – someone who was no longer human. Emotionless and feral. The manslayer. Kanryu's manslayer.

The sword rose, almost threatening her. She stared into his eyes, trying to understand.

"…Kenshin…"

His grip on the sword tightened and he took a step forward. Was he trying to kill her? Why? Had she –

And then she closed her eyes, because what did it matter anyway?

"…thank you," she said, and sighed.

~*~

Yahiko stumbled through the rain, legs shaking. Kenshin had outpaced him entirely. He heard shouts and muffled screams coming from the training hall and shoved a hank of hair from his face just in time to see the fat creep – Kihei – stumbled off the training hall porch.

Sano had a saying: there's a time to think and a time to act, and they're never the same time.

Yahiko flung himself at Kihei. There was no grace or discipline in the attack; it was pure dirty street fighting. He gouged and bit and kicked Kihei down to his knees, and then he did it some more, until he was damn sure that the little freak wasn't getting up again without a doctor's help.

When he finally had the fat creep lying facedown in the mud and moaning, he took a long look at his handiwork, at the bites and scratches and purpling bruises. There was a taste of blood in his mouth.

Then he threw up.

~*~

A thud, a clatter of steel on wood and her eyes flew open. The sword was lying a few feet away, still dripping blood, and Kenshin had fallen to one knee before her, head bowed.

"Mistress. Permit this worthless one to assist you."

"I…" Her eyes closed again, involuntarily. "No… Yahiko. Is Yahiko…?"
"The young master is safe," he said flatly.

"I need to see him." She forced herself up on her hands. "Where's Yahiko?"

Kenshin was at her side, then, easing her up. His hands were very warm.

"Yahiko!" she called. "Yahiko, where are you!"

"I'm here." He stumbled into the hall, wiping his mouth. "Got the other bastard…"

"What?"

"Kihei. Got 'im."

The rain thrummed on the roof; the scent of blood and fear enveloped her and she shuddered, heat prickling under her eyelids. She tilted her head back to keep the tears inside.

"We have to get the police – no. Megumi. She'll know – I can't think right now, I'm sorry."

"I'll get her," Yahiko said, kneeling at Kaoru's side. Kenshin glanced at him for a moment, then looked away.

"But…"

"I'm not hurt, and I'm not a suspected killer," Yahiko pointed out, face pale. His hands were shaking. "Please – let me do this."

"…Yahiko." She grabbed her student's hand. "Be careful."

"Always," he said. She squeezed his hand and he squeezed back, looking at Kenshin. Some silent communication seemed to pass between them. Then he took off running.

"Kenshin… could you help me up, please?"

He slid his arms around her and picked her up. She considered protesting; then she gave up and let him carry her out of the hall and into the rain. It beat down in almost a solid mass, soaking her through to the skin in the short time it took to walk from the training hall to the covered porch. By the time they made it inside she was shivering, and not only from cold; she couldn't seem to stop seeing the men clustered around her, reaching for her like starving dogs for a bone.

A hot tear ran down her face and she wiped at it.

"Kenshin, put me down – I need to get out of these clothes before I catch cold." Keeping her voice even took almost more effort than she had to spare. He set her down gently and stood back. She took a few steps and then her knees buckled under her.

He knelt at her side again, hands warm on her elbow and the small of her back.

"Mistress."

"Don't," she said, and the tears were flowing freely now. It was all tangling together: the men and Kenshin and blood on her father's floor. "I – please. Just…"

He withdrew, leaving the room. Something small and terribly young inside her cried at the loss of human contact. She forced it away, because that wasn't the point – because she had no right to ask anything of him, even now, because he'd have to do it.
And then he came back. She looked up to see him carrying the blanket from her room; he draped it around her and tucked it under her chin, still blank-eyed and expressionless: but his hands were very gentle. Then he backed away and sat against a wall, one knee drawn up and the other folded underneath, watching her.

"Kenshin…"

She snuggled into the blanket despite herself.

"Thank you," she said again.

~*~

The night passed in a blur of calming tea and police uniforms and Megumi's voice snapping orders and invective. Sano arrived shortly before Megumi and folded her into a bear hug, shaking; she was glad to let him. Yahiko came back with Megumi and the terribly cowed police a little while later, and Sano pulled him into the hug before he could protest. Kenshin watched them from the across the room, and she was too tired to try and read his eyes.

He hadn't actually killed anyone. The thugs were badly injured, and several of them would never be able to hold a sword again: there were enough lost fingers to make two whole hands. But he hadn't killed. He'd kept to his orders and he hadn't killed.

The officer who'd delivered the news had looked slightly stunned as he'd said it.

Eventually, everything was sorted out: the Hiruma brothers were carted off, Megumi returned to the clinic after leaving Kaoru a packet of sedative tea and strict instructions for its use, and Sano told Kaoru and Yahiko to go to bed, because he'd stand guard for the rest of the night.

Kaoru had recovered enough by then to make it to bed on her own. Kenshin followed her, two steps behind and one to the left. She didn't protest when he failed to wait outside for her to change, mostly because she didn't plan to bother with changing into her sleep clothes. Instead she stumbled over to her mattress, still wrapped in the blanket, and collapsed in a curled heap.

Kenshin settled himself behind his screen, and she slept the whole night through.
It was a grey day, very windy. Kaoru's hair whipped around her face and caught in her mouth as she walked home from the market, Kenshin a solid, silent presence behind her. The wind tugged at him, too, but he didn't try to keep his clothing straight or his hair out of his eyes.

Kaoru finally stopped halfway across the bridge, snarling as she undid her ribbon and yanked her hair back. So what if pulling back her bangs made her face look pinched?

"Stupid wind," she muttered, retying the ribbon. "Who gave it permission…?"

She thought she saw Kenshin almost smile, in the corner of her eye. When she looked at him fully he was as expressionless as ever, but…

He'd been different since that night two weeks ago. Not better – he was still quiet and watchful and absolutely obedient – but different. He still did exactly as he was told, without hesitation or complaint; he cooked and stood guard and helped around the house and it didn't seem like anything had really changed, if you looked at the surface; yet it had, on some far deeper level.

The morning after the attack she'd come into the dining room to find him kneeling by the rice bucket next to the table. She and Yahiko served themselves, usually; if they had company over then it fell to her, as the oldest woman of the house, to keep everyone's bowl filled. His head had been bowed, bangs covering his eyes, and she hadn't been sure what it meant or what to do about it so she'd settled herself in her usual spot, eyeing him warily.

He'd picked up a bowl, filled it with rice, and held it out to her; she'd taken it, uncertain, and thanked him softly. There'd been no response, not even a flicker of his eyelids, but he'd stayed by the table for the rest of breakfast: the first time that he'd ever been present during a meal.

And there had been more things like that, little things, like a hot bath ready and waiting when she got home from giving lessons or a plate of riceballs left at the training hall door when she was running late and didn't have time for lunch. *You've got to watch out for when they start taking liberties, that horrible old vegetable seller had said, even helpful ones; most times it leads to 'em getting ideas above their station…*

She'd asked Megumi about it, about what it could mean, and Megumi had said that it could be what the old man had claimed. That he was coming back to himself, slowly, testing the limits of her authority in the safest way he could and waiting for the confidence to pull away. It could also be that his bond to her was deepening: that he was becoming more loyal, more trusting. Either were good outcomes, and regardless of which one it was the best thing she could do would be to act as though nothing had changed and his behavior wasn't anything to remark on. To wait a little while and let things settle. Then start offering him choices, small ones, and see if he could make them – if he was willing to make them. Nothing drastic or open-ended, just choices between one thing or another, and then see how he responded.

So she'd asked, today, if he wanted to go to market with her or take the laundry in. He'd hesitated for a moment, tilting his head forward so that his eyes were hidden, and said *mistress, this worthless one will accompany you.*

Such a small thing to be so happy about. But it was progress, finally; it was a choice and he'd made it and her heart had swollen in her throat, caught somewhere between joy and tears.
Yahiko wasn't with them. He'd been working longer hours at the Akabeko, saying that he was saving up for something and no, he wasn't going to tell her what it was because it was none of your business, ugly. He'd been quiet since the night of the attack – quiet for him, anyway. She'd knew why: she'd seen Kihei a few days afterwards, at the formal inquiry before the trial. His face had been a mass of bruises, one eye still swollen shut, and he'd flinched a little when he saw Yahiko. She'd expected her student to smirk back, proud of his accomplishment; instead his mouth had twisted briefly downwards and he'd looked away, eyes dark.

Sano had been at the inquiry too, leaning against the back wall with his arms crossed over his chest and glowering at the Hiruma brothers as they knelt below the judge and the prosecutor. Promising, silently, that no amount of money could save them, that if the legal system didn't get them then he'd damn well would. It hadn't been necessary – they'd been caught in the act, after all; even wealth can't save someone from bald stupidity – and Officer Ryunosuke had sealed their fate by testifying that he'd discovered that a member of his squad was taking payments from them. They'd run this kind of scam before, apparently, and the young policeman had flushed with angry embarrassment as he described his subordinate's misdeeds.

The trial, scheduled for a few months later, was largely a formality. The brothers would be held in Edo jail until then.

Officer Ryunosuke had caught up to her in the hallway after the inquiry and apologized, still red-faced. He had been genuinely sorry, that was the worst part – he'd blamed himself, for not realizing sooner that one of his officers was on the take. If he had figured things out just a bit sooner, she wouldn't have been attacked in her own home; everything that had happened had been his fault, he'd said, because he wasn't quick enough. And she'd managed to accept his apology gracefully right up until he'd bowed again, a little bashfully, and said it's a damn good thing you have such a loyal slave, Miss Kamiya. He's a credit to your skills.

She'd had to excuse herself, then, before she did something stupid. He'd told her to come to him if she ever needed help again, that she had an ally in the police now whenever she needed one, and she'd smiled and nodded and managed to walk away instead of running. Because it was a good thing that Ryunosuke had done by apologizing and offering to make it right, an honorable and upright thing, and yet he could look at Kenshin and see only a loyal animal. Only a slave.

So many believe, absolutely, that slavery is the natural order of things, Megumi had said. It's always been this way, after all; if it was wrong, someone would have changed it. There are reasons, of course, there are always reasons, but what they all come down to is this: if slavery is wrong then so are they, and they know that they're good people so slavery must be right.

Kaoru sighed a little and readjusted her basket, hair pulled firmly into a tail at the back of her head. The wind picked up, snatching breath from her mouth.

"Jeez!" She angled herself away from the wind as she stood, bracing her hands against her hips and glaring up at the sky. "If you want to have a storm, then go ahead and have one! But make up your mind, already; all this playing around is getting old."

"Mistress," Kenshin said flatly from somewhere behind her.

"Yes?" She turned towards him, the wind nudging her back. His head was bowed and his hands were clenched tight into fists; she was instantly on alert, because she'd only seen him like this once before, when Kihei had tried to buy him, and even then the reaction hadn't been this strong.

"Forgive this worthless one – " he started to say, face pale and drawn under bangs, and then she saw the man coming towards them with a grim light in his eyes.
Her first, horrified thought was that it was Gohei, that he'd escaped or been set free: but it was gone in half a heartbeat because the only thing this man had in common with Gohei was sheer size. Gohei had been blunt-featured and bearded. This man's face was angular and clean-shaven, and he wore a white cloak over his shoulders that swept out behind him, snapping in the wind.

There was a sword at his waist.

"Mistress," Kenshin said again, and fear shot through her because his voice was taut, on the verge of cracking, and his entire body was shaking as he stared at the ground. She looked back at the stranger, at the cold look in his eyes as he focused on Kenshin, and the fear sharpened into steel.

Kaoru stepped in front of Kenshin and hit the man with her best glare. The wind tore at her clothing, snatched at her hair and the breath that left her lungs, but she stood her ground even as the stranger finally fixed his eyes on her and his will bore down on hers. She would not yield.

The stranger was strong, frighteningly so. Her chest ached with the effort of drawing in air under his relentless power; her legs were watery and weak and she wanted nothing more than to fall to the ground and try to hide from his inexorable gaze.

*The sword that protects is not permitted to fail,* she remembered, and her spirit surged out from the depths of her being. The stranger raised an eyebrow. Suddenly she could breathe again.

"You can't have him," she said, voice strong even though her mouth was dry. "I don't care who you are, or what you want, what your relationship to Kanryu was or what rights you think you have. He's not for buying, begging, borrowing or stealing. You can't have him."

Her heart pounded in the hollow of her throat. The stranger held her gaze for a moment longer, and she couldn't look away but neither would she allow herself to flinch. It was like staring into the heart of a raging wildfire – except that wildfires can't help their nature, and she knew that this man was deciding whether or not she deserved to burn.

Then he snorted and flicked his eyes briefly away, breaking the connection. Her knees sagged a little, but she stayed on her feet.

"What I want," he rumbled, sounding almost amused, "is to know your name." Then he nodded over her shoulder, towards Kenshin. "And what connection you have with my former apprentice."

"...apprentice?" the girl repeated, very nearly squeaking in shock.

Hiko examined the young woman standing before him as the wind did its level best to tear him from his spot, assessing her surface and what that surface hid. She was putting up a good show, he'd give her that: to a lesser man she'd seem completely unafraid, and the world was full of lesser men. His former apprentice stood behind her, not quite cowering – some inner discipline was keeping him upright despite it all – but very, very close.

There was real fire in her eyes, and a will to protect that nearly smothered her fear entirely.

"Well?" he said. "I'm waiting."

"It's rude to demand someone's name before you introduce yourself," she snapped, recovering. "Who are you, and what do you mean by apprentice?"

"I asked first." He couldn't help smirking; it had been a while since anyone had stood up to him, and
there was something genuinely amusing about watching the girl try to stare him down. Like an angry mother hen scolding a mountain cat for coming too close to her chicks. Lucky for her: if she had reacted any other way he would have wrenched the truth from her by force. But she had slid between him and his wayward student without a second thought and her soul had snarled in outrage when he tried to force her to step aside, as though he was someone precious to her. That was reason enough to reserve judgment, for now.

"…Kaoru Kamiya," she said grudgingly. "And Kenshin is – " She glanced back over her shoulder. "– Kenshin is under my protection."

Her face hardened as she turned back to him. "Tell me who you are and what you want," she demanded again, eyes fierce.

"Under your protection?" Hiko looked past her, taking in his apprentice fully – the slave-mark on his cheek, the crest on his clothes – and his mouth pulled down into a bitter frown. "How much did you pay for him, girl?"

"Nothing," she bit back. "He was abandoned. I found him, I held him, and I took title. Now answer my question."

There was no pride in her voice or in the lines of her soul. Quite the opposite, actually: she said the words as though they were bitter medicine, necessary but hateful, and her stance tightened like she was taking a mortal blow.

He made a disparaging noise deep in his throat, annoyed at the complication. Judging the situation rightly would involve having a conversation with the girl for however long it took him to determine her motives and intentions. Which meant he would have to engage in social niceties, if only to calm her down. Which meant that yes, he should probably introduce himself. Damn.

"Seijuro Hiko," he said shortly. "Thirteenth Master of the Hiten Mitsurugi style, and that idiot’s teacher – or I was, until he ran away and got himself – well, you can see the result."

Kenshin grew paler as Hiko scrutinized him again. He hadn't quite believed the rumours when they’d first reached him: had, in fact, glowered at anyone who brought them to him until they trembled and ran away. No apprentice worthy of his school would have allowed themselves to be caught in such a way, after all, and he would never have chosen an apprentice unworthy of his school.

Even if, through some evil turn of events, the worst had happened, he knew perfectly well that his lost student was at the very least strong and dedicated enough to death-will himself rather than have his mind broken and his skills subverted. So, he had concluded, the rumours were simply that. Kenshin had run away; something had happened with that girl from the town, something dire that had convinced the melodramatic brat that he wasn't fit for the next stage of his training. Which wasn't an inaccurate assessment, if one failure was enough to send him running.

So perhaps Kenshin had fallen in with some bad company. Whether he snapped out of it or not was no concern of Hiko's. Half-trained as he was – without the final technique to show him the true price of strength – he would self-destruct sooner rather than later unless he came to his senses and stopped using his skill for evil purposes. If he did snap, he'd likely take the men he'd served with him. Problem solved.

And if he managed to come to his senses and return, Hiko would test him as all students of the Hiten Mitsurugi style were tested. The boy would pass or fail on his own merits and regardless of the outcome, Kenshin's story would end. That was the true secret of the final technique: no matter who won the final match, the apprentice always died.
Then, a few weeks ago, word had reached him that his former student had left Kanryu's estate and taken up residence at a local sword school. That some local bully-boys had set their eyes on him, were trying to steal him – and well, the rumours this time were too clear, too concise, too undeniable. Kanryu had kept much of his activities shrouded in misinformation and deception: it had been easy for Hiko to rationalize the conflicting stories away. This could not explained as anything other than what it was. This was truth. Kenshin had failed, as completely as a swordsman could, and as the boy's master it fell to him to do what needed to be done.

He'd left the very next day, resigned to the inevitable.

It had been easy to follow the rumours and learn the location of the minor school his failed pupil had washed up at. He'd planned to simply arrive, end the boy's suffering, and leave without getting any more involved than was absolutely necessary. When he'd seen Kenshin and the girl on the bridge he'd thought that he'd found the perfect opportunity.

Except the boy had known he was coming. Had responded – fear and grief and humiliation whirling in a vortex buried deeper in his heart than it should be, but far closer to the surface than it would have been if he was truly gone. If he was truly lost, he shouldn't have reacted at all.

That shouldn't have been enough to stay Hiko's hand: that shouldn't have mattered at all, because failure was failure and one did not fail to master the sword of heaven and live.

But it had been. So here he was, arguing with some slip of a girl nearly young enough to be his granddaughter on a bridge in the middle of a windstorm. This was why he never left the damn mountain if he could help it: no matter how carefully he planned things, he always seemed to get more involved than he'd meant to.

"I don't believe you," the girl said, snapping Hiko back into the present. He looked down at her, eyebrows raised.

"Excuse me?"

She crossed her arms and glared up at him.

"I-don't-be-lieve-you," she said again, over-enunciating each syllable as though she was talking to a particularly slow-witted child. Hiko blinked at her, trying to decide whether to be amused or offended. Her hair whipped straight out behind her as she stood against the wind, eyes watering slightly as it rushed past her.

"It's been at least ten years since – since this happened to him. If you were his teacher, why didn't you come for him sooner? Why wait ten years to find out what happened to your student?" She faltered on the first sentence, but her voice grew stronger as she spoke. "It's not like he would have been that hard to find. Kanryu showed him off," and there was real heat in her voice, verging on hate, enough that he was momentarily taken aback, "so you can't expect me to believe that you didn't know. I'm not an idiot; I have a student of my own, you know. So stop lying to me and tell me what you really want."

Amused. He was definitely amused. A little offended, too, but primarily amused. Her eyes were bright with challenge, and at some point in her tirade she'd put her hands on her hips like an angry housewife. Hiko's lips twitched inadvertently.

"Why don't you ask my failure of a student, there?" he rumbled, and met his former apprentice's eyes.
"Mistress…" Kenshin said weakly, collapsing in on himself like a beaten cur. He dropped to his knees, face white and bloodless.

A muscle in Hiko's jaw jumped. Rage sang through his veins, quick and hot and pure, and it took a genuine effort of will not to draw his sword and – do something without fully contemplating all the available information. Which he would not do. Because he was the thirteenth master of the Hiten Mitsurugi style and such impulsivity was beneath him.

The girl crouched down beside Kenshin, her eyes warm with concern. The boy reached out and grasped the hem of her kimono, pleading. Pain shot across her face, wrestled quickly down and away but he could see it lingering in her spirit: pain and rage, not at him but for him.

"It's alright, Kenshin," she said, soothing, hands outstretched as though she wasn't sure whether or not to touch him. "Everything will be fine. Excuse me, Mr. Hiko, but I need you to back up a bit." She looked up at him with a businesslike air and carefully masked worry in her eyes. "You're upsetting him."

Fury still seethed in his bones, but Hiko was perfectly capable of self-control and the girl was right. He took a few steps away, turning to look out at the river running to the ocean, and forced his wrath flow away with the rushing water and the roaring wind. It was not a productive emotion right now.

He let the feeling go: then he examined what was before him, with his eyes and with his heart, and did not let his visceral reactions factor in. Kenshin, bent and bowed, cringing like a nervous dog and the girl hovering just slightly above him. The wind tugged at their hair and clothes, sending leaves whirling past them and away into the sky. She was speaking softly to him, not quite petting him; he was struck by the sudden image of her sheltering him under outstretched wings. There was no triumph in her, no sense of ownership, only the absolute need to protect; as instinctive as breathing and just as necessary to her survival.

Whatever her role in this was, she hadn't been the one to reduce Kenshin to this.

So he turned his focus on the boy instead, expecting the worst. He found it. Submission and defeat were written in every line of Kenshin's body, and he held himself like an animal trying to evade a predator's gaze. And yet… his knuckles were white where he gripped her skirts and his jaw was tight. He didn't breathe like a frightened thing: if Hiko ignored his submissive posture, he could almost think that the boy had only briefly hit his limits in the middle of a match and was battling his way through them.

Something had happened to make Kenshin's mind a cage, but his soul was still alive within it.

With that realization, a knot that had been clenched tight and hard under Hiko's heart since he'd left his mountain eased slowly open. He was deeply irritated to discover that he was relieved.

"What happened to him?" he asked, surprising himself. He hadn't intended to speak.

The girl answered him without bothering to look up, still focused on the beaten man in front of her. "Takeda Kanryu happened," she said, bitterness sharpening her voice. "I don't know exactly how Kanryu got his hands on him, but… it's hardly your business, anyway."

"It is my business," he growled. "Kenshin was my student."

"Do we have to go over this again?"

A last, gentle whisper and Kenshin finally let go of her hem. She stood and faced Hiko, pride and cool fury settling on her shoulders like imperial raiment. "It's true that I haven't seen Kenshin respond
so strongly to someone since he came into my care, but he's frightened. If you were his teacher, why is he afraid of you? And why did it take you so long to come find him?"

"That second question will take some time to answer," Hiko said, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'd prefer to do it in a more private setting. As for the first…"

He looked fully at Kenshin again. Kenshin flinched.

"Look at me, boy," he barked. His wayward apprentice froze, briefly, and then – very slowly – he raised his face to meet Hiko's eyes once more. The girl watched it happen, sucking in a surprised breath.

"I am not here to hurt you, Kenshin," Hiko said, very carefully, and was surprised again to find that it was true. "I am here to discover the truth. That is all. Do you understand me, boy?"

Kenshin's eyes were wide, wide as they'd been as a child when Hiko had taken his name from him. For a split second he looked almost like himself again, standing innocently in the wind and waiting for his future to unfold.

Then the moment passed. But it was enough.

Kenshin lowered his head. His throat worked as he swallowed. The girl stared hard at Hiko, then at Kenshin, biting at her lower lip.

"He does know you," she said quietly. "He – he believes what you say."

"As I told you, girl, I was his teacher." Hiko crossed his arms. "If he's frightened of me, it's because he thinks he's failed." And will be punished accordingly, he didn't say, but he suspected that the girl heard it anyway.

Kenshin's fists clenched. The girl's eyes, seeing his reaction, hardened. The wind flipped her ponytail across her face and she pushed it over her shoulder, frowning.

"And do you think he's failed?" she asked in a voice like stone.

"That," he said evenly, "remains to be seen. Now, unless you intend to have us stand here talking all day in this damnable wind, where anyone can hear," he gestured broadly, "I would suggest that we retire to somewhere more civilized."

"…fine." She pushed her hair back again and smiled sweetly, with only the tiniest hint of poison.

"Mr. Hiko," she said, one hand on her canted hips. "Would you do me the honor of joining me for a cup of tea?"

~*~

The girl's home was fairly large but a touch run-down; she'd clearly been managing alone for some time. Patches of new wood and paint on the walls and roof made it clear that she'd been unable to afford the cost of proper repairs, instead only addressing the worst problems as they arose. The sign at the gate announced that it was the location of the first school of the Kamiya Kas shin style.

Kenshin had stayed close to the girl as they walked, cleaving to her like a second shadow. Never touching, but never more than a handspan away. He kept his eyes cast down and Hiko knew enough to recognize it as standard protocol for a slave; yet it grated at his nerves, made him want to snap at the boy to keep his damn chin up. A swordsman bows only to the deserving.
Except that Kenshin wasn't a swordsman anymore. He was nothing but a guard dog. On a good day.

The girl sent Kenshin off to finish some chores — *take in the laundry*, he thought he heard her say as the wind blustered particularly hard — and invited him inside. The interior, at least, was well-kept, modest and clean and with none of the frou-frou Western knickknacks that had become increasingly fashionable over the past decade or so. He'd even had people try to commission "Western-style" pottery from him, of all things. Those requests had gone straight into the kindling without a second glance.

The parlor that she showed him to was graceful and subtle. Its alcove held a single ink painting of reasonable quality and a spray of plum blossoms. Quite appropriate; the cherry trees were late this year. The room was in the lee of the wind, and the exterior doors were open to the porch and a small courtyard with a potted hydrangea and decorative stone basin to catch the rainwater off the roof. It was quite full from the recent storms. He could just see the school's training hall from his seat in front of the alcove. There were no students; this fit what he'd heard, that the school was young and had yet to gain any significant reputation.

"Pardon the wait," the girl said as she entered the room, holding a lacquered tray bearing a teapot and two cups. "Many thanks for your patience."

Well, at least she *could* be polite, if she so chose. He was hardly in a position to throw stones where selective courtesy was concerned.

"It was nothing," he returned, playing along. "A wait in such a pleasant room is no trouble at all."

"You're too kind," she said, kneeling and pouring out the tea. "My home is very humble. Would you care for a cup?"

"Please." He took the clay cup from her, noting its quality. A solid piece of craftsmanship, uninspired but well-executed. It fit the feel of the home: struggling but dependable, rooted firm in its history. The tea was of reasonable quality, too, if a tad oversteeped. He complimented it anyway.

After they'd each drunk a little and exchanged more ritual pleasantries — and he *did* have to admire her insistence on observing the proper forms even in such unusual circumstances, although he suspected that she was mostly stalling — he set his half-empty cup down on the tray and let his hands rest on his knees.

"That being said, I would like to know how you came to have my former student — 'under your protection,' wasn't that the phrase?"

She glanced down, turning her cup uneasily in her hands, and he saw her swallow.

"I — well. I'm — " A blush crept up her cheeks. "It's difficult to know where to begin."

"Begin at the beginning," he said, not unkindly, because she'd done nothing to warrant cruelty. "That is traditional."

"Right. She took a quick breath. "About five weeks ago, I was coming home from training at the Maekawa school. My own school is very small, you see, and since my father died — well, I can't train at my own level without going to another school." She flushed a little at the admission. "But Mr. Maekawa is an old friend, and he lets me train there. Anyway. I was coming home along the river and passing by one of the old docks when I heard a noise…"

Hiko listened to the story: how she had found Kenshin, brought him home and tended to his wounds. What she had convinced him of, all unknowing — and he watched her very carefully when she...
reached that part, searching for any hint of a lie and finding none. She had been ignorant, then. She stumbled when she tried to explain her choice to him; he knew, without her fumbling words, the pity and rage and sense of duty that had driven her. He'd been much the same way, once. So had Kenshin.

Her explanation of her friends, the doctor and the street fighter, had holes in it that he could have driven a herd of oxen through. She was concealing something; but the doctor's advice seemed sound, assuming that the explanation she'd offered was true – and if it was true, then he had cause to involve himself.

Slavery had been part of Japan for long enough that most had forgotten that things hadn't always been this way. The Hiten Mitsurugi of the time had been unable to stop the system of chattel slavery when it first arose: the style was always weakest in the first few years after a new master took on the mantle, and by the time the eighth master had come to terms with what he'd done and what his new role must be it was already too late. Slavery was simply how things were done.

The Hiten Mitsurugi was a free sword, Hiko's own master had told him when he taught Hiko that part of the history. It must stand alone: it does not lead rebellions or aid governments, lest it be compromised by politics and the impure motives of corruptible men. In a situation such as the eighth master faced, the sword of heaven could do nothing. Not without taking a side.

But this – if it was true that this Kanryu had found a way to truly destroy a person's humanity, to rob them of their soul – then he would have to intervene simply to restore the balance. Slavery was, in the end, only a human evil. This was something else entirely.

"And this Dr. Takani, she believes that Kenshin may be fighting off the conditioning?"

"Maybe. Or maybe it was never really done properly to begin with. I mean, she says that – that he was the first person to actually survive. So it might not have been done quite… right. But…” She shrugged. "Whichever it is, he's the only person who knows, and he's not – he can't tell anyone."

"But you're trying to help." Hiko let a strain of skepticism enter his tone, testing her, and she flushed even deeper.

"I know – I know it sounds really, really bad," she said quickly. "But – I mean, it kind of makes sense, a little, and it seems to be working. If I didn't think it was helping I would have stopped, but he's – I think he is starting to trust me a little, maybe, or he might just feel safe enough to start rebelling. He made a decision today, you know. He couldn't even do that much, at first. Not a big one, but…”

She spread her hands open, eloquent in her despair. He saw in her eyes how much it hurt her, to rejoice over his ability to do something so simple, so human; how bitter the triumph was when weighed against the work yet to be done and the fact that it needed to be done at all.

The girl sighed. "I just wish I knew – that I knew how he ended up there in the first place. Megumi doesn't know. No one seems to. If I had some idea, then, maybe – maybe there's some clue in his past, something I can use…”

Her hands folded tight around her teacup as she gazed at the matting, and her eyes were too old for her face.

"…I just wish I knew."

The wind was picking up again. The sound it made as it rustled the treetops was like a box of
parchment, or a woman's skirts. It had begun with a woman, hadn't it? Not much older than this girl kneeling before him, this girl who wore compassion and pride like armor.

Hiko didn't sigh. It wasn't in his nature. But he did exhale, long and thoughtful, and watch the wind toss leaves and debris. There would be another storm by nightfall. It had been an odd spring: so many fierce storms, as if the rainy season had come early.

"His parents didn't name him Kenshin," Hiko said finally. The girl looked up, and yes, there was that spark of hope he'd expected to see. Why he was feeding it — well, he had his reasons, and he certainly knew what they were. He just didn't see the need to put words to them yet.

"When I met him," he continued, "he had a different name, far too gentle for a swordsman. So I named him Kenshin and even that early on, he knew better than to argue about it…"

~*~

Kaoru kept her eyes fixed on the stranger's face as she listened to his story. Kenshin's story. Outside, the wind rattled over rooftops and tossed tree branches from side to side as if they were strands of gossamer cloth.

"He came from a very small village in southern Japan, one that specialized in the production of red dye. The name doesn't matter; it's gone now, wiped out by a cholera epidemic. Kenshin was the only survivor. I found him in the ruins. He'd buried them all, every last one, and found markers for each grave."

She could see it: a small child with ruddy hair lying limp against his skin, laboring with empty eyes under a relentless blue sky. And she could imagine how he'd felt that day, when the world ended: when he'd woken up and realized that he was now and always alone. As she had, that first day after she'd learned that her father was never, ever coming home and every day after that, until Sano had washed up at her door and put an end to loneliness.

The tea in her cup trembled, slightly, and she set it on the tray with careful motions. The stranger — Mr. Hiko — had the grace not to comment.

"It impressed me," he said, after some time had passed. "I was reaching the point in my career where it seemed the proper time to take on an apprentice. He was rather small, but his heart and mind were strong. And as you know, teacher," his eyes seemed to glint sardonically, "physical force is the least important of the three strengths; a deficiency there can always be overcome."

"I do," she said softly. She'd been able to count Yahiko's ribs when he first came to her, but his eyes had glowered out from under his tangled mop of black hair, full of anger, and she'd known that he needed what she had to give.

"So I took him in," Mr. Hiko continued. "I taught him to the best of my considerable ability, and as time passed it became clear that he would be a true successor to my style."

"The Hiten Mitsurugi," she said, stumbling a little over the name. "You know, I've never heard of it…?"

"And I've never heard of yours," he said tartly. Heat flooded her face. "It dates back to the time of the warring states," he said, seeming to relent a little. "If you've never heard of it, that's only to be expected. There are only ever two practitioners at a time: the master and his apprentice. We rarely involve ourselves in outside affairs."

"I see," she said, and couldn't quite keep a certain cynicism from her voice. There were styles like
that, holding themselves apart from the world for fear of becoming corrupted by it. Her father, as a
rule, had never badmouthed anyone in his life; but he had a particular way of sighing when he
was very deliberately not saying what was on his mind. And he had always sighed that way when
the subject of those styles came up, remarking later, in private, on the dangers of spending too much
time in one's own head.

Mr. Hiko quirked an eyebrow at her, clearly picking up on her reaction and just as clearly choosing
to let it go.

"At any rate." He shifted, resting his chin on one hand, and his eyes grew vaguely unfocused, as
though he was watching events unfold on some internal stage. "There was a town near our home in
the mountains where we went once a month for supplies. And there was a girl, a samurai's daughter
named – " He frowned. "You know, I don't think I ever bothered to learn it. The family name was
Yukishiro, I believe. She was a few years older than Kenshin, engaged to the son of a fellow I had a
business arrangement with. We visited them enough that Kenshin started to get to know her, and
became rather attached to her. I didn't see the harm in it. The boy's always known right from wrong,
and she seemed like a sensible girl. Besides," he smirked, "he'd reached the point where he needed to
learn that you can't always get what you want."

He was smirking, but his eyes told a different story: there was something ancient and angry and
utterly hard underneath the mocking glint. He blames himself, she understood abruptly. For not
realizing that it was more than just a crush.

She thought for a moment that she should say something, as one teacher to another if nothing else,
but he kept right on talking before she could think of anything.

"I'm not sure exactly what happened," he said bluntly. "Her fiancée, Akira, fell ill. Needed some sort
of treatment that his parents couldn't afford. Kenshin got this notion in his head about helping her
raise the money for it. I told him no, that it would interfere with his training. We argued, he left, and
the next I heard about any of it was that the girl was dead and Kenshin had disappeared."

"Disappeared?" She frowned as she echoed him. "How old was he?"

"Fourteen, by my estimate." He shrugged. "He wasn't sure of his own age when I found him. But he
was young. I began to hear rumours that he'd fallen in with this Takeda Kanryu shortly afterward."
Her eyes widened and she clasped her hand to her mouth in shock as she realized what it meant.
Fourteen. He'd been about fourteen when Kanryu had taken him – barely older than Yahiko – not
even of age…

"Excuse me," she said, and bit down hard on the inside of her cheek. There was a sudden bloom of
copper on her tongue and she forced herself to swallow it rather than spit. The pain and the foul taste
cut through the horror, and she picked up her tea again and took a slow sip. Mr. Hiko waited
patiently.

The world stopped trying to tilt and throw her off, eventually. It took less time than it had on
previous occasions and she wondered, dismayed, if she was actually getting used to evil tidings.

Another sip of tea and then she straightened her spine, forcing her shoulders back.

"Please, continue."

"That's all there is," he said, with a certain fatalism in his voice. "I didn't believe the rumours, when
they reached me – that he'd been taken as a slave. Perhaps if I had – but if it had been your student,
would you have believed such a thing?"

It was a rhetorical question. He wasn't actually asking for her absolution, or her understanding; yet she couldn't stop herself from imagining just that. If Yahiko disappeared, and she'd heard a rumor that he'd fallen in with evil company…

"I would have gone after him," she said, raising her eyes to meet his gaze. "Even if I didn't want to believe, I would have gone and seen for myself. And if they were true, I would have found a way to bring him home."

He regarded her strangely for a moment in that same way Megumi sometimes did, as if she was an unexpected variance in the normal function of the universe. Then he snorted.

"You actually mean what you're saying, don't you?" He shook his head a little, black mane falling over his shoulders. "I wouldn't have thought it possible, in this day and age…"

There was a knock on the wood of the shoji.

"Mistress," came Kenshin's voice from the hallway, and she tensed because there was distress written plain in his voice for anyone to hear. "There is a messenger."

Kaoru blinked, frowning.

"…what on earth?" she muttered aloud. "Excuse me a moment," she said, bowing slightly to Mr. Hiko. He raised an eyebrow at her, but made no objection. Not that she would be inclined to care if he did.

She stood and slid the door open. Kenshin was kneeling in the hall, drawn tight as a bowstring; some of the tension seemed to ease when he saw her.

"What messenger?" she asked him, careful to keep her voice soft.

"From – " and his voice actually broke. He clenched at the cloth covering his thighs. "From Takeda Kanryu's estate. Mistress."

Her blood froze in her veins and she stared down at him, huddling at her feet. His hand reached out as if to grasp her hem again, and then twitched deliberately away, curling against his side as if he was cradling a wound.

"Kenshin…"

She didn't know what to do. Whether to leave him be, or try to talk him through it, or –

No, that wasn't so. She did know what to do. She'd done it before.

Carefully, all too aware of Mr. Hiko's eyes boring into her, she reached out and rested her hand on the top of his head. He seemed to lean into her touch; she let her fingers trail through his hair and down the side of his face. Kenshin turned towards her hand, eyes closed, his brow knotting in a pained look that was more expression than she'd ever seen from him.

"You are not Kanryu's," she told him gently. "This is your home; this is where you belong. That won't change. You don't have any reason to be afraid. Didn't I promise you that you would always have a place here, no matter what?"

"Yes, mistress," he murmured, and she felt the heat of his breath against her palm. Her heart ached.
"Have I given you any reason to believe I'll break that promise?"

"No, mistress." His eyes slitted open, strange and pale and shifting.

"Then don't be afraid."

For a long moment, Kenshin didn't respond. He only pressed his face against her hand, eyes nearly closed, and the hand wrapped around his waist eased slowly away.

"...yes, mistress," he said finally. The fear was gone, but the impassivity hadn't returned. He sounded almost — almost human. "Please forgive this worthless one."

"It's alright." She took her hand away and almost thought he sighed at the loss of contact. Her throat was tight with grief and she wanted desperately to throw her arms around him and will him whole again.

Fourteen years old. He'd been fourteen years old.

"The messenger insists on speaking to you, mistress," Kenshin said, and his voice still carried that bare trace of humanity.

"Very well, then." She drew herself up. "Mr. Hiko, will you excuse me while I attend to this?"

Mr. Hiko was eyeing her again. She indulged in the brief, exasperated wish that someone would just tell her what was so strange, for once; it was awfully wearing, being examined.

"Go ahead," he rumbled. "I'll wait."

"Kenshin, would you...?"

Kenshin was already getting to his feet. He turned smoothly, emotionless once more, and led her down the hall. She followed, bracing herself for — well, she didn't know what, precisely, except it was absolutely guaranteed to be unpleasant. It couldn't be an overt threat, at least; she would have heard the fighting.

The messenger was waiting at the gate, wearing a simple outfit with a crest she didn't recognize: a spider on a burning web. He stood unnaturally at attention, eyes fixed at some distant point on the horizon, and didn't react at all until she was close enough to speak to. Then he bowed mechanically and she saw the slave brand on his cheek.

"Mistress Kaoru Kamiya?" he asked. His voice was rote and expressionless, as bad as Kenshin's had been when he'd first arrived, and his eyes were utterly without humanity.

"That's me," she said, hiding her horror. "May I ask your business?"

"My master begs the honor of your company, mistress," the messenger said, and held out an envelope. Kaoru stared at it, blood rushing in her ears, and everything seemed suddenly very far away.

"...my company...?"

The messenger didn't say anything further. He just held the envelope out until she finally convinced stiff muscles to move and took it from him, pinching it between her thumb and forefinger as if it was something foul. The messenger made no further movement.

"Is that all?"
"This worthless one is instructed to await your response, mistress," he recited, still staring past her. She suppressed a shudder and, uncertain of what else to do, broke the letter's seal. There was a single invitation within, beautifully handwritten on heavy paper the color of fresh cream. The ink glimmered slightly and she realized that there were golden flakes in it. It said – well, what the messenger had said. Takeda Kanryu wanted to meet with her. A week from now. For tea.

A hysterical laugh tore its way out of her throat before she could stop herself and she clamped her free hand over her mouth, muffling it. The blood drained from her face and she started to breathe hard and heavy, gulping in air as her lungs suddenly ran dry.

"I – I see," she managed to gasp, her fingers trailing down her face to rest where her pulse beat rabbit-fast in the hollow of her throat.

"I – have no response for him – at this time," she choked out. "Please return – return – " She had to talk to Sano, to Megumi, they had to plan this, she had never expected this and she didn't know what to do – "Tomorrow. Come back tomorrow, please. I'll know by then if I'm free."

Or if I need to flee the country, she thought, trying to keep her panic reigned in.

The messenger bowed again.

"Yes, mistress. This worthless one will return tomorrow for your answer."

He left, walking in slow, even strides, and tears built behind her eyes, hot and aching. Kaoru turned to walk back in the house, nauseous with fear. She made it as far as the door before she had to stop, lean against the wall, and breathe.

"Mistress?" Kenshin was at her side, then, one hand hovering just above her elbow. She could feel him there, not quite touching.

"Kenshin." She gasped for air like a landed fish. "Kenshin. Can you – do you remember where the clinic is?"

He'd visited there, accompanying her to call on Megumi, although he'd never left the house alone before. But – desperate times and all that – and after all, he'd made so much progress lately –

She bit back another hysterical giggle.

"Yes, mistress."

"I need you," another gulping breath. "I need you to go to the clinic and fetch Megumi, okay? Tell her to get Sano – and everyone else – tell her it's about Kanryu. Tell her it's important. We need to meet soon, within the hour – can you do that for me?"

"Yes, mistress." His eyes were paler than usual; sharper, somehow.

"Hurry."

He was already bolting out the gate. Kaoru made it back to the parlor without collapsing, although just barely. Mr. Hiko looked genuinely alarmed when he saw her face.

"What happened?" he asked, putting a hand on the sword resting at his side. Kaoru sank gratefully onto a seating-cushion – which did not, technically, count as falling to the floor.

"Takeda Kanryu invited me to tea," she said numbly, and didn't burst into tears.
IMPORTANT SCHEDULING NOTES.

So, I'm in my third year of law school and coming up on exams; furthermore, I'm getting ready for the bar. With that in mind, there will be some changes to the update schedule.

The next update for Invictus will be the weekend of MAY 25th. The next updates for Vaster Than Empires will be the weekend of MAY 4th and JUNE 1ST.

After that, I will be going on hiatus for my bar exam prep period, and for the test itself. This hiatus will end the weekend of AUGUST 10th. At that point, regular updates for both stories will resume.

I apologize for the disruption and hope you will bear with me. I am not abandoning these stories; this is a planned hiatus with a specific end-date, and I am going on it because I need to prioritize my real life over my fanfiction. Thank you all for your patience during this time.

This message will be reposted in my author's profile, and in the header for the next update to Vaster Than Empires on MAY 4TH.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

Sagara slammed his hand down on the table. Kenshin flinched away, although it wasn't aimed at him, and Kaoru took a moment to gently touch his shaking hand. "We're not fucking – we've gotta get the missy outta town, Fox, we don't have any other choice!"

"And what, precisely, will that accomplish?" Megumi asked archly, examining her nails and eyeing Hiko out of the corner of her eye. He had clearly given up on Sagara for the time being; he and Shinomori were speaking very quietly and intensely off in a corner, and perhaps she was imagining things but Shinomori looked almost uneasy.

"Getting her the fuck away from that fucking animal!" Sagara exploded. Again. He'd been on edge since the night that the Hiruma brothers attacked, furious with himself for failing and sick with guilt. Under other circumstances she would have welcomed a disturbance simply because it would give him something to do, something that wasn't stalking around like an offended cat looking for a fight.

But this would be Kaoru's battle, not his; he knew it, and that made his temper worse.

She waited for him to finish accusing Kanryu of performing biologically unlikely acts with horses before responding.

"Sagara. I know you have a brain in that head of yours, because something keeps your hair from falling through your skull. What would happen if Kamiya disappeared?"

He glared at her. Megumi looked calmly back, and watched his eyes change as he started to think, instead of just reacting. She could almost follow his train of thought by the subtle shifts in color: pale
with rage, at first, and darkening slowly to the usual deep brown as his mind caught up with his
instincts. It was his only weakness, really, that he reacted without thinking. But it was that same
passion that drew people to him; once he gave his loyalty, it was absolute.

"...shit," he said, and subsided into a brooding silence. Megumi turned to Kaoru.

"And you?" she asked. "Do you have any objections?"

"Not really," Kaoru said calmly. Kenshin was hunched a handsbreadth behind her left side, making
himself small. He'd always had a gift for that, for closing himself down into a huddled ball of please-
don't. Not that it had ever done him much good when Kanryu had been of a mind to torment him
specifically; sometimes, though, it had deflected the worst of the more unfocused rages.

His fingers were gripping Kaoru's sleeve.

He was here, Kaoru had said, because he had a right to be. And – her eyes had added – because it
would only frighten him more to be sent away.

"If Kanryu's interested in me, it'll only cause problems if I avoid him, right?" Kaoru was looking at
her for confirmation. "I mean, if he's just curious, then getting upset will make him more so. And if
he – if he knows something, or thinks it – it'll just confirm that there's something going on. So it's
better to act as though – as though nothing's wrong."

"Correct," Megumi bit out. "Shinomori?" Both Hiko and Shinomori looked at her, and she jerked
her head towards Sagara. "He's ready to talk sense now."

Shinomori inclined his head once and moved over. Hiko remained where he was, eyeing her as
carefully as she was eyeing him. She wondered what Kaoru had told him; she wondered if he knew
who they were, other than her friends. She wondered what he thought of them.

Kenshin's teacher. Kenshin's past. He had been only her fellow victim for so long that she could
almost believe that he had no past, that he had emerged fully-formed from the stink and mire of the
training pens, willed into being by Kanryu's malice and dreams of godhood. But here it was, at long
last: proof that he had been a different person before Kanryu had remade him. That he might have a
self to return to, if he had the strength.

It didn't matter to Sagara, except in an abstracted way because it would matter to Kaoru. It would
never matter to Shinomori. But it mattered to her, and she wondered if Kaoru had told him, if Hiko
knew who she was, who she had been – what she had done, in ignorance – but that was no excuse.

Hiko stayed where he was, watching them all with grave impassivity, and his eyes gave nothing
away.

"Does he have t'be here for this?" Sagara asked, gesturing sharply at Hiko. Hiko looked down his
nose at the brawler, the corner of his mouth twitching. Amusement? A frown? Megumi couldn't tell.

"Do you propose to throw me out?" he asked in a very deliberate tone.

"Sano." Kaoru was kneeling with her hands folded in her lap, back very straight. "Mr. Hiko asked to
be present, and I agreed. Kenshin is his concern, too."

"An' you get to make those calls, now?" Sagara crossed his arms, broadening his shoulders. "Who
died and put you in charge?"

Kaoru pinched the bridge of her nose. "Is it that important, Sano?"
"Could be!" He leaned in, belligerent. "You don't know this guy, you don't know what his agenda is."

"All valid concerns, Sagara," Shinomori interrupted smoothly. "However, having spoken with Mr. Hiko, I do not believe he poses any threat."

"You don't believe." Sagara rounded on him. "But do y'know?"

"No." Shinomori's voice was flat; his eyes, behind his bangs, were very cold. "Nothing is ever certain, Sagara. No matter how vigilant we are, we cannot account for all possibilities."

"If you're all done yammering?" Mr. Hiko interjected, with a weary sigh. The room shifted around him, somehow, until he was its focal point. "I don't care about whatever it is that you're up to; the only business I have is with Kanryu. But, if you're going to be paranoid, let me point out that I've already seen and heard enough to have a fairly good idea of what's going on." Hiko spoke calmly, as if their struggle were no concern of his. "If you try to kick me out now – assuming that I allow it – then you don't know where I am or who I'm speaking to." His eyes glinted. "Just something to consider."

"Is that a threat?" Sagara growled, starting to rise to his feet. Hiko smirked.

"Merely an observation." A beat. "Idiot."

"You – !" Sagara started forward, almost lunging at the older man. Hiko's eyes flashed; Sagara reared back, the muscles in his arms flexing as he forced himself under control. His mouth twisted in a silent snarl as he glared at Hiko. Megumi saw something shift between them, some silent communication, and then Sagara dropped back onto the floor.

"Good point," he said finally, too casually. "You stay where we can fuckin' see you, alright?"

He leaned back on his hands and looked very deliberately away. Megumi couldn't help thinking of two wolves meeting for the first time: men were men, it seemed, regardless of species.

"If you insist." Hiko propped an elbow on his knee, cupping his chin in his hand. "Now, if I understand the situation correctly, Ms. Kamiya will have to meet with Kanryu?" His face darkened when he said the name.

"Yes," Megumi said simply. "Which means we need to know as much as we can about why Kanryu wants to meet with her. When did you tell the messenger to return, Kamiya?"

"Tomorrow." Kaoru smoothed her clothes over his legs. "I'm free on the day mentioned in the invitation, I just didn't want to agree without talking it over."

"When does he want to meet?"

"This Friday." Kaoru smiled weakly. "The day after tomorrow."

"Not much time," Sagara commented. "That's his style, though, innit?"

"It is." Megumi dug her fingers into her thigh, memories welling up like pus in an infection. "Not quite enough time to prepare, but enough time to worry." She couldn't keep the bitter smile from her face, not when she was discussing this. "Everything is about power, with him."

"You sound very certain," Hiko murmured, and she felt him looking at her, threatening to expose her.
"We... have a history," she said, forcing herself to meet his eyes and let him see the truth written there. Her voice sounded hollow, even to her own ears.

He kept her gaze for a long moment, then nodded slightly and let her go.

"So," she said, exhaling. "Kamiya – accept the invitation tomorrow, and don't change the date or time. You're not experienced enough to try and play this kind of game. Let him do the maneuvering; just defend against it, for now."

"Defend..." Kaoru blinked, wide-eyed. "But – how? I don't know..."

"I'll help you as much as I can," Megumi said briskly, heart clenching. Kaoru's voice had gone high and breathy, but there was no fear in her face. She was learning to hide herself; her innocence was burning away, piece by piece. And Megumi had known that this would happen, that it was the natural consequence of allowing her to involve herself in this fight, and she had let Kaoru do it anyway.

Just one more sin, really.

"Shinomori," she snapped, without quite meaning to. "Do you have any idea what Kanryu wants?"

He shook his head. "I know nothing for certain. I can only speculate."

She'd always appreciated that about Shinomori, that he knew the difference between rumor, fact, speculation based on fact, and speculation based on rumor. Most people didn't; it was harder than it sounded to master the distinctions and use them effectively.

"Well?" Sagara shifted as he watched the conversation, coming forward to hunch over his crossed legs and staring hard at Shinomori. "Share with the fuckin' class, wouldja?"

"The first option which we must consider is that he is simply curious," Shinomori began, impassive as a stone statue. "Kanryu abandoned the manslayer; despite this, the manslayer has continued to exist. Furthermore, the manslayer was recently – "

"Kenshin," Kaoru cut in, tapping her open hand firmly against the tabletop – not quite a slam, but very close. "His name is Kenshin, Mr. Shinomori. Not 'the manslayer.'"

Shinomori paused, focusing on Kaoru for what was probably the first time. Kaoru met his gaze levelly, steel in hers, and after a suspended heartbeat he inclined his head, acknowledging her.

"Kenshin," he continued, without inflection, "was recently the focus of a moderate disruption. It is unusual for something which Kanryu has thrown away to resurface again in any form. It is possible that Kanryu wishes to re-asses Kenshin's condition, and learn the truth of the matter for himself. He may intend to try and purchase Kenshin from Ms. Kamiya. Alternately, he may harbor certain suspicions regarding Ms. Kamiya's motives and her involvement in certain affairs, and wish to question her. It is possible that both motives are at play, or a different motive entirely which I have failed to account for."

Sano drummed his fingers on the table. "What makes you think that's what's goin' on?" And why don't you know for certain? he didn't say, but Megumi could see it in the tense line of his jaw. So could Shinomori.

"Kanryu is planning something," Shinomori said flatly. "I do not yet know what it is. I am not as trusted as I once was. However, I believe that the conditioning process is part of it. As you know, the mansl – Kenshin holds a certain historical significance in that regard." That cost him something to
admit: Megumi could see it in the slight furrowing of his brow.

She pressed her fist to her mouth to hide her shaking hands, knowing that it made her look contemplative and not as afraid as she really was. For Kaoru, yes – for herself, also, and of the memories crawling out from the dank pits they'd been consigned to. For all of them, because Kanryu was moving and Shinomori didn't know why.

"So," Kaoru said, brows drawn down in concentration. "Basically, you're not sure of anything."

Megumi would have laughed, under other circumstances. Shinomori's face tightened a bit further

"...there are many variables," he said finally. He was disconcerted, and Megumi didn't blame him; it had surprised her, too, the first time she'd realized that Kaoru saw and understood more than she'd given her credit for.

"Alright then," Kaoru said, stretching her arms over her head with a deliberate lack of concern. "I guess I'll just have to wing it." Her tone was acidically sweet. "Megumi? What do you have to say?"

"Several things," Megumi said, rather enjoying Shinomori's discomfort. "But first – you are aware of the dangers, yes?"

Kaoru nodded. "But I don't see how there's much of a choice. Like I said before, trying to avoid it will just make things worse. So," and here she settled herself, heaving a deep sigh and tossing the end of her ponytail over her shoulder. "I'll do it."

"Missy." Sagara was looking at her with guarded eyes: afraid, not of her, but for her. "Sorry t'say so, but I dunno if you're takin' this seriously – "

"I am," she said quietly. Kenshin stirred behind her. He hadn't moved during the conversation except to let go of her sleeve when she raised her arms. He hadn't renewed his grip on the cloth; now, though, he edged a little closer to her. Kaoru's eyes flicked to him, then to Sagara, and Megumi understood abruptly that this was all an act for Kenshin's sake. By the sudden caution in his eyes, Sagara did, too.

"I understand that the situation is dangerous, but Kanryu's nothing to be afraid of," she said firmly: for Kenshin, yes, and for her own as well. The steel was in her eyes again. "He's just a man."

Megumi nearly laughed; but Kenshin was there, and she couldn't let him see that Kaoru was afraid.

"...s'ppose that's true." Sagara subsided, still eyeing her.

"Anyway, if that's all, then I don't want to keep any of you from your business. Megumi, you should stay – but I don't see why the rest of you need to hear things you already know. Mr. Hiko, do you have a place to spend the night?"

"I can make my own arrangements," he said, amusement lacing his tone. "Is that the end of this little war council, then?"

"I think so," Kaoru said. "Except Megumi and I need to talk a bit more. Sano, if you could make sure that Yahiko doesn't stay too late at the Akabeko?"

Just in case, her eyes said. Because Yahiko was only a boy, and the world was suddenly a very dangerous place. Sagara nodded.

"Yeah, I'll make sure he gets home on time." And safe, was the unspoken guarantee. He glanced
towards Megumi, as if he wanted to say something, and then looked away. His jaw worked.

"Great. Mr. Shinomori, I'm glad I finally had the chance to meet you," Kaoru said, smiling like a noh mask. "I hope you can find out what Kanryu's plans are soon."

Shinomori stood and bowed slightly to the group.

"I'll take my leave," he said, and did just that. His departure was a signal: Hiko and Sagara left soon after him, and then it was only herself and Kaoru, and Kenshin kneeling behind Kaoru's shoulder.

"Well," Kaoru said finally. "What now?"

She looked at Megumi with steadfast faith, trusting her to find the path. After all, she had set Kaoru on it, had pointed her toward the woods and told her where to go.

*I didn't make you choose this,* Megumi thought, rebellious. *You did this of your own will.* She'd never asked anyone to shoulder her sins.

Which, she knew, was why she would help. Had to. Because Kaoru had not been asked, had not even known, and had not walked away. Could not possible have walked away, any more than Megumi could walk away now. Everything that she was had compelled her to stop that cold morning when she'd found Kenshin below the dock, to take him home and heal his wounds – even after she'd learned the full extent of them.

"The single most important thing," Megumi said, willing Kaoru to hear her, "is to never, ever show him that you're afraid."

"Never show fear..." Kaoru echoed. Beside her, Kenshin raised his head briefly. For a moment, he met Megumi's eyes: and his own were bright with something she had never seen before.

*Never show fear.*

That had been her mistake. She was certain of that. In their first meeting, after the training pens, she hadn't been able to hide her horror. He'd known, then, how to use her; he'd had power over her, and that was all he wanted, really. Power.

Megumi cleared her throat.

"He'll be looking for weaknesses," she said bluntly, forcing herself to look Kaoru in the eyes. "It doesn't matter whether he wants something specific or he's simply curious. The one thing Kanryu craves above everything else is power. If you show him weakness, any weakness at all, anything that gives him power over you, he will never," and her voice cracked here, despite herself, "leave you alone."

No, not ever; she'd never had a chance, not after that. He'd bound her with a thousand silken chains, and after a time he hadn't even needed to threaten her. After all, he was only giving her what she deserved. She *deserved* it, every blow, every night spent bleeding onto silk sheets, every hot, whimpering climax torn from her against her will but only after she had *begged* for it –

And he might have held her forever, if Sagara hadn't come into her darkness all wry quips and candleflame, painful nearly beyond bearing after so many lonely years. It hadn't been about her – Megumi Takani, specifically, was no part of his mission – and that in and of itself had been a blessed relief. She had been only one of hundreds of souls his strong hands had helped to freedom. Nothing special. Nothing special at all.
Kaoru reached out to her, eyes bright with grief. "Megumi – "

Megumi smacked her hand away, suddenly wrathful. As if this girl had any right.

"Don't pity me," she snarled. "Don't you dare pity me."

"I was only going to say…" Kaoru pulled her hand back, bowing her head in silent apology. "I was only going to say that you're very strong."

"Strength," Megumi said bitterly, "has nothing to do with it. Anyway, Kamiya – don't be too informal, but don't dress your best, either – don't do anything that indicates you needed to prepare yourself or that you see anything unusual about the situation. Do you know anything about Western customs?"

"No?" Kaoru pulled a confused face. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Kanryu prefers them," Megumi said briskly. "For Japanese guests, at any rate. For Western guests, he prefers Japanese customs. Understand?"

By the way Kaoru's face cleared into disgust, she did. Keep them off-balance, always guessing, never comfortable. Always with the impression that they were doing something wrong, and he was tolerating their ignorance. That was his way. Power. Always power.

"Oh. That's just petty," she said, crossing her arms. "Ugh. Megumi, can you – "

"Yes." Megumi stood to leave. "Come to the clinic first thing tomorrow; I'll teach you as much as I can in the time that we have."

Kaoru nodded. "I'll see you then. And – Megumi – "

Megumi paused halfway to the door.

"Thank you," Kaoru said, and Megumi couldn't see her face but she knew what it would look like, how bright and open it would be. Because Kaoru was grateful, truly grateful to Megumi for deigning to guide her, when if not for her she wouldn't be lost to begin with…

"Don't thank me," she said, precisely as harsh as she'd meant to be. "You have nothing to thank me for."

She left, trailing shattered silence in her wake.

~*~

Hiko left the Kamiya girl's house in a rather more contemplative mood than he'd arrived. So. She was involved in one of those rebel groups that popped up once every few generations, to no particular effect. And a rather incompetent one at that, unless they were trying to lull him into a false sense of security. Which he rather doubted. He had considered, also, the possibility that the girl had simply decided to trust him, and it seemed most likely that it was a combination of the two factors: her own naiveté and her belief, for whatever reason, that he could be trusted.

She wasn't wrong on the last point, since he hardly cared about the result of their little struggle either way. But if she was going to lead a revolutionary's life, she was really going to have to cultivate a healthier sense of paranoia.

It was a fairly odd assortment of characters: that impulsive street fighter, who hadn't yet noticed the
group's slow movement to put the girl at its center. There was a great deal of rage in him, poorly controlled. He'd been surprised that the lad had actually backed down; he'd been almost certain that things would come to blows first. Perhaps they would have, if the exchange had been a serious challenge rather than a test.

The older woman was something of a mystery. She clearly had some old, bitter connection with Kanryu, and her look when she spoke of him was that of a former slave yet there was no brand on her face. She carried her pride as a cloak and shield, a thin one, but better than the wounded vulnerability hidden underneath. It'd likely smother her, in the end, but that was no concern of his.

And then there was the spy. Aoshi Shinomori. Their inside man, as it were, and the most valuable member of the group for Hiko's purposes. Kenshin wasn't beyond saving, but whether he healed or not was up to him; if Hiko could have *commanded* the boy's heart or soul, this whole mess would have been avoided in the first place. Stubborn brat. Of course, if he was that easily swayed he never would have been able to learn the Hiten, which led naturally to a rather troubling conclusion: that Kenshin had *allowed* this to happen. His soul was not broken, only caged. Which meant that, on some level, he had *consented* to this. Something had convinced him that this degradation was no more or less than what he deserved.

And Hiko was certain – certain the way that the tides were certain of the moon – that the reason for that had something to do with the one thing he *didn't* know: what had happened between his apprentice and that girl from the village, whose name he'd never bothered to learn.

Gods above and below, he'd been careless.

Well, what's done is done, and at least his path was clear. He needed to find out what had happened between Kenshin and the girl from the village, and the only lead he had was Kanryu's probable involvement. And what should fate deliver him but a man with his fingers in Kanryu's pies, and no personal loyalty to him at all?

It was easy to pick up the spy's trail. Like as not he was as interested in speaking to Hiko as Hiko was in speaking to him; professionals knew each other, even on only a few minutes' acquaintance.

He followed Shinomori out of the Kamiya girl's neighborhood and into a wilder part of town, the kind of place where there were never any witnesses no matter how crowded the streets had been at the time. Eventually, that not-quite-crushing poverty yielded to what had doubtless once been a public park of some kind, and perhaps still was on official maps. What it had become, however, was a tangled wilderness of shanty huts and small outdoor fires. Men and women – if such words could apply to such wretches – huddled around them, eyes dull. Some bore faded slave-marks.

Not only would there be no witnesses to find here, should the police come calling, but there never would have been a crowd in the first place. This was a place where people knew better than the stop and stare.

The sun had begun to sink below the mountains when the spy halted in a shadowed corner, far from the small fires. His shoulders seemed to slump.

"So," he said calmly. "What do you want?"

"I think you know that already," Hiko said, equally calm.

"Answers." The spy turned to face him, green eyes remote behind his bangs. Hiko nodded. "And if I have none to give?"
"I suspect you can find the information I need," Hiko said, crossing his arms. "I'd be very surprised if you didn't have access to the records from ten years ago."

"Ten years ago, I was fifteen."

Hiko raised an eyebrow. "And that should mean something?"

The shadows played across the spy's face, casting him half in darkness.

"Not at all."

"Then will you do what I ask?"

A baby was crying, out there in the darkness split by smoldering campfires, high-pitched and wailing. A few moments later there was a guttural shout and the crack of flesh meeting flesh; then a woman's moan. The crying stopped soon after.

The spy seemed to sigh.

"If I refuse?"

"I'd want to know why." Hiko uncrossed his arms, resting a hand casually on his sword-hilt. Not quite a threat, just as Shinomori's statement had been not quite a refusal. "Doesn't this sort of thing fall within your mandate?"

"I've received no order to assist you," Shinomori pointed out. Hiko snorted.

"As if that would be a consideration for you. Tell me," he said, as a pack of dogs somewhere began to bay. "whose idea was it, putting that lunkhead brawler in charge? He makes an excellent target."

"That was not my decision." Shinomori's jaw tightened. "Sagara has his uses."

"As a footsoldier, I'm sure." His thumb stroked over the grain of his hilt. "As a commander? I'm surprised you've all made it this far."

Hiko paced forward, stopping at the very edge of too close. Well within Shinomori's reach, and that was a statement in and of itself: that he had nothing to fear from any trick or technique the spy might use on him. Which was true enough.

"There were no other candidates." Was the irritation flaring behind those glass-green eyes?

"Interesting." Another step forward and, credit where's it's due, the spy did not take a step back. "What disqualified you, I wonder?"

"My current position creates too many risks if I were to be detected," Shinomori said flatly, as if reciting a lesson. There was cold fire in his face now, pale and constrained. "It is unwise to place all of your eggs in one basket."

"Those aren't your words." A third step. "And that's not the reason."

He brought his will to bear, then, and the blood drained slowly from Shinomori's face. It was unfair; it bordered on cruel. It was, however, necessary, and that was the terrible secret that his namesake and his namesake before him, all throughout the line of mastery, had carried with them: that the ideals of the sword of heaven were ultimately that they had none. They would do what was necessary - what others were unable or unwilling to do, to maintain the equilibrium between heaven and earth.
Even if it meant raising the only kind of son you could ever have to hate you, and teaching him to kill you.

Shinomori strained against his will, tendons bulging once as he threw himself against it. There was no escape, nor would there be until Hiko released him. He hadn't been this rough with the girl; there'd been no need to be, as she was still only half-trained. She'd surprised him in that regard. If he ever had to face her again, he'd be more forceful. The spy, however, carried death-marks on his soul: he had killed, had been trained to kill, and could withstand more than a pacifist like Kamiya.

Hiko judged Shinomori's endurance to a nicety, and when he'd reached his utter limit he drew back. A brief, panicked gasp was the only sign the spy gave of his discomfort; that and the long pause before he spoke again.

"...my motives."

Hiko waited for him to continue. The campfires crackled and popped; glass shattered in the distance, and voices raised in anger, exploding into violence before settling into ambient noise, no more relevant than the wind.

"It was decided," Shinomori said, after another long pause. "that my motives were – insufficiently altruistic." Did his fists clench briefly, or was it a trick of shadows?

"In what sense?"

The spy's heartbeat elevated just a touch, and Hiko saw his throat work as he swallowed. He didn't want to answer, but Hiko knew he would, because the alternative was that terrible crash of Hiko's will over Shinomori's own, his mind folding under the assault like paper in a windstorm. Hiko had been on the receiving end of the full technique, once, when he was still an apprentice. He'd never quite forgiven his master for it, and he suspected that was why the old man had done it. To make things easier, come the end.

"I have only one goal in this." Shinomori was clenching his fists; his knuckles were white with tension. "That goal is the utter destruction of Takeda Kanryu. Regardless of the cost."

"I see." Insufficiently altruistic, indeed: this wasn't about ideology for the spy, this was about revenge. No wonder his little rebel group didn't trust him to lead. "What did Kanryu take from you?"

He didn't expect an answer. He'd said it only to indicate that he understood what Shinomori was saying: that Kanryu had wounded him in some essential way, and all he wanted was to even the score, the politics be damned. But the youngster glared up at him, eyes burning like balefire with hate deeper than the roots of a mountain, and snarled as he answered.

"Her name," he said, invoking it like a mantra, "was Misao."

"Hmph." Hiko crossed his arms again, almost amused and liking Shinomori rather more than he had a few minutes ago. Ideals were tricky things, easy to elevate above the human lives that sustained them. Revenge was simpler. Purer, almost: blood for blood, and no need to justify it with pretty words. "Let me promise you something, Shinomori. If you assist me in this matter, Takeda Kanryu will be dead before the year is out."

The fire in Shinomori's eyes had banked itself. It was still there, only buried, waiting to be called forth. By the time he returned to his room in Kanryu's estate, Hiko knew, it would be hidden as completely as if it had never existed. But there was still a spark of it as he met Hiko's gaze.

"You will swear to this?"
Hiko nodded. After a heartbeat, so did Shinomori.

"I will bring the information to you within three days."

~*~

It had been a long time since Kaoru had taken out mother's hairpins. She didn't usually wear them, so she never had much need for them. Sometimes she would take them out just to look at them – they were beautiful, after all – and wonder if she should be a different kind of woman. But not often.

*Beauty is a woman's armor,* her mother had told her once when she was younger, before the sickness took her, *and courtesy is her weapon.* Kaoru had been kneeling on the mats, staring out at the garden as her mother combed through her hair, and she remembered the spicy, enveloping scent of her mother's perfume: she remembered her mother's low laugh as she carefully picked muddy leaves out of her daughter's hair.

One of her father's students had told her that girls shouldn't set foot in a sacred dojo, so she'd stormed away to lay in wait and tripped him when he came down the training hall steps. They'd scuffled, and Kaoru had come away the worse for it before her father had broken it up. She hadn't been wrong, her mother had reassured her; she would never be wrong to fight with all her heart for what she loved. But there were ways and ways to fight, and not all strength flowed from the sword.

She hadn't understood then, sulking cross-armed and enduring her parents' gentle teasing. She didn't believe she truly understood now. But – maybe – she was starting to.

Her mother had arranged her ornaments by season. Sparrows perching on pine for the New Year, then deep red plum flowers for the early weeks of spring, before the cherry blossoms bloomed. Butterflies on bunches of pink cherry petals came next, then wisteria…

Kaoru blew her bangs away from her forehead in irritation. The cherry blossoms were *late* this year: in fact, if you went only by the weather, it might as well already be the summer rains. Did that mean she was supposed to still wear the plums, or was she meant to keep going as if the seasons had changed normally? Well, seasonal meant *seasonal,* and presumably you waited until the correct season actually came, even if it came late.

On the other hand, Kanryu preferred Western customs, at least when believed his guests were only familiar with Japanese ones. So perhaps staying within the Western calendar was most appropriate, and didn't that ignore the natural rhythms of the year? She'd certainly heard enough oldsters complaining about it… so if that was the case, maybe she should wear the pins for the season it was *supposed* to be, rather than the season it actually was. Then again, she didn't want to come across as trying too hard to play his game –

And wasn't she doing *exactly* what Megumi had warned her not to do by fretting like this?

She sighed again and closed her mother's jewelry box with a determined *thump.* Kimono. Kimono she understood. And she only had a few of them, so there would be less to worry over. She'd pick her outfit, *then* accessorize.

It wasn't like she had anything else to do. Not until Sano brought Yahiko home, anyway, and then – oh dear, *then.* How could she explain this to him? How could she justify any of this – when so much of his life had already been disrupted just after he had finally accepted that he had a *home* and he was safe –

Kenshin stirred in the corner of her room. He was supposed to be making dinner, but it seemed more
important to him to stay by her side, so she'd let him. It was almost a hopeful sign, that he was ignoring a standing order, even if she couldn't be quite sure why.

"Mistress?"

"It's nothing," she said quickly, a little disturbed at how quickly the urge to weep receded. *No more childish things,* she'd sworn, and known that it was the only choice she had. But it felt like walking on broken glass these days, like fighting with an unhealed wound: she couldn't move as freely as she always had. "We should start dinner. Sano and Yahiko will be home soon."

She stood. Kenshin stood with her, fluid as a shadow, and followed her closely enough that she could feel his heat radiating into her skin.

Fourteen years old. She thought about that, as she knelt on the mats in the dining room and watched him cook, her hands folded helplessly in her lap. He'd been fourteen years old when he'd been captured. A few years older than Yahiko; a few years younger than herself. *Younger* than her – and she thought, inevitably, of herself at that age. It hadn't been so very long ago; but it been before her father died, before Sano, before Yahiko, before –

Before the world had ended.

He'd been Kanryu's slave for about ten years, Megumi had said. So he'd be twenty-four now, or close enough. She should have asked Mr. Hiko how long it had been. She'd meant to, except then the messenger had arrived and there had been other things to worry over. He didn't *look* twenty-four; he looked ageless, except when he slept, and she'd only seen him sleeping a few times at the very beginning, when he'd been too weak and wounded to snap to attention as soon as he heard her coming.

But he'd looked young when he slept, too achingly young, and she hadn't thought about what it might mean because she hadn't wanted to. She'd had enough to think about.

Fourteen years old. Still a child by any measure: as completely orphaned as anyone could be, even his hometown wiped off the map. Only his master – that strange, hard man – and the girl from the village, who'd been so important to him. Something had happened and ten years later – this.

*What happened to you?*

The pressure of the words built behind her lips, swirling in her mouth until she had to clench her jaw to keep them back because he *wouldn't* answer – he *couldn't* – but –

Kenshin raised his head from his work and turned to her, as if he'd heard her thoughts.

"Mistress," he said flatly. "Sir Sano and the young master have returned."

"Oh?" And then she could hear them, stampeding their way from the entrance down the hall to the dining room. "So they have."

"We're back," Yahiko said as he entered. Sano nodded, sauntering behind him.

"Welcome home." Kaoru slid around on her knees to face them. "Dinner will be ready soon. How was work?"

"Okay." Yahiko knelt down. "Not real busy. Bad weather, you know."

"I see." He knew; she could see it in the tension lining his face, in Sano's guilty expression. He knew
something was wrong. "A strange thing happened today," she said lightly, not sure how else to approach it. It wasn't as if he didn't know how serious things were, how grave the stakes had grown...

"Yeah?"

She nodded. "Well," she began, "I guess I should start with what happened on the way home from the market..."

He relaxed as she told the story of Hiko's arrival, and maybe it was because she left out the worst parts – like the terror she'd felt when he bore down on her, willing her to step aside, and she'd held her ground and thought she might die of it – and maybe it was only because she was telling him, as if he was an adult who had every right to know and not a child to be protected. It hurt, a little, to realize that she wasn't sure anymore: that he had been growing and changing while she was preoccupied, and she had missed the beginnings of his shift towards manhood.

She didn't tell him how young Kenshin had been. She didn't want him to know – didn't want anyone to know. There was something too awfully intimate about it; it was all too easy to play out the story in her mind's eye, with Yahiko standing in for Kenshin and giving the unnamed girl Tsubame's face. In fact, she told him very little – as little as she'd told the others. Only that Kenshin had been Mr. Hiko's student, and they had quarreled, and he had fallen into Kanryu's hands somehow. That was all anyone needed to know, really

Sano had heard the story already. He applied himself grimly to his meal, attacking the food as though it had offended him. She knew that he wasn't tasting a morsel of it.

Kenshin stayed by her as she spoke, serving the rice, and that was the third reason she spoke as vaguely as she could about what she'd learned from Mr. Hiko. Because it didn't seem right to share his story when he couldn't speak for himself, to share portions of his life that he might not want anyone to know about. They had to know something – he was as bound into this as any of them, and she wanted them to know that he had been a person, once, and could be again, to believe it the way she did – otherwise she couldn't ask them to risk their lives to help her save him.

But they didn't need to know everything she knew. She would keep as many of his secrets as she was able to, and when this was over – that far distant someday when Kenshin was whole again – hope that he would understand that she'd done the best she could.

She mentioned the invitation from Kanryu casually, not wanting to infect Yahiko with her fear. Sano had frightened him enough already, with whatever he'd let slip on the walk home. She could tell that it hadn't worked by the way his fingers tightened on his chopsticks. Her student was too clever to be fooled by her nonchalance.

That, and Sano reacted to her mentioning it by slamming his rice bowl down on the table. She flinched; in the corner of her eye, she saw that Kenshin did as well.

"That had better not be cracked," she said warningly, picking up her own and taking a determined mouthful.

"It's fine, missy." To his credit, he looked mildly abashed as he picked it up and ran his fingers across it, feeling for cracks. "Yeah. Nothin' broken; no harm done."

He wasn't talking about the ricebowl. She swallowed, unable to quite meet his eyes.

"Good," she said softly.
Yahiko finished chewing and asked, too calmly: "Do you think he wants to take Kenshin back?"

She didn't need to look at Kenshin; she felt him freeze in place, knew without seeing that his hand was creeping towards her sleeve.

"I don't care what Kanryu wants," she said serenely, taking another bite. "He won't get it."

And – surprising her so much that she almost dropped her bowl – she sensed Kenshin relax behind her.

"So why are you going in the first place?" Yahiko was staring at his tray, head lowered, but he didn't seem angry. More – thoughtful. Almost brooding.

"Because it's easier than refusing," she said clearly. "At least, according to what we know about Kanryu. He won't give up, once he's decided to take an interest, so… might as well get it over with."

"Huh." He looked at Sano, with the too-old eyes she'd thought he'd never have again, and her heart broke a little. "She's gonna be safe, right?"

Eyes too old for his face, but his voice still cracked a little, like a child's. Sano twitched a little, as if he was biting back a different response even as his eyes softened.

"Sure this," he said confidently. "Ain't gonna let anything happen again. You know me, kid, I only gotta learn a lesson once."

Yahiko nodded. "Okay, then."

The rest of the meal passed in silence.

No one lingered after dinner to chat or drink; everyone went straight to their rooms, wrapped in their own thoughts as they exchanged cursory goodnights. Kenshin followed her, leaving the dishes unattended to.

She did, however, insist that he wait outside her room while she changed into her sleeping clothes.

He was across the threshold almost before she'd finished telling him that it was safe to come in, kneeling at her side as she brushed her hair. His head was bowed, his eyes downcast as always; but they seemed to burn in the low light from the lantern, watching her in the mirror. She braided her hair quickly, biting her lower lip, and finally said:

"Kenshin."

"Yes, mistress?"

"You don't have to worry about tomorrow. I meant it, you know," and she knew that he understood, but she had to test it, had to be sure that it wasn't a fluke. "He can't have you back. I won't let him."

It surprised her, a little, the vehemence in her own voice; but not really, because she knew herself and she knew how deeply, frighteningly possessive she'd become. Even though she had no right to be. This wasn't only about protecting a wounded man, not anymore. This went deeper. He was as much a part of her world now as Yahiko or Sano or her father's school, and she would fight as fiercely to keep him there. Where he belonged.

Maybe it was selfish, maybe it was wrong, maybe she had no right to feel this for him, when he couldn't choose whether or not to be part of her life. But she felt it, and it would fuel her; it
would give her the strength to fight. She could use it, as long as she was careful.

"He gave you up," she said softly, speaking mostly to her own reflection and watching cool rage bloom in her eyes. She didn't quite recognize herself when it did. "He hurt you and then he threw you away."

He'd taken a child and twisted him, bent his mind to trap his heart and soul and all to test a theory.

"I won't let him hurt you," she whispered, watching her fingers twist around each other on her lap. "Not again. Not ever."

"...mistress."

It was the same acknowledgment he'd given her a hundred times, except not. His voice was different; his voice was a voice, not simply a sound, and there was something almost like feeling in it. Her head snapped up. She heard cloth rustle as he stood, walking to the alcove where she'd stored her mother's jewelry box.

"Kenshin?"

He brought it over to her, kneeling again as he set it carefully down between them and opened it.

"What are you…?"

His hand dipped into the hairpins and pulled one out, one that she hadn't quite seen. It had been hidden away behind some larger ornaments in deeper colors, almost buried underneath. He laid it carefully across his hands and offered it to her, head bowed, as if he was presenting a sword. It was a long, straight pin: the design was a spray of peach blossoms in white and pale gold, interspersed with a few bright green leaves.

The tip of the pin gleamed in the lantern light, almost as bright as a blade.

"...oh," she breathed, and took it carefully from him. The metal of the pin was strong and the tip was sharp, sharp enough to pierce down to the bone without much effort. She could feel the threat in it when she ran her fingers down the shaft.

*Beauty is a woman's armor*, her mother had said, *and courtesy is her weapon*. And there were ways and ways of fighting.

Her vision blurred a little.

"Thank you," she said. "It's perfect."

Kenshin bowed to her and closed the jewelry box, putting it back in its place. Kaoru set the hairpin reverently down on her dresser, below the mirror – the mirror that had been her mother's and her grandmother's and her great-grandmother's before her in an unbroken line. She stared at herself in it for another long moment, until she could see herself again, her mother's eyes and her father's proud chin, all the bits and pieces of her ancestors that had combined to make her one whole being. And she thought: Takeda Kanryu is only a man.

"Thank you," she said again, moving to face Kenshin. His eyes didn't quite meet hers but neither were they cast down, and his head was high. "You know…"

She paused to breathe, uncertain, and he waited.
"When I'm at Kanryu's," she said finally, licking her lips nervously. "I was thinking – maybe you should stay with Megumi. Would you prefer to do that, or stay here?"

It wasn't that she didn't want him with her; it wasn't that she wouldn't take him, if she could. If she thought he was ready. He deserved that much, to face the man who'd crippled him. But for all the strides he'd made – even given what he'd just done – he wasn't strong enough, not yet. And she would not let Kanryu hurt him again.

Kenshin flattened himself against the mats, moving so swiftly that he almost seemed to collapse and she gasped a little, startled. Her hand came up to clutch her collar.

"Mistress," he said, a little muffled, and there was that feeling in his voice that she could not name, so faint it almost wasn't there at all. "May this worthless one be permitted to accompany you?"

A question. A request. She collapsed a little herself as the implications hit her, bracing herself against the floor with one hand. He'd asked her for something – something foolish and dangerous and that she would never, under other circumstances, even consider –

But he'd asked. He wanted something.

The lamplight flickered. The wind was dying down and she could hear the gentle patter of rain against the roof. Not a storm: just rain, soft and clean.

"If – if that's what you want," she said, head light with joy and hollow with fear. He looked up a little as she spoke, pale eyes gleaming in the lantern's glow. Those strange eyes like flower petals, so achingly beautiful in the rare moments when they gleamed with near-humanity. She thought, inanely, that maybe that was why she hadn't been able to walk away. Because she wanted to know what they would look like, when he was fully a man again.

"If that's what you want," she said again, a little more strongly. "Then yes. Of course you can."

"Thank you, mistress," he said immediately, and sat up into his usual position: back straight, head bowed, eyes cast down.

"Alright, then," she said, turning back to her dresser and tidying it for no particular reason. "Well. I'm going to bed. Goodnight, Kenshin."

He retreated into his corner as she crawled into her bed, but she felt his eyes on her for a long time before she slept.
Okay! Here it is, the last chapter before The Long Hiatus. This is the last there will be on Invictus until August 10th - for I am off to the wilds of the bar exam, and I shall return a changed woman.

The boy was sweeping in front of the gate when Hiko came to the Kamiya dojo. Not to say his goodbyes, of course – though if he would have if he hadn't been able to get a moment alone with the idiot any other way. Kenshin's hands tightened around the broomstick as he approached. The girl was nowhere in sight.

"Sir," he said, bowing.

"Kenshin."

Kenshin looked up, shifting eyes unreadable, and Hiko looked at his face for a long, long time, eyes lingering over the scar on his cheek.

"…sir," Kenshin said finally. "How might this worthless one assist you?"

"I know about the girl, Kenshin," Hiko said, watching his former student's face carefully. There was a slight tightening in his jaw, a careful shift in stance.

"I know about Tomoe," he continued. "Not all of it, not yet. But more than I did. I'm going back there, Kenshin, to get the rest of the story."

Shinomori had made good on his end of the deal faster than Hiko had expected, and under other circumstances he might have wondered why but what he'd learned had been too important. It burned in him like a mast fire, slow and hidden under the leaves.

He took a step towards Kenshin. To the boy's credit, he managed to hold his ground.

"When I return," he said, still staring straight into lost apprentice's eyes, "I will know the truth. All of it. And there will be a choice to make; whose, I don't yet know. Do you understand, boy?"

Another long, tense moment unfolded between them, and Kenshin neither flinched nor looked away. Then, when the silence had stretched almost to breaking point, he bowed and held it.

"Sir," he said, and nothing else. Hiko looked him over once more, then snorted in irritation.

"We'll see," he said, and left.

~*~

Kanryu had sent a carriage.

It was a handsome carriage, Western, black and sleek with his crest on the door: a spider crouching on a web that glinted silver in the clouded sunlight. It was silver, Kaoru realized as she drew closer,
Kenshin following behind her like a shadow: real silver, worked into the wood. The horses – a matched set of bays – stamped restlessly, once, then quieted as the driver flicked the reins. He had slave-mark on his cheek.

A second slave swung down from his perch at the back and bowed deeply to her, opening the door. The interior was a pale cream, with upholstered benches and light gold draperies. It was all very elegant. Rich, in the Western style, but not too overdone for Japanese sensibilities. Which fit with what Megumi had spent all of yesterday drilling into her. The western styling was meant to unsettle her, but she would presumably draw comfort from the careful balancing of the two aesthetics. That way, later, she could be caught off-guard.

*Give every courtesy,* she reminded herself. *Never show fear.*

Kenshin slid gracefully in front of her and held out a hand to help her up the step and into the carriage. She met his eyes briefly: they were dark, almost violet, and did not leave hers as she stepped up and settled herself on the Western seating. Kanryu's slave closed the door with a gentle click and he and Kenshin climbed onto the small perch at the back, as protocol apparently dictated.

The carriage pulled away with a slight lurch. Kaoru closed her eyes, chest tight. Her muscles protested, straining to settle into the alien posture. She was supposed to sit with her ankles neatly crossed, feet resting either on the floor or tucked slightly back and to one side, and it stretched her legs in strange new ways. It wasn't hard – she'd held more strenuous stances in training – but it was new, and she'd only had a day to learn it. At least the rest came easy, the folded hands and proud spine. Shoulders back, head high… never be afraid. She had to remember that. *Never show fear.*

Kanryu's estate was located on the outskirts of the palace grounds, close to the center of power: a massive, sprawling complex enclosed by high walls. He had torn down his ancestral home some years before and built a Western mansion in its place. It stood out horribly among the traditional residences to either side, which was apparently precisely what he'd wanted. Kaoru knew, from Megumi, that the workshops and the training pens were behind the manor, although she wouldn't have been able to guess it if she hadn't been told. From the main street she could only see the house behind the wrought-iron gates and the long drive across a manicured lawn to the front door.

The gates opened and the carriage drove through. Kaoru braced herself as it crossed the threshold, expecting – something, a chill down her spine or a change in the air pressure – but nothing happened. There was only the crunch of gravel under the carriage wheels and the horses' hooves, and the faintly overpowering scent of flowers. She glanced behind herself, trying to see Kenshin out of the back window, but it was set too high in the carriage wall to see more than the top of his head. He was still there, though.

She stopped craning her neck and faced forwards again, schooling her face into a politely neutral expression and trying to dismiss the sudden conviction that her kimono was wrinkled and her hairdo was coming undone. They weren't. She knew that. She looked fine, *dammit.*

"…Takeda Kanryu is only a man," she murmured to herself, so softly that her lips barely moved.

The carriage came to a stop. She listened to the soft scrape of footsteps on gravel as Kenshin and the footman jumped down and came around the carriage. The door opened smoothly and then Kenshin was there, eyes still dark and unreadable – but not blank. Not since the night of the Hiruma brothers' attack. He held out his hand to help her down and she took it, and she thought that perhaps his fingers curled a little more closely around her hand than they needed to: she knew that hers did around his.

There was another slave waiting at the foot of the stairs that led up to the massive front door. He
bowed low and swept his arm out, gesturing for her to proceed. Her breath caught for a moment.

Kaoru didn’t have much experience with Western architecture. She’d seen a few of the newer administrative buildings in the city center, the ones done in a Western fashion, but she’d never gone inside them. Truth be told, they frightened her, a little: they were so tall and straight, made of deep red stone that could so easily crush everyone inside. There was no air, no natural light except what came through the tall, slightly clouded windows.

Kanryu’s manor wasn’t as tall as the new buildings, but it was much broader. Wings jutted out from either side like engulfing arms and the tall door was set back in an alcove, gaping like a monstrous mouth. Or maybe that was her imagination – it probably was her imagination, come to think of it. If she didn’t know what this place was, the secrets it held, she would probably be more charitable.

But as she stared at that long walk, all she could think of was giant crouching low to devour her.

Almost too much time had passed: she needed to take the first step, now, or it would be all too obvious that she was afraid and she must not be afraid but she was –

Kenshin took a small step forward into her peripheral vision. She glanced over at him. He was offering his arm to her, and she stared at it for half a heartbeat before she realized what he was doing. And what Kanryu had likely been trying to do, by not having his slave offer her assistance in climbing the steps, which was warranted by virtue of her rank even though she didn't need technically need the help. Right. Everything was going to be a test, then.

She took his arm, somewhat gingerly, and started up the steps. Small, graceful movements, she told herself in her mother's voice. Float through the world, and never let anyone see what it costs you.

Kenshin kept step with her effortlessly, head bowed and arm parallel to the ground. Perfect form.

Had he been trained for this, as well?

The double doors opened ahead of them to reveal another slave, a woman this time. She bowed with the same eerie, mechanical precision as the others and held it as she spoke.

"Honorable mistress, this worthless one's most revered master begs your indulgence for but a few moments, as he is unavoidably detained. If you will permit, this worthless one will show you to the east parlor."

"Very well," Kaoru said smoothly, keeping her voice even. "If you'd be so kind."

The woman straightened and turned on her heel, walking at a measured pace. Kaoru followed, still holding Kenshin’s arm – for the look of the thing, yes, but also because he was the only ally she had here; other than him, she was very, very alone.

There were no screens inside the house, just walls, so the rooms couldn't be adjusted, and she couldn't help thinking that it must be dreadfully inconvenient. You'd have to make sure to build every house with enough rooms for every contingency. Or maybe Westerners didn't worry about such things. Everything they built was so large, after all, and she'd seen maps of the world and marveled at how very large their homelands were. Maybe they had enough space for all the rooms they'd need to build.

The east parlor was towards the rear of building. It was a crowded space, all plush Western furniture in reds and browns and the windows were doors, too, somehow: narrow glass arches that reached almost to the ceiling and opened onto a kind of circular brick porch overlookin the grounds. The sweet, floral scent was almost overwhelming now, and she thought it might be coming from the
flowers that encircled the porch. They were a delicate balance of pure white and pale pink, and as Kaoru drew closer the spicy-sweet smell grew stronger, until she felt like she was choking on it. There was a note of decay to the rich perfume, a subtle one as if the flowers had grown from rotting meat.

She glanced at Kenshin. His head was still bowed, and his eyes were veiled behind his bangs, but she could see the tension the line of his jaw. It radiated out from him, through his stiff arm into her fingertips and down to her bones.

"Please be seated, honorable mistress." The woman bowed and left. Kaoru carefully untangled her arm from Kenshin's. There were several seating options; she picked the one furthest from the windows and gagging floral scent. Two chairs, with a low table between them and a view of the door. She sat down gingerly, as the material covering the seat cushion was very slick. Kenshin knelt at her feet, seeming almost to lean into her.

"It's alright," Kaoru said, as much for her sake as his. "Everything's going to be fine."

And she let her hand rest lightly on his head, fingers curling in something that was almost a caress. She did it for her own sake as much as his, and she wasn't surprised to feel a slight tug on her hem as he gripped it for a moment and then let go.

Her pulse throbbed in her temples, hard enough to hurt. She hadn't worn her hair up in anything besides a ponytail since she was very small, and she couldn't help feeling that the bun would come out if she moved her head too quickly. The peach-blossom hairpin was a cool pressure against her scalp, a single small promise: she was not helpless, she was not unarmed. This was a battle like any other, and she was her father's daughter and her mother's too. She wouldn't lose. She wasn't allowed to lose; the sword that protects cannot afford to fail.

This was a battle. She would prepare herself for it like any other combat.

Kaoru's eyes slid closed and she breathed deep, past the sick-sweet reek of the flowers, past the uncertainty and the doubt and the knife-edged awareness of the man kneeling at her side, more dependent on her than any thinking being should ever be. She breathed from her navel, with a short inhale and then a long, slow exhale, feeling her way along the path of energy in her body. Her father had only just begun to teach her the refinements of energy and focus, but – but that wasn't worth thinking about, right now. She had what she had, and she would make do.

Power followed her breath, fountaining from the top of her head down to the soles of her feet and then wending its long slow way up again. Like a serpent, like a waterfall, like an undammed river returning to its natural banks. She was dimly aware of Kenshin's slow relaxation at her side, as if he could feel her equilibrium returning, and instinct told her to stroke his head so she did, just once. He leaned into her touch and she opened her eyes.

There were footsteps outside the doors. She folded her hands neatly in her lap as they swung smoothly open, and she saw Takeda Kanryu for the first time.

*If I passed him in the street,* she thought, startled, *I wouldn't even notice him.*

He was a little taller than average, well-dressed in a Western fashion, with a narrow face and carefully styled hair, and it didn't seem quite right for him to look so absolutely normal. His eyes swept the room restlessly, frowning slightly. Then he saw her and smiled as if he was truly glad to see her.

"Ah, Miss Kamiya!" he exclaimed, striding over to where she was seated. "Such a pleasure. So glad
that you could make it on such short notice."

He held out his hand and for a brief, horrible moment she couldn't quite remember what she was supposed to do: then she let her own rest gently in his palm and he bowed over it. His skin felt normal, if a little feverish.

"And I see you've brought my manslayer," he continued, glancing down at Kenshin. Then his genial expression hardened, twisting like iron melting in a forge. "Why aren't you bowing, dog?"

"Excuse me?" Kaoru asked, but he wasn't talking to her. His eyes were fixed on Kenshin, who had clenched his fists in the cloth of his pants and hidden his eyes behind his bangs. He was shaking.

"Well?" Kanryu demanded. "Don't dawdle – show the proper respect. Forehead on the ground, now!"

Slowly, as if being pressed by a terrible weight, Kenshin's hands slid off his thighs and he began to bow.

Kaoru couldn't speak. She needed to speak. She needed to do something, this was happening too quickly, this was –

*This is the first move*, she thought suddenly, as the cool stillness of battle-focus poured over her.

*Parry.*

"Kenshin. Stop." She poured every ounce of authority she had into her voice, cracking it like a whip. Kenshin froze.

*Strike.*

"Sir Kanryu," she said, thinking of Megumi's slow-boiling rage and trying to put that acid sweetness in her voice, "I don't recall giving you permission to address my slave, much less give him orders."

Kanryu met her eyes. He looked like he was smiling: his mouth was curved up, and his eyes were hooded as though he was enjoying some private joke. But there was poison in his voice when he spoke.

"Do forgive me, Miss Kamiya," he said, flicking one of his bangs idly away from his face. "It seems I forget myself. I take great pride in the quality of my work, you know, and like any master craftsman it does frustrate me to see it improperly cared for."

Kenshin was shivering. She could see it out of the corner of her eyes, but she didn't dare risk a glance at him. To look away now would be disastrous; she'd already granted Kanryu an advantage by yielding the first move. Never take your eyes off your opponent.

"Oh?" Kaoru dropped her hand to Kenshin's head again and he huddled back against her legs. She could feel him trembling. "That's wonderful to know – he was in such a terrible state when I found him, I'd assumed that his former master was some kind of brute."

A part of herself covered its face in shame and turned away. But she couldn't afford to listen to it, couldn't take the time to feel guilty about the words coming out of her mouth. Megumi had counseled her not to be aggressive, to just focus on holding her ground but Kenshin was shaking at her feet and the man who'd done this to him – taken a boy who'd only want to help the girl he loved and made him this – was standing right in front of her. She would not fail. She would win: she would take a pound of flesh in Kenshin's name.
Cold anger unsheathed itself within her, sharp as any blade. She never stopped smiling.

"Although your dedication to your craft is admirable," she continued, voice light as if she was chatting about the weather, "I don't appreciate anyone interfering with my property. As I'm sure you know, given the recent… disturbance."

He reared back like a snake about to strike, nostrils flaring, and Kaoru held his gaze even as it burned with violence. She kept a small, cold smile on her face, kept her fingers tangled in Kenshin's hair; she knew that she looked a mistress and despairs.

But if she didn't act this way, she would lose. If she showed weakness, fear or fury or any human feeling, she would lose this battle. And the sword that protects cannot afford to fail. He'd made a misstep, violating protocol in order to provoke her into attacking him blindly. Struck out at her weakest point – at her genuine care for Kenshin. But he'd ceded ground to do it because he'd underestimated her control, and it hadn't occurred to him that she might be able to play this game, to lie and pretend that she was only offended for the proper reasons.

Unless he hadn't, and this was all a test – no. The battlefield was no place to second-guess yourself. She'd cross that bridge when and if she came to it.

Kanryu looked away first, blinking his face back into an apologetic smile.

"I apologize, Miss Kamiya," he said, eyes smooth as river-glass, and bowed with one hand over his heart. "Truly. It was unpardonably rude of me. I pray you will not judge me too harshly for my… overzealousness."

He was retreating, for now. She nodded in seeming acceptance, stroking lightly through Kenshin's hair as though soothing a frightened animal, and that was what he was meant to be, wasn't he? A beloved pet, at the very best. Not human. Existing only at her convenience.

"Very well," she said carelessly, her heart breaking. "Shall we begin again, then?"

"As you wish." Kanryu smiled. "Miss Kamiya, it is my very great honor to welcome you to my humble home. I'm afraid that tea isn't quite ready, but I thought that perhaps in the meantime, I could amuse you with a tour of the grounds? The training facilities here are the oldest in Japan. There's quite a bit of historical interest, if such things strike your fancy. And the gardens are quite spectacular."

This was the next sally, she knew instinctively. And she could defend, deflect, put it off – but that would tell him that she was afraid of him, and she would not be afraid.

"That sounds lovely," she said, and let him help her out of the chair.

~*~

The gardens were exquisite. Kanryu escorted her personally, one hand resting companionably over hers where it gripped his arm and talked lightly about the history of the estate. There was a kind of maze made of hedges which was apparently a very popular Western device; usually there was a covered seating area called a gazebo in the center, but in this case the center held a small hut for the tea ceremony. It had been the Western gardener's idea, and driven his highly traditional Japanese colleague to distraction.

"He came around in the end, though," Kanryu chuckled. "They're always arguing over something or other, but the results are worth all the trouble. Otherwise I wouldn't keep them around."
Kaoru felt Kenshin's presence warm at her back, and drew strength from it. For his sake, she could not flinch or shrink away; she had to meet Kanryu's challenges head-on.

"Oh, yes," he said, in an almost fatherly tone. "I'm afraid I've never had the patience for rehabilitating useless things. It's like drinking tea made of old leaves: too much effort for too little reward. I quite commend you, though, for your efforts in that regard. You've done marvelously, especially given the materials you had – but your inexperience does show, my dear."

"Does it?" she said, still dripping sweetness, and readied herself for the next round. "Well, that's only to be expected."

"Indeed. Why, I would venture to say that he would have turned on you by now if not for my careful work. You allow him such liberties, after all."

"I thought he was beginning to experience difficulties," she asked innocently, doing her best not to eye Kanryu's jugular in too speculative a manner. "Isn't that why you abandoned him? Or am I mistaken?"

His face flashed into that sudden, snarling violence again, gone almost as soon as it appeared, and his cordial mask stayed firmly in place as he responded.

"It's true that he was reaching the end of his usefulness to me. I require a higher standard of service, given my position."

"I suppose," she said, stopping to brush her fingers across one of the strange, strongly-scented flowers that dominated the gardens. "What are these flowers? They have such an unusual scent."

There was nothing to gain from engaging him on that ground; his family was higher-ranked than hers, so the best possible option was to ignore the implied insult and change the subject.

"Roses," Kanryu informed her. "A Western breed – notice how lush the petals are? And a much stronger fragrance."

"It's almost overwhelming." She leaned in, politely pretending to inhale the scent. "And there are so many of them."

"Quite intentional. I'm afraid the professional facilities can be rather rank, especially in the summer, and it bothers the neighbors. The roses help." His smiled sharpened; his eyes gleamed cold as butcher's knife. "Are you interested in touring the workshops? As I mentioned, they're of some historical interest – and perhaps it might help your own efforts to see how things are normally done."

Kaoru's heartbeat rose, thudding fast against her ribs, and she faked another long inhale to buy herself some time. She could refuse. On what grounds? That she had no interest – but the person she was pretending to be would, or could be easily talked into it, or at the very least would be indifferent enough not to potentially insult her host by turning down the offer. And he knew that she wasn't that person, but he was waiting for her to show it.

"I'm sure it would be fascinating," she said finally, straightening to look him in the eyes. "But you make it sound so indelicate – the smell…"

He patted her hand indulgently. "Don't fret, my dear, I've no intention of taking you that far below stairs, as it were. That's all very technical, after all, of interest only to other craftsmen."

There was a lie in his eyes. But she couldn't think of a way to refuse without flinching. And whomever flinched first would lose, and she could not afford to lose.
"Then I'd be honored," she murmured through a polite smile.

Kanryu led her to the back of the gardens, where a tall flowering hedge partitioned the main estate off from the workshops and the pens. There was a single gate in it, solid wood, and locked from the estate side. He produced a key that had been hanging from a chain hidden under his shirt and unlocked the gate to reveal a long, winding stair going down a steep slope.

"This land used to be even," he explained as his escorted her down. "But about two hundred years ago, when my family began manufacturing, we had the back half of the estate lowered and the front half raised slightly. As a security measure, and to reduce irritation to the neighbors."

The slope went down a good twenty feet, and as Kaoru looked up and behind them she saw that the hedge wall hid a stone one with guards stationed every ten feet or so. They stood with unsettling stillness, like statues, and she knew without needing to see their faces that they would have slave-marks carved on their cheeks.

There were five long, low buildings with neat pathways between them: beyond that was another tall stone wall, and beyond that she caught just the barest glimpse of smoking fires and thatched roofs. Shouts echoed from beyond the second wall, and now and again the terrible crack of leather on flesh. The rotting smell was stronger here, wafting in from the rear of the estate. From behind that great stone wall.

He walked her through one of the buildings, assuring her that it was representative of all the others, although this one wasn't currently in use. This was the finishing area, apparently, where the broken slaves were trained in their various disciplines. Most already possessed valuable skills, but versatile slaves sold better: specialization was a luxury item. And of course, there was a need to teach them the correct protocol; that could take months.

"Of course," Kaoru said, nauseous. "May I ask what that building is, over there?" she asked, gesturing to the one on the far right. Unlike the others, it had no window and only one door.

"Oh, that." Kanryu waved a dismissive hand. "The medical facilities. When they come this far, there's been too much invested in them to let them die of the odd infection."

"Is the mortality rate very high, then?" she asked numbly, blood running cold with the implications.

He shrugged. "It can be. But that's only really a problem if it's been a bad breeding season."

Bile lurched up her throat, raw and foul, and she could only barely swallow it down.

"I see," she said, more faintly than she'd meant to. Kanryu smiled down at her in a way that was almost a leer.

"Since we've come this far," he said, and the hand over hers on his arm tightened so that she could not pull away, "It does seem a shame not to show you the rest. I'm sure you know that the manslayer is an item of some historical interest, and it would be a pity to squander this chance to really understand his history."

He began steering her towards the gate in the second wall. Kenshin stirred behind her, his fingers brushing against the back of her kimono, and she sensed rather than saw his hand lift towards the wooden sword tucked in his belt. She made a sharp gesture with her free hand, mind racing, trying to work past rising panic and find a way out.

There wasn't one. Not one that she could see. If she refused she would only make it clear that what was behind that wall frightened her – and it did, because she knew what must be there and she didn't
want to see, didn't want to know the way Megumi did, didn't want to look into the mirror and see that horror reflected in her eyes – but he would only make her look anyway.

*What Kanryu craves above all else, Megumi had said with eyes like a corpse, is power.*

He must not know that she was afraid.

Kenshin's hand brushed against her again, light as insect wings, and left warmth in its wake. The hairpin rustled as she walked and she reached up to adjust it, casually. The silk blossoms were cool against her skin.

*The sword that protects cannot afford to fail.* And they were such small words, so fragile, but they knit her quaking soul together.

She smiled up at Kanryu, making her eyes a mirror.

"Well, if it's no trouble…"

That flash of animal violence again; banked fury glinting in his eyes and that meant something, but she couldn't spare the time to analyze it now when she was barely holding herself together.

"None at all," he said, almost through his teeth, and opened the gates to hell.

The ground beyond the gate was muddy and churned, reeking of blood and excrement. There was only one building: windowless, like the medical facilities, with a single iron door. It stood in the very back of the space, surrounded by open-sided huts – the thatched roofs she'd seen earlier. Under them huddled – people, they were people, as much as they no longer looked it, not even in their eyes. She had to force herself to look at their eyes, because she owed them that: she couldn't help them but she could look, and see, and bear witness.

Those who weren't clustered under huts were standing, half-dead, in open pens. There were men watching over them, unbranded men bearing thin birch rods, and as she looked on one of the standing victims began to collapse. The man near his cluster strode over and started to beat the one who'd fallen. There was no passion in it. He wasn't angry: he delivered the beating carefully, efficiently, until the fallen victim struggled to their feet.

"Ah, Mr. Yamanashi," Kanryu said as one of the overseers approached. "How goes it?"

"Well enough, sir," the man grunted. "The latest batch worked as you said, though I think it's made them a bit too compliant. Makes me worry they're still hiding something, like there's still some piss and vinegar in 'em after all. Pardon my language, missy." He bowed to Kaoru.

"Of course," she said weakly. She wanted, desperately, to look at Kenshin, to apologize for this, for not being able to stop it. For not protecting him. But she didn't dare.

"Well, carry on," Kanryu said, waving his hand dismissively. "We're heading to the cells – Miss Kamiya's curious about the manslayer's history."

"Eh?" Mr. Yamanashi blinked, and seemed to really see Kenshin for the first time, narrowing his eyes as he glared over her shoulder. "I'll be damned. Little shit survived after all – I knew he was tough, but damn. Well. Been a long time since I've seen that face."

Kaoru looked back at Kenshin then, keeping her face carefully quizzical. He was staring at the ground, eyes shielded, looking like a puppet held by a few fraying strings. Her heart leapt into her throat and she wanted, more than anything, to take him by the hand and lead him away from here –
she should have thought, should have realized, shouldn't have let the tide of anger carry her into fighting Kanryu. Should have just defended, as Megumi had told her to…

She didn't say his name. But she almost did, and as her lips closed silently over the last syllable he looked up and met her eyes.

His eyes were bright, human, sparking with pain and grief and – something she had no words for.

*I'm sorry,* she tried to tell him, without words. He looked at her for a long moment.

Then he bowed his head again, but his posture seemed stronger, now. As though he'd taken something from their brief exchange.

"My dear?" Kanryu was grinning down at her like a fox in a henhouse. She smiled politely back at him.

"Oh, nothing," she chirped. "I was just surprised that anyone here still remembered Kenshin."

"Well, he is one of my most famous creations," Kanryu said, guiding her towards the long windowless building at the back. Kenshin followed behind her, closer than a shadow. "I suppose it was the lovely Dr. Takani who told you his former name?"

Shock sang through Kaoru's veins, but she held her polite social smile even as she cursed herself for a fool. Because she had used his name, hadn't she, when she'd ordered him to stop his bow – and hadn't Megumi said that only one other person had known Kenshin's name…?

"She did," Kaoru managed to say, and prayed that her voice was even.

"Hmm. Well, do give her my regards. I suppose she's explained the process we used on the manslayer to you?"

"She did." Kaoru swallowed bile, heart pounding in her throat.

"Then you understand, of course, how counterproductive to the conditioning it is to allow him the use of a name?"

Rage pulsed through her, cold and sharp, and she fought back in the only way she could.

"Oh? I hadn't thought that conditioning required such careful upkeep. Given what a master craftsman you are. And besides," she said, casually, adjusting the peach-blossom hairpin, "I like his name."

Kanryu's fingers dug momentarily into her skin.

"True," he said, and couldn't quite hide the rage in his voice. "Forgive me my perfectionist ways, my dear."

"Forgiven," she said with cheer that she didn't feel as he escorted her through the iron door.

The inside of the cell block was nearly black, except for a few guttering lanterns set against the wall. There was a narrow hallway, and wooden doors lining each side with small grates set at the bottom. Low moans echoed through the building: muffled sobs and, as they stood there, a single heart-wrenching scream. She closed her eyes, throat raw with swallowed bile and unshed tears.

"Ah." Kanryu looked in the direction of the scream. "It does take them that way, sometimes. You know, of course, about the drug regime?"
"I do."

"It's administered here." He led her down the hall, and she didn't want to go but she couldn't stop, couldn't show that she was afraid, had to keep going no matter what. "The initial dosages are quite potent, enough that the latter half of the treatment – what you saw outside – would be largely ineffective. That's more of a shaping; this is where they're broken. So every slave starts here, in the cells." He paused before one door, the same as any of the others. "This one, as I recall, was the manslayer's."

He let go of her arm and opened the door. Kenshin let out a small, choked cry, staring into the black cell with shock-wide eyes. Kaoru could just barely get the shape of it in the dim lantern light: rectangular, and only barely large enough to sit in. He couldn't possibly have lain down in it, even as small as he was; he would have had to sleep curled on his side, or propped against the wall.

Was that why he never used the futon she'd given him?

The walls were discolored. She took a step closer, sickly fascinated. They were covered in scratch marks and stains – blood and other, fouler things.

"It's not being used right now," Kanryu said idly. "Would you like a closer look? I can send for a torch."

She looked back at him, standing in the hall with a ghoulish grin: she looked at Kenshin, staring into the black cell as though he'd seen his own death – which he had. This was the place where he'd died, where that fourteen-year-old boy who'd loved a village girl had been lost forever…

And she waited for the rage. She waited for the horror. She waited for the pity.

They didn't come.

Instead, unfolding inside her like a toxic bloom, was disgust. Pure, acidic repugnance, untouched by horror or rage: at Kanryu, at this place, at herself for believing the myth, that Kanryu was some mythical monster.

This was Kanryu's master stroke? This was all he had? The screams of the damned and cell that smelled of blood and shit? And he was standing there, smirking like a magician, like this was supposed to break her –

He truly thought that she was that weak, that she would cry and flinch like a child from the truth of the world.

He thought so little of her.

"That won't be necessary," she said coolly, drawing herself up to her full height. "Well. This has certainly been… informative." She met Kanryu's eyes, unflinching. "Honestly, though, I'm not that interested in the past. Where a person came from doesn't matter as much as where they're going, don't you think?"

He started to say something and she turned her head sharply away, cutting him off.

"Kenshin. Come on, we're leaving."

Kenshin swallowed and, moving as if underwater, slowly turned from the cell and came to her side. His face was ashen and her contempt for Kanryu surged again: was that the best he could do? Hurt a man whom he'd already broken?
"Thank you very much for your hospitality," she said, taking Kenshin's arm. His muscles were stiff under her hand. "I would stay for tea, but unfortunately I have another engagement after this, and it's taken longer than I thought it would. I don't want to be late – courtesy is so important."

Kaoru began to walk away and then Kanryu's hand was on her arm, forcing her to turn, and his face never lost that smooth grin even as his grip became tight enough to bruise.

"Ah, Miss Kamiya, I'm afraid I must insist – "

"Get your hand off me." The words burst out of her, white-hot with scorn, and the power in them forced him back a step, his grip on her arm undone. "Sir."

She felt something shifting as she stared him down, willing herself to look past her fear, past what he'd done to who he was and saw something flinch away from her in the depths of his eyes. He knew what she'd seen, and for a moment the mirror cracked and she realized, suddenly, that he hated her. He hated everything: he sought power because he had none, because no matter how hard he tried he could never quite make the world be exactly as he wanted.

He was, after all – as she'd told herself over and over and not quite believed – only a man. Or not even a man, just a child who'd never learned that it was wrong to pick the wings off flies. A spoiled, angry child.

"Good day," she said politely – because courtesy cost her nothing, now – and left.

~*~

The tide of revulsion carried her past the gate and as far as the first river outside Kanryu's neighborhood before it ebbed and she found herself standing on a riverbank in a strange part of the city, the scent of the training pens clinging like bitter perfume and Kenshin shaking at her side. Her stomach lurched, and kept lurching, and she had just enough time to disentangle herself from Kenshin's arm before the light breakfast she'd managed to choke down that morning came back up again. She heaved, gut churning, and fell to her knees. Her throat was raw and there was nothing left after the first bout – she hadn't eaten much to begin with and it had been hours – but she kept retching and retching, until tears formed in the corners of her eyes and snot began to run down her face and she was sobbing, huge ugly choking sobs in between dry heaves.

Then Kenshin's hand was on her back, wide and warm between her shoulderblades as he knelt beside her, and that made it worse. Because he wasn't offering comfort out of kindness; he was required to, bound by chains not of his own making, when he must be far more tormented than her by what they'd seen. She'd only walked through it; he'd lived it, that mud and that horror and the stench of human waste.

And even if he had been offering it freely, she wouldn't have deserved it. She'd promised him, promised herself, and she'd failed: she'd let Kanryu hurt him, again…

"Mistress – " he started to say, voice low and expressionless, and she couldn't look at him, didn't dare meet his eyes.

"Don't call me that!" she nearly wailed. "I hate it! I hate it! I don't – I could accept it before because, because I was protecting you, because I promised I would keep you safe and I couldn't, I let him hurt you again – I was proud and angry and I thought I could fight him and – and he hurt you, and I couldn't even make him bleed for it – and I'm so, so sorry – "

"What do you require, mistress?" he persisted. She shook her head, flinching away from his hand at
her back and still unable to look him in the face. There was too much shame.

"Don't ask me that," she whispered, voice cracking. "I don't deserve to – just – just get us home, Kenshin. Please. Let's just go home."

Her throat ached and she could barely keep her head up. Still, she fished her handkerchief from her sleeve and cleaned herself up as best she could after Kenshin silently withdrew. There was no point in distressing anyone else, or drawing unnecessary attention.

She heard wheels creaking along the road and turned from the river. A rickshaw was pulling up, apparently in response to Kenshin's hail. The runner wore the Tokujiro company's crest, and thankfully had no slave-mark on his cheek.

"Where to, young miss?" he asked cheerfully as she stepped in as quickly as she could, before Kenshin could reach out his hand to help her. Like most rickshaws, there was space between the runner's posts and the passenger's seat for a slave to kneel, and Kaoru closed her eyes in brief agony.

"Kenshin," she said quietly. "It's your choice."

He looked at her for a long moment, unblinking, as if he was startled or thinking or both. Then, slowly, he climbed in and settled himself at her feet.

As she gave the driver his directions, she felt Kenshin's hand clench her skirts.

~*~

Home had never looked more like itself: the familiar sight of the gates had never come has a more absolute relief than they did when the rickshaw finally pulled up in front of the shallow steps leading up to it. Kaoru paid the runner quickly – more than the ride was worth, by the depth of his bow – and thanked him. Kenshin moved like an old man when he got out of the rickshaw, like he had lead in his bones.

He'd held on to her skirts all the way home.

She thought that she could bear to look at him now, and saw that his face was drawn tight across his bones, skin ashen and eyes almost back to that unsettling blankness. He followed her mechanically, mirroring her movements, and it was such a horrible reversion to his earliest days with her that she almost had to look away again.

They made it up the stairs and through the gate, and then he stumbled. She turned to him, put her arm around him out of pure instinct – remembering the first time, him covered in bloody mud and her heart beating out of her chest, frightened out of her mind but so certain that she was doing the right thing – and he collapsed against her, giving her his full weight as he never had before. She bore it; it was the least she could do, probably the only thing she'd done right since she'd said that he could come with her to Kanryu's estate.

Somehow, they made it indoors. She steered him into the parlor – it was closest to the door – and eased him down onto the mats. He slid bonelessly off her shoulders, catching himself only enough to kneel instead of falling. She knelt in front of him, trying to find his eyes under his bangs.

"Kenshin. Kenshin, please…"

He didn't respond. It was his first week all over again – his head bowed, staring at his limp hands resting on the tops of his thighs, shoulders slumped and caving in as if to make himself half his true size.
"I'm sorry," she pleaded. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, please don't – don't run away again. Kenshin. Tell me – please, I'll fix this just – tell me how…"

And he still didn't respond, couldn't. She almost grabbed his hands but didn't quite dare: she'd never touched him that fully before, never been touched by him that way, except…

Except that night, when the storm had broken. In the aftermath.

Instinct took her and she scrambled to the nearest bedroom. He was reverting, physically, but this wasn't that first week and he wasn't the cringing half-animal he'd been. He'd changed, in his time with her: he'd been growing more human by the day. She had to believe – to have faith in him, if not in herself, in the small signs he'd been leaving. In a plate of riceballs by the training hall door, in his instinctive reach for her whenever he was afraid and that single, terrible request he should never have been able to make…

*Let this work*, she prayed as she yanked a spare blanket from the wardrobe. *Let me be right. Let me fix my mistake…*

Kenshin seemed to have grown even smaller in the brief time that she'd been gone. He looked completely alone, huddled in the center of the room as if he was trying not to touch anything, or breath too hard. As if he knew that no matter what he did, what choice he made, there would be pain.

"Kenshin," she called softly, footsteps slowing as she entered the room. "It's alright."

Carefully, Kaoru draped the blanket around him. His hands came up, paused, and then fell to his lap again; she kept her grip on the edges of the cloth and wrapped her arms around him, intending to tuck it in under his chin. As she embraced him he seemed almost to sigh. Then his full weight was against her, leaning on her, and suddenly she was the only thing holding him up.

Unshed tears swelled in her throat, nearly choking her as his hair brushed against her cheek. His eyes were still open and staring into nothing, but his head was resting on her shoulder and he was curling into her, relaxing as her arms tightened around him.

"It's over," she murmured. "It's over and it's done and you're safe now. It's always safe here, you know that."

His breath hitched. She made soothing sounds, nonsense syllables dimly remembered from her own childhood, and stroked his back through the blanket instead of his hair because she didn't want to remind him that he was owned, only tell him that he was loved. She could admit that to herself, in this strange intimacy: that she loved him, at least a little, the way she loved Yahiko and Sano and Megumi and maybe even Aoshi Shinomori, whom she'd only just met but that hadn't meant she didn't see the hollow place behind his eyes.

*The sword that protects.* It meant so, so much more than simply fighting.

"It's alright," she told him again, fierce and tender. "It's alright."

He was a feverish warmth in her arms, heavy and hot and shaking slightly. She held onto him as best she could, rocking a little, remembering the worst moments of Yahiko's illness. When she'd finally understood that he was only a little boy, only a child who'd seen and suffered more than any child should. Remembering her mother and her father and the comfort that had flowed from them as naturally as breathing, and hoping that she could be the same way.

After what could have been minutes or hours, Kenshin finally stirred. She relaxed her grip and he
start to sit up; it took him a little while and she waited patiently, letting him brace himself against her. Finally he was kneeling just before her, head bowed and eyes shaded, and she was left holding an empty blanket.

"Miss –" he started to say, and then stopped.

"Miss –" he said again, ending with a strange, choked consonant and gasping for air afterwards. Kaoru leaned towards him, concerned.

"Kenshin…"


"Don't apologize," she said automatically, dazed, as the world shifted and tilted around her. He'd said her name. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"Yes, Miss K-kaoru." He still stumbled over it, almost mumbling, but he was saying her name.

He looked up, wary, and straightened from his bow. His eyes were bright, and very human.

"Miss Kaoru," he said again, staring at her, and she couldn't look away. And he didn't smile, although she wanted him to, thought that he should: a small, shy smile, uncertain. But he didn't, and he wouldn't, not yet.

"I'll make lunch," she said inanely. "You should rest. I'm – you need to rest. I'll make lunch," she repeated.

"Yes, Miss Kaoru," he said obediently, and stilled. He wouldn't leave the room until she did.

"Get some rest," she said again, and started to leave. Then she paused in the doorway and turned back to face him. He was watching her, his strange eyes – not quite blue, not quite purple, but shading in between – alight with something that she didn't dare name for fear of being wrong.

"I – " she started to say, and then looked away. Heat rose in her face. "I, um – I – thank you," she blurted out, finally. "Thank you, Kenshin. For – for not calling me – for using my name."

And before she could see his reaction, she fled.

~*~

Megumi read the report again. She had already read it twice, once to know, again to comprehend, and now she read it a third time in the hopes that she had been wrong the first two. Then she set it carefully down on the desk.

"Well," she said, voice echoing hollowly in her own ears. "I had thought it was too good to last."

"I'm sorry." Shinomori was kneeling in front of her. He put his hand on the report, his fingers not quite touching hers, and she met his glass-green eyes with equanimity. "Dr. Takani. I am sorry."

"You haven't showed this to Sagara?"

He shook his head, bangs falling over his eyes. She closed her own, breathing deep, remembering that she breathed free air.

"Don't let him know," she said softly, not quite asking. "Not yet. He – there may yet be a way…"
Her voice cracked. Shinomori was silent, knowing that he didn't need to say what they both knew: that her time was running out faster than they'd thought, that this – this new project, this new horror would require her expertise, sooner or later. And then it would be unleashed on the rebels, armed with the information that she would give to Kanryu, sooner or later. One day, she could hold out. Perhaps two. But sooner or later, she would break. Sooner or later, everyone broke.

They'd always known that she was bait, had counted on her being used as such. But they weren't ready, not anymore, to turn the trap against Kanryu and the shōgunate. Not since the captain's death.

"You have to tell Kyoto," she said suddenly. "If this doesn't convince those idiots to get their act together, nothing will. With any luck, we can get back to where we were a year ago, with this," and she tapped the report, "serving as an impetus. Surely they'll see how important it is to set their differences aside."

"And if they don't?" Shinomori's eyes were clear and still as the surface of a pond. Megumi smiled, hard and small and bitter as an apricot pit.

"If they don't..." Her eyes darkened. "If they don't, I will do what must be done."

Shinomori looked, for a moment, as if he wanted to say something. Then he inclined his head, one warrior to another, and left her to the lengthening shadows.
save your heart and take your soul

Chapter Notes

And we're back.

I have changed the update schedule slightly: instead of updating every week, I will be updating every two weeks, so that Invictus and Vaster Than Empires will each be updated once a month. I'm not going to have the kind of free time I did in the spring, and this will allow me to get quality chapters out on a regular schedule.

See you on the 24th (which is also my birthday!) for the next installment of Vaster Than Empires!

Something had changed, and Yahiko didn't know what to do about it.

It wasn't just that Kenshin had stopped calling Kaoru *mistress*, although that was certainly a change and a good one; it made Yahiko think that maybe Megumi had been right after all, and somehow what they were doing was working. But it wasn't only that and it wasn't only Kenshin who had changed. Kaoru hardly ever raised her voice anymore, even when he called her ugly. Sano barely spoke, only brooded about with his hands thrust in his pockets. Megumi acted like nothing was different at all, until you saw her eyes: there was something there like old tree branches.

And lately he'd begun to feel too big for his skin, like something inside him was trying to grow past the borders of flesh and bone, and that wasn't a *bad* feeling, exactly. Except that the same something was itching in the back of his throat and he didn't know how to let it out, this thing that felt like standing on the edge of a cliff and looking down to see waves pounding on the rocks.

He'd sworn to himself the first time Kaoru put a wooden sword in his hands that he would never, ever be helpless again. That he would learn how to fight and the next time someone came and tried to take what was *his* – to hurt the people and the places he loved – they wouldn't be able to. He'd stop them. He'd make them *pay*.

And he'd made Kihei pay, in blood and bruises and flinching terror.

So why didn't it feel good?

Kihei had been a wretched slug of a man, more than halfway to monster. He'd tried to hurt Kaoru. He'd attacked Yahiko's home. He'd –

He'd looked utterly pathetic, lying on the muddy ground and whimpering. And later, in the courtroom, twitching and flinching and cowering away, with his scrapes barely healed and bruises turning a sickly yellow-brown. Yahiko had remembered, then, something that Kaoru had said offhandedly once a long time ago, quoting her father, about how monsters were always smaller in the sunlight. It should have pleased him to think that he had made this monster small but it didn't: it made him feel small himself, and sick inside.

But Kihei wouldn't have let something like that stop him, he'd argued with himself, and as soon as he'd thought it a quiet voice had said back *but aren't you supposed to be better than Kihei?*
The sword that protects. He'd thought he understood what it meant – in order to protect someone, you have to be strong, right? – but as he'd stood in the courtroom with Sano glowering over his shoulder (and Sano was strong, and Sano hadn't been there and what good did strength do anyone if you weren't there?) he'd thought that maybe he hadn't understood at all.

Yahiko sighed, resting his head against the porch pillar, and watched Kenshin calmly drawing a bucket of water from the well. The day had been bright and almost as warm as a proper spring; the sun was still half-hidden under the clouds, but at least it had shown its face. Now evening was coming in, and the sun was beginning its downward arc towards the horizon. The air was calm, and smelled like new growth.

Kaoru and Sano had been gone since lunch, and warned him not to expect them back until after dark. So he'd grabbed some takeout from the Akabeko, enough for both him and Kenshin, and managed to get home before Kenshin started cooking. Kenshin had stiffened when Yahiko told him to leave off and laid out the meal, relaxing just the slightest hair when Yahiko had grabbed his own portion and gestured for Kenshin to take the rest. He'd retreated into the kitchen to eat, but at least he'd eaten. Yahiko had been half-afraid that he'd accidentally trampled over one of the hundred and ten bizarre rules that constrained the older man, but he'd cooked every night that he was physically able and it was about time that he had a break.

Kenshin carried the bucket into the kitchen: when he came back out, he paused for a moment, eyes shaded by his long red hair. Then he went and knelt at the side of what was supposed to be a garden but was really just an overgrown corner of the courtyard that Kaoru hadn't had the time to do anything about. He studied the ground for a long moment, long enough that Yahiko decided to amble over and see what was going on.

"What's up?" he asked, crouching down next to Kenshin. Kenshin's head lowered a little further, and Yahiko thought he saw his shoulders rise up, as if he was preparing to flinch away.

"Miss Kaoru instructed this worthless one to maintain the house in good order," he said, after a pause.

Yahiko considered this, glancing out at the weedy garden patch. More weed than garden, really – but as far as he knew Kaoru hadn't actually told Kenshin to tend to the garden, not in so many words…

So maybe this was something Kenshin had decided to do himself? He'd been making choices for a while now, but only when prompted; as far as Yahiko knew, this was the first time he'd indicated that he wanted to do something on his own. If he was, in fact, doing that. Maybe Kaoru had told him to see to the garden.

Then again, did it really matter what Kaoru might have told Kenshin to do?

He knew that it did, at least to Kenshin – but it shouldn't, and that felt more important.

"I think there's some garden tools in the storehouse, up in the loft," he said, standing. "You want me to go get them?"

Kenshin bowed hurriedly to him, starting to get up. "This worthless one will – "

"No, no," Yahiko waved and Kenshin paused, startled. "It's a really good idea. I want to help." Yahiko started toward the storehouse, calling back over his shoulder. "You figure out where to start, okay? I'll get the tools."

The garden tools were where Yahiko remembered them being, rolled up in cloth in the loft behind a
stack of broken training dummies in various stages of repair and a disassembled rack of some kind. They were set next to a small box, one that Yahiko didn't remember, that was marked with a family crest that Yahiko didn't recognize. Although he had the strongest feeling that he should.

He traced the crest, frowning. A thick, horizontal line, and three dots beneath, balanced in an inverted pyramid. It looked familiar. Really familiar. And the box wasn't nearly dust-covered enough to have been in the loft for long. No one ever cleaned up here: everything in the loft was either broken or too rarely needed to bother with storing in the main room. But he'd never seen anything with that mark on it in either the house or the training hall before.

It wasn't very big – not much larger than a soup pot – but it was heavy, as he discovered when he picked it up and gave it an exploratory rattle. Something jangled and clinked inside it – many somethings, small and metallic and frankly sounding an awful lot like money. He'd never been a very good cat burglar, but he had been an excellent pickpocket and he'd swiped enough full purses to know the sound of hard cash.

What was a very full box of money doing in Kaoru's loft? It could all be spare change or nails or something else innocuous, he supposed… but there was a seal around the edge, and a lock, and – the whole thing just seemed suspicious.

Yahiko put the box carefully back where he'd found it, doing his best to hide where the dust had been disturbed, and climbed down the ladder with the cloth-wrapped tools tucked under one arm. Kenshin was standing in the center of the storehouse, holding himself too still.

"They're kinda rusty. Is that okay?" Yahiko asked, a little hesitant. It was hard, talking to Kenshin: the thought of speaking to him the way Kaoru did made him feel sick. The way Kaoru had to, he reminded himself, because she was the mistress and there were rules and Megumi had explained that Kenshin couldn't be forced into breaking the rules he'd been bound with. He had to break them on his own, or he'd be too scared to function. All they could do was show him that it would be safe if he did.

But even knowing all that, it still felt wrong.

He wondered how Kaoru could stand it.

Yahiko held out the rolled-up cloth and Kenshin took it, unrolling it and looking over the tools with bowed head and slumped shoulders. He still had a tendency to collapse in on himself, but it had grown markedly less over the past few weeks. Ever since he and Kaoru come back from Kanryu's manor (whole and sane and Yahiko hadn't realized until they were safely home how bone-scared he'd been of things that he still didn't dare name, even in the privacy of his nightmares).

"…forgive this worthless one for troubling you, young master," Kenshin said carefully, and swallowed hard.

"It's not troubling." Yahiko turned slightly away, idly wrenching a half-dislodged slat of the ladder into place. "It's my home too, y'know."

Kenshin bowed his head at that, turned, and left. Yahiko followed, mulling over the box. If it was money, it was a lot of it, more than Kaoru made in a year. It could be something else, maybe, but he couldn't imagine what else would make that distinctive sound. Kaoru would have been over the moon if she'd lucked into a windfall like that, so she must not know about it. So who could have left it there?

He cast an uneasy glance over to Kenshin as the older man knelt again at the edge of the garden
patch. It couldn't be someone trying to frame Kaoru again, could it? The Hiruma brothers were in jail, after all; then again, that didn't mean they didn't have allies somewhere. And they were the kind of nasty-minded little creeps who'd seek revenge, even if – hell, especially if – they were beaten by the rules of their own game.

Yahiko shook his head. There wasn't anything he could do about it now. He'd ask Kaoru about it when she got back.

Instead of fretting, he sat down on the ground next to Kenshin and watched for a moment. Kenshin was pulling up weeds with a careful, methodical efficiency. He'd hidden his eyes behind his bangs again, and Yahiko thought he saw a quaver in his fingers as he dug them deep into the soil, curling them around a particularly stubborn set of roots.

"So, are we just pulling everything up?"

Kenshin started, then finished pulling up the weed and set it on the small pile that he'd accumulated.

"...no, young master," he said, and Yahiko could see the effort that it took: there was a dreadful tension in Kenshin's jaw that he'd only seen once before, on the day that the policemen had come and tried to take him away.

"Can you show me what not to pull up?"

Another almost-twitch, and Kenshin rose silently to his feet. He pointed to a handful of plants, easily distinguishable from the weeds.

"Okay," Yahiko said, and slid himself over to the other side of the garden. "You get that side, I'll get this side, and we'll meet in the middle. And – um – " He fidgeted. "You know, you don't have to call me 'young master' and stuff. Just Yahiko's fine. I mean, if that's okay."

Kenshin stilled again, for a single long heartbeat – and Yahiko was certain he'd overstepped somehow, broken some rule that he hadn't been told about and hadn't managed to suss out on his own – but then, slowly, Kenshin sank back down.

"As you wish, young sir. Ya – Yahiko. Sir Yahiko."

He began to weed again, and Yahiko thought that he saw something move in Kenshin's face, something that wasn't quite a smile, but it wanted to be.

The ground was softer then Yahiko thought it would be. There was some resistance at first, but there was rich, wet soil under the hard-packed surface, and he was surprised to discover a certain pleasure in working the earth by hand. Well, mostly hand – weeds had to come out by the roots, and sometimes the roots went deep. But there was a tool for that, and it was easy to get the trick of digging down and loosening the greedy things, cutting through minor capillaries to extract the largest part. He wasn't sure why he didn't need to worry about those smaller veins shooting off from the main trunk, but Kenshin seemed to know what he was doing and he'd shaken his head when Yahiko had asked what to do about them. So Yahiko figured that meant that they didn't matter.

He didn't really know anything about gardens, or any kind of planting or growing. He was samurai, after all, and even though he'd been a pickpocket and a street rat, too – even though his family had fallen into debt and been disgraced, losing their position among the shōgun's thousands of retainers – he had never stopped being samurai. You didn't, no matter how far you fell. And samurai didn't grow things. That was peasant work.

It was kind of nice, though. Not fun, exactly, because it was hard work, but a kind of warm, solid
feeling started filling up his chest as he watched the clear space slowly growing from the edges of the plot into the middle of the tangled chaos, raw earth all churned up black and ready for planting.

Kenshin had cleared a lot more ground than he had. Yahiko sat back on his heels, studying him for a moment. Kenshin worked calmly, steadily, without fuss – he did everything without fuss. The only times Yahiko had ever seen him rattled were during the whole thing with the Hirumas. First when Kihei had tried to buy him, and for a brief moment after Gohei's assault. Yahiko had knelt down at Kaoru's side and Kenshin had looked at Yahiko, with a crack in his eyes like a broken mirror. Someone had been looking out from those eyes, someone altogether more wounded and afraid than the cipher Kenshin normally was.

Maybe that was the person Kaoru always saw, when she looked at him.

Kenshin raised his head, as if he'd heard Yahiko's thoughts. Then he looked towards the gate.

"Miss Kaoru is returning, young master," he said flatly, and gathered the uprooted weeds in his arms. Yahiko followed suit, dumping his weeds in a pile against the wall along with Kenshin's. Kenshin spun around as soon as he'd dealt with his armful, almost – but not quite – hurrying to the gate.

"Kenshin!" Kaoru sounded happy to be home, happy to see them; yet her eyes were remote. "And Yahiko. I didn't think you two would still be outside at this hour."

The sun was almost under the horizon, but here was plenty of light to see by, and would be for another hour or so.

"We were clearing that old garden patch," Yahiko said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the right general direction. "It was Kenshin's idea."

Kenshin was holding himself too still again. Kaoru glanced past them, to the garden, and smiled – and this was a real one. Yahiko had seen enough of her false ones lately to know the difference.

"Really? That's great! It's about time someone did something with that old patch."

A subtle exhale, and Kenshin's calm returned. More than calm: he seemed to lean into her space the same way that a tree's leaves slowly turned to follow the sun. It made Yahiko's throat clench with things he had no words for, no words that mattered, anyway. Anything he could think to say would sound like he blamed Kaoru for this, when it wasn't her fault. He knew as well as anyone did what it cost her to give Kenshin even this much peace.

"I thought you and Sano weren't going to be back 'til later," he continued.

"We're not back," she said, starting towards the storehouse. "I'm just stopping here to get something. You shouldn't bother waiting up, either of you – we're going to be out pretty late."

"How late?" Yahiko called, alarmed at her brisk pace. She was honing in on the storehouse like an angry wasp, and her shoulders were tight as a fraying rope under her jacket. Her wooden sword was at her side, and she was wearing hakama over her kimono. Kenshin trotted behind her like a dog at heel and Yahiko felt another little twist in his gut at the comparison.

"Late!" she called back, opening the door. "Don't worry! It's alright, Kenshin, I don't need any help," she said quickly as he started to follow her in. "We'll be back before morning, okay?"

The door slid shut. Yahiko frowned and started walking towards the storehouse. Kenshin stood at the top of the stairs, waiting, and before Yahiko could even get halfway across the yard the door opened again and Kaoru emerged with a small wooden box in her arms. There was a mark on the
Yahiko's stomach dropped.

"What'd you need to get?" he asked, too-casually, but Kaoru didn't seem to notice.

"Oh, just something of Sano's," she breezed, heading back towards the gate and tucking the small, narrow box into her jacket. "Nothing important, just some old stuff he promised to keep safe for a friend while he was out of the country. And now the friend's back, so Sano has to hand it over."

"And that's going to take all night?"

"Well, you know how Sano is when he's meeting old friends. They'll be at it until sunrise. And he really wants me to meet this guy – I think he's trying to set me up." An exasperated look crossed her face. "Honestly. As if I have the time."

Yahiko responded automatically, with a jab about her looks or her weight or her lack of womanly graces, and it got the desired response because he had to dodge a smack as she went out the gate. But he didn't know what he'd said: his mind was static and his veins were ice because Kaoru was lying. She was good – really good, considering that he didn't think she'd ever really lied before – but she'd never had to lie for her life and he had. He'd needed to make others trust him, and know who to trust, in order to survive.

She was lying to him. Something was happening, something big, and she didn't think she could trust him to know the truth about it.

"Hell with that," he muttered, and looked around the dojo with a thief's eyes. He couldn't just follow her out the gate; she might notice. But there was a tree growing by the wall nearby…

It was the work of moments to climb it, and he saw her vanishing into the distance towards the bay. The gap between the branch and the wall was nothing: he could have crossed it blindfolded and one-handed. And if she thought she was going to get into trouble, maybe get hurt, maybe killed and that he was going to just let that happen without even –

Well. He was the man of the house, after all.

Yahiko balanced on the top of the wall, preparing to jump, when a soft voice called up to him from the courtyard.

"Young sir."

Kenshin. Yahiko looked down to see the older man standing loosely at the foot of the tree, looking up at him with a wide gaze that was almost worried.

"Don't worry," Yahiko told him. "I know she's up to something, too. I won't let anything happen to her. It'll be okay."

Then he jumped off the wall and headed after Kaoru.

He didn't look back: if he had, he would have seen – after a long, fraught pause – a blur of brown and red as Kenshin jumped the wall in one swift movement and followed.

~*~
It was easy to tail Kaoru: after all, she didn't think she was being followed. Yahiko's stomach got smaller and smaller as the neighborhood got worse and worse. She was aiming for the docks, and for the old docks, too – not the shining, well-patrolled harbors used by foreign ships and dignitaries. No Western trade ever came to these piers, just old fisherman, set in their ways, and local merchants who couldn't afford better berth or didn't want to. It was the last place that someone like Kaoru should ever go. The silk clothes and bright ribbon that marked her as a woman of status and worthy of respect in her own neighborhood made her nothing but a target, here.

At least she seemed to know it. Her stride lengthened and her back straightened as she walked along, looking neither right nor left, her hand resting carefully on the hilt of her wooden sword. Most of the scum slunk out of her way, unwilling to take a chance on someone who walked with that much confidence, but enough of them eyed her with growing speculation that Yahiko's fist clenched helplessly. He hoped that she'd meet up with Sano soon.

Her destination was a dive bar in the middle of the neighborhood, just a block or so away from the water. Smokey light poured through the slatted windows out into the street, along with laughter, the odd feminine squeal and the occasional shrieks of a poorly-tuned shamisen as it reached for the high note and missed. She slid inside; a minute later, she and Sano emerged, his arm draped carelessly around her shoulders. They might have looked like lovers slinking off into the night in search of somewhere more private, if you didn't see the wary caution on both their faces.

Yahiko let them get a little further away before he resumed his tail. Sano was good, really good, and he'd need to be more careful now.

They made their way down to the water's edge and started wandering out of town, far past the streetlights and even the pretense of respectability. It took Yahiko a few minutes to realize where they were headed, and as soon as he did everything fell into place.

Even before the country had been opened to Western trade there had been smugglers in Edo Bay. There were more, now that trade was so unregulated, but they still used the same old landing points and the police still turned the same blind eye, as long as the bribes were paid and nobody stepped over any lines. Kaoru and Sano were headed towards one of the more secure spots, one Yahiko was fairly sure that even the police didn't know about. Which explained the box full of money, but didn't explain anything else. What would Kaoru want from smugglers? Where did she get the money to pay them? And what was Sano – no, he was probably helping her. After all, how would she know how to contact smugglers without him…?

But why was he helping her? It had to be something important to her, really important. Otherwise Sano would have talked her out of it, or found some other way.

Maybe…

Yahiko swallowed, throat suddenly dry and swollen tight with things he couldn't afford to feel right now. Maybe something had happened, that day that she and Kenshin went to Kanryu's manor. And – well, she'd said, when Kenshin first came to stay with them, that she might have to leave the country – so maybe – maybe she was arranging passage under the radar so that she and Kenshin couldn't be followed.

But Kaoru would have told him!

Unless she couldn't take him – or it was so important that she couldn't stay no matter what, couldn't even afford to give him a choice of whether to stay or go with her…

Yahiko rubbed furiously at his eyes and kept following, stomach knotting around his spine.
Eventually, the rotted and untended wood of the piers ended and a muddy trail leading up a low, forested cliff began. Sano stopped to light a small, hooded lantern, and then he and Kaoru started up the path. It cast just enough light in front of them to avoid a misstep. Tonight was a smuggler's moon, dark and clouded, and there were no streetlights in the forest.

A light breeze rustled the trees, soft counterpoint to the small waves shushing against the shore. It tugged at Yahiko's clothes and brushed against his hair, smelling of salt and dead fish, and he slid off his sandals and put them inside his shirt to move a little more quietly.

The lantern made Kaoru and Sano easy to follow, if you knew what to look for. The small circle of light bobbed in front of them like a will-o-wisp, not large enough to give away their position – not unless you already knew they were there. They followed the path all the way to the top of the bluff. There was a small clearing there, at the very top, overlooking the ocean and shielded by the forest. Yahiko hung back at the treeline, crawling carefully under a low bush and making sure to darken his clothes with mud and earth as he did so. Then he settled in to wait.

It wasn't long before three men emerged from the edge of a cliff, appearing as if by magic – probably a hidden door of some kind, on that led down to the caves below. Yahiko couldn't quite hear what they were saying, but their actions were clear enough as they stopped just out of Kaoru and Sano's reach. The leader rubbed his fingers together, grinning.

Kaoru reached towards her jacket and Sano stepped quickly in front of her, shaking his head. The leader scowled and crossed his arms. Sano mirrored him, glaring.

A sharp gesture and a barked order. One of the men disappeared again and came back a few heartbeats later, carrying a large box with the help of a fourth. They set it down between their boss and Sano and backed slowly away. The fourth man didn't leave.

Sano waved at the box. The boss waved at his men. One of them came forward with a crowbar and pried off the top, then stepped back to let Sano inspect whatever was inside. He reached his hand in and pulled out a rifle, and Yahiko had to jam his fist into his mouth to stifle his exclamation.


A twig cracked behind him. He froze, heart thudding an unsteady tattoo against his ribs. His free hand dug into the earth, feeling the grains, horribly reminiscent of the peaceful garden. And, very slowly, he turned his head.

There were men in the forest, armed men, crouching with rifles out and eyes fixed on Kaoru and Sano. And they were definitely not policemen.

Now Sano let Kaoru step up to his side and take out the box of money. The leader took it with an unctuous bow and opened it, checking the contents. A smile slid across his face like scum on an oil slick, and Sano knelt down to pick up his goods.

Slowly, carefully, Yahiko pulled himself into a crouch and got his toes gripping the ground, tensing to bolt. The armed men could just be insurance, in case the deal went wrong for the smugglers. Or they could be something else entirely. He fixed his eyes on the smuggler's leader, afraid to blink even for a moment.

The leader said something. Kaoru turned, surprise written on her features even in the dim lantern light. He touched her sleeve and she let him, damn her: Sano frowned and knocked the man's hand away, shouldering the box of rifles with one arm. He pointed to the money box; the leader shook his head, grinning like the shit-eating pig he was.
Yahiko clenched his hands in the dirt. Sano was angry now, and Kaoru was yanking on his sleeve. She knew as well as Yahiko did what Sano was like when he got going – anger always made him a bit stupid, and this was – not the time to be stupid –

The armed men shifted to a ready position. Yahiko watched the leader, waiting for the signal that had to be coming.

The leader clicked his fingers together, and his men fanned out behind him. Yahiko spared a glance for the riflemen and saw them lifting the guns to their shoulders, saw the low red spark of their flints –

"Sano! Kaoru! It's a trap!"

He exploded from the trees, bullets whizzing past him. One grazed his shoulder. Sano had whirled when he shouted and now he bounded over to the woods, face twisted in a furious snarl. Leaving Kaoru alone. She had her wooden sword out, parrying a blow from the man with the crowbar: she twisted her wrist and the crowbar flew out of his hand. A step forward, and she'd slammed the hilt into his gut. He doubled over, coughing.

Yahiko launched himself at the nearest smuggler, yanking his own bamboo sword off his back. His opponent laughed; then Yahiko slammed the practice blade down on his shoulder and the man's laughter turned into a furious snarl as he clutched his stunned arm. The leader had stepped back: the other two men had joined the one fighting Kaoru. She was surrounded…

"Kenshin!" Kaoru cried, shock in her voice. And suddenly there was a whirlwind in the middle of the melee, red hair whipping in the lamplight and men flying backwards as Kenshin cleared a safe place for Kaoru to stand. Yahiko had a startled moment to wonder where Kenshin had come from – what he was doing here, when he wasn't supposed to leave the dojo without Kaoru's permission – and then the man fighting Yahiko started towards the two of them. Yahiko rapped him hard on the knee.

"You're fighting me!" he cried, but his voice cracked as he remembered the taste of Kihei's blood on his tongue. And that moment of hesitation was one moment too long, as the smuggler grabbed his collar and backhanded him. Light exploded on the side of his face, like fireworks.

"Goddamn brat," he sneered, and hurled Yahiko away. Yahiko landed hard, vision greying at the edges as the air slammed out of his lungs. He struggled to his feet with one eye already bruising shut. Somehow there was a rock in his hand.

"Don't you fucking walk away from me!" he screamed, black fury twisting up his insides. Because everything was wrong – because Kaoru was wrapped up in bad business with evil men and Sano wasn't protecting her and neither of them were talking to him and nothing made sense anymore, and no wonder they weren't taking him seriously when he couldn't get even a single fighting man to consider him a threat – when the only people he could fight were cowards –

He threw the stone. It slammed hard into the back of the man's head and he whirled, advancing with a grim look in his eyes. Yahiko backed up, holding his sword out in front him.

The smuggler looked past him for a second. He smiled.

"Stupid kid," he said, almost kindly, and shoved. Yahiko slid his foot out behind him to catch himself but there was no ground – no ground! – and his stomach lurch as he fell backwards and kept falling, over the edge of the cliff. The world slowed. He saw Kaoru's eyes widen, heard her scream his name – saw Sano suddenly throw the man he was fighting bodily into the other smugglers
Too late, he had time to think, and then he hit the water.

~*~

Yahiko fell.

Time stopped.

Kaoru screamed.

He disappeared over the edge of the cliff and time started up again. Kaoru raced for the edge, just a step behind Sano, but they were both outpaced by Kenshin — how can a human move that fast? she thought, in the terrified space between heartbeats — as he blurred past them and dove, narrowing himself to a needle’s point.

She almost followed him over. Sano caught her around the waist and hauled her backs, ignoring the meaty thud as her heel slammed into his shin.

"The rocks, missy! It's a goddamned miracle if they missed them!"

Kaoru looked again, choking on her aching heart, and saw the jagged, devouring teeth waiting below. She couldn't see Yahiko or Kenshin — couldn't see anything but that terrible stone mangle and the white spray at the wave-tips of the black, surging sea.

"…no," she whimpered, the fight draining from her bones. "Please, please no…"

Sano put her down and she knelt at the cliff's edge, clutching the soil as if she could hold back erosion with her own two hands — as if she could will the inevitable to be otherwise. She heard him cleaning up their little skirmish behind her, cracking the last few heads and ripping cloth to tie them to one another. She didn't know what he planned to do with them and she didn't care, either. Every molecule of her being was straining to see clearly in the faint starlight, searching for some human sign in the glittering waves.

There. Was that seaweed or — no, it was Kenshin's head breaking the surface, the quick flash of his face as he gasped for air and dove back under. She held her breath with him until her limbs shook and spots bloomed in her eyes like roses — Kanryu's roses — beautiful, monstrous things —

He surfaced again, and this time she saw Yahiko's head tucked under his arm. She didn't stop to watching him swim to shore.

She ran, heart ramming in her chest, her throat, pulsing through her limbs like a bloody, terrified drum. Branches tore and snatched at her hair and clothes as she plunged heedless off the path and scrambled down the cliffside, pebbles tearing through her skin. She made it to the beach at the same time they did, stumbling a little as she hit flat ground, and used the tripping momentum to catapult herself to where Kenshin had collapsed halfway out of the breakers, cradling Yahiko in his arms. The sea surged up behind him, covering him to his waist with every wave. It left greedy fingers as it pulled away, as though it yearned to coax them both back in.

"Yahiko!"

Kaoru fell to her knees beside them, taking Yahiko gently from Kenshin's arms. Kenshin coughed, spitting up a handful of seawater: a trickle ran down his chin as he pulled himself up to kneel beside her.
"Yahiko – no, no – c'mon, you little jerk, please – "

Her student was pale and cold and unresponsive. She pressed her ear to his chest, his mouth, hoping for a heartbeat or the whisper of breath but there wasn't anything –

"Get back, missy." Sano was there, suddenly – he must have followed her down – pushing her carefully away and kneeling next to Yahiko. He turned Yahiko on his side and pressed on him stomach, stabilizing him with one wide hand against his back. Yahiko was so small, next to Sano – underfed and scrawny and the most precious thing in the world –

And coughing! Yahiko hacked and spat. Half of Edo Bay was retching out of his mouth but he was breathing again –

Tears stung her eyes.

"C'mon, kid," Sano said, in a too-easy tone. "That's it. Even a baby knows how to breathe, right?"

By way of an answer, Yahiko vomited up some more water and sucked in a long, steady breath. Kaoru wrapped him in a tight hug, and he wheezed, flailing at her shoulders.

"You scared me to death – "

Sano pulled her back. He took off his coat and let it fall on Yahiko, covering his head momentarily in white cloth.

"Easy, missy. Let him breathe for a while. He'll be alright, now that the water's out."

"He's alright? Really?" She clutched at her collar, eyes hot with salt spray and her overflowing tears. Kenshin stirred beside her and she turned to face him, bracing herself against the pebbled shore with one shaking arm.

"Kenshin…"

His throat worked; he lowered his eyes and stared at his hands, clenched hard on top of his thighs. Bracing himself for something – as if he expected…

A startled oh! slid from her lips before she could stop it. He'd disobeyed – he'd left the dojo when he was never supposed to leave without her permission, and he'd gone after Yahiko when he was supposed to stay by her side and guard her –

Kenshin started to flinch at her exclamation; before he could finish collapsing in on himself she threw her arms around him, too overwhelmed to think of the consequences.

"Thank you," she cried into his shoulder. "Thank you, thank you, thank you…"

He fell back on his hands, stiffening: she smelled saltwater on his skin and something else, something woody and sweet. Clean earth and cedar… he was harder than she'd expected, all ropy muscle and tense control and freezing cold from his swim, and before she quite realized what she was doing she squeezed him tight, wanting to make him warm. Damp seeped from his clothing to hers and she realized, suddenly, exactly how close they were.

"You're soaking wet – " she said, pulling abruptly away, " – your skin's like ice. Here." Pulling off her coat helped cover her own awkwardness: she wrapped it around his shoulders, careful not to touch his bare skin. "Put this on, you'll catch your death."
Kenshin straightened himself, one hand creeping up to clutch her jacket closed. His eyes were wide, unblinking, and she had to look away as a blush crept unbidden over her face.

"I should get you both home," she said quietly. "Sano, can you carry Yahiko?"

"No." Yahiko's voice was cracked and raw, and he glared up at her from where he'd nestled into Sano's coat with black rage in his eyes. Kaoru's stomach lurched. "I ain't going."

"What? Yahiko. Don't be ridiculous, you're freezing, you need to warm up and rest – " Trivial concerns, but she was trying to head him off – because she knew what he wanted to know and also that she couldn't tell him –

"I ain't goin'," he took a deep, ragged breath, "until you explain t'me what you were doin' makin' deals with weapon smugglers!"

"That ain't somethin' you need to know, kid," Sano intoned, one hand coming to rest heavily on Yahiko's shoulder. "Trust me."

"Why the hell should I?" Yahiko would have been shouting, except that his voice was too strained to manage it. He coughed, sucking air into his lungs. "You don't fucking trust me! So why the hell should I trust you?"

"Yahiko…" Kaoru reached towards him and he batted her hand away, glaring.

"Don't treat me like I'm a little kid!" His voice cracked again, and not from exhaustion, "Whatever's goin' on, I got a right to know! It's my home, too – "

He blinked hard, eyes glistening briefly, and Kaoru thought her heart would break.

"Yes. But – this isn't something – I can't tell you, Yahiko. It's too dangerous. You shouldn't have followed us here in the first place and – and you need to forget what you just saw." Nausea built low in her abdomen, a terrible feeling like running downhill and knowing that you're going too fast to stop.

"Why?" He made an abortive gesture, as though he had wanted to slam his hand down on something and realized almost too late that there was nothing there. "What's so goddamn important? I'm not – you think I can't handle it?" He was breathing hard now, quick gasps that meant he was fighting back tears, and he rubbed furiously at his nose. "You think I'm too stupid t'help or know the truth or – "

"I think you're a ten year old boy," she said, and remembered her father. She was speaking his words, now, and it felt like trespassing on sacred ground. "And you're the bravest, strongest, most honorable ten year old boy I know – but you're ten years old, and you're my student, and if anything happened to you I couldn't live with it, Yahiko!"

She grabbed his shoulders, not quite shaking him, her fingers clamped hard around his arms. He had to listen, and understand – because he shouldn't have been here tonight, because her heart had stopped the moment she'd seen him rush out of the trees and she had died watching him fall over that cliff: died and not come back to life until he'd sucked in that first ragged breath.

"Yes, I am trying to protect you! I'm your teacher. That's my job! And I am ordering you, as your teacher, to forget everything you saw tonight and never, ever mention it again. And if you can't trust me in this, then forget that you were ever my student!"

The words hung in the air like the echo of a temple bell, cold and shattering. Something in Yahiko's
eyes – the fierce pride he held so dearly – broke, and tears began to pour down his face. But he wasn't sobbing. He didn't make a sound.

"…Yahiko, I – no, I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

She pulled him into a hug, cradling his head against her shoulder. He didn't respond.

"I didn't mean it. I wouldn't throw you out, not ever. You're my family. You're – you scared me so much, I – I'm sorry. I won't leave you. I won't. Not ever." Her voice was very small.

Kaoru looked helplessly at Sano. There was anger in his eyes, too, the same frightened rage that had beat inside her until she'd let it out. As she watched, it dimmed and died.

"Hey, kid." He reached out, uncertain, and ruffled Yahiko's hair. "You know she didn't mean it. Y'just scared us, that's all. But we're not gonna kick y'out."

Yahiko sobbed – just once – and she heard him whisper I'm sorry.

"I know," she said, low and quiet. "I know. So am I."

~*~

Sano stayed behind to deal with the smugglers and take the rifles to their final destination – one of the many storehouses scattered throughout Edo, waiting for word from Kyoto. Kaoru took Yahiko home, and he didn't hold her hand but he walked close and silent beside her, like a shadow. Kenshin walked a few paces behind him, wary as they passed through the old docks and calming as they drew nearer to home and safety. Yahiko had lost his sandals somewhere; he wouldn't let himself be carried and shuffled stubbornly along in his socks until they were almost three-quarters of the way home, and then he stumbled. Kenshin caught the back of his collar and picked him up in one easy gesture. Yahiko didn't protest. Kaoru shot a grateful glance Kenshin's way, and thought she saw his expressionless eyes slide over to meet hers.

Yahiko was almost asleep on his feet by the time they made it home: he ducked clumsily away from her and headed for his room first thing. Kaoru watched him go, helpless.

"Miss Kaoru," Kenshin said quietly, stepping up to her side.

Kaoru sniffed quickly and turned to face him, forcing a calm expression. She couldn't quite manage cheer right now.

"Yes, Kenshin?"

He hesitated for just a heartbeat too long before he spoke.

"…shall this worthless one to prepare some tea?" he said finally, and Kaoru wondered what he had tried and failed to tell her. That she'd been too hard? Spoken stupid, evil words that could never be taken back?

She already knew that.


He bowed, moving off towards the kitchen, and she was left alone in the dim circle of light cast by the stone lanterns flanking the door. She took a moment to breathe, forcing air to flow past the rawness in her throat and draw the tears away from her eyes.
Then she went inside. Yahiko's door was closed, but his lantern was lit. She knocked softly.

"Yahiko?" she called. There was a shuffling sound, as though he was pulling on clothing or rolling out of bed.

"You don't have to open the door," she said quickly. "I just – I wanted to say I'm sorry. Again. I – I would never – " A quick, deep breath. "Even if you decided that you didn't want to study the Kamiya Kasshin anymore, you'd still have a home here. This will always be your home. Always. No matter what."

She could hear the cracks in her voice and hoped that he did, too: hoped that he could hear the truth in it.

Another soft scuffle and the door slid open. Yahiko knelt on the other side, dressed for sleeping, and his eyes were softly red and slightly bloodshot.

"Can you just –?" and he took his own deep breath. "Can you just tell me – what you and Sano are doing – it's not bad, right? You're not wrapped up in anything – really wrong. Are you?"

"No." He looked so small, backlit by the paper lantern, but fire was starting to rekindle in his eyes and Kaoru allowed herself a moment of hope that she hadn't wounded him beyond healing.

"No," she said again, softly. "It's illegal, and dangerous, but – it's not wrong. It's probably the most right thing I've ever done."

She knew, as she said it, that she'd given everything away. Yahiko was smart enough to realize, if not the whole truth, then enough of it to put him in danger. But – she didn't see any other way. Not after what she'd said to him.

Yahiko considered this for a while, worrying at his lower lip. Then he nodded.

"Okay," he said. "Just – promise me you won't do anything stupid. Promise." There was desperation in his voice.

"I'll be as safe as I can," she said. "I swear to you. By my father's name."

And she thought about telling him more: that he was provided for in her will, and had been since he'd become her student. That even if something did happen to her, he'd have an income and roof over his head. That she would never leave him in the cold, not ever.

But that wasn't the point: the point was that he needed her, her and Sano, and she knew how much not being able to help them must be devouring him from the inside. She couldn't let him help, though. Not in this. She was risking too much already.

"I promise," she repeated, and held his gaze with hers. "Nothing bad is going to happen."

After a moment, he nodded.

"Alright," he said, rubbing his neck. "Um. Goodnight, Kaoru."

"Goodnight, Yahiko."

He closed the door. She stayed outside for a few moments, until the lantern dimmed and went out; then she stood and went to the kitchen, hoping that Kenshin had finished making the tea.

~*~
Sano passed by the Oguni clinic on his way back from Katsu's, almost – but not quite – planning to go inside. It was the middle of the night, after all; the clinic was closed, and nevermind the single lamp burning in the foyer. That was for emergencies, and a handful of scrapes and bruises didn't qualify.

He sighed, allowing himself to lean for a moment against the gate. No, there wasn't any reason to bother the fox-lady at this hour: the only real hurts he had weren't anything that he had the right to ask her help with. He'd never meant for Kaoru or Yahiko to get involved in any of this.

And yeah, okay, it had been selfish as fuck for him to try and keep them out of it, keep them unsullied – he'd been doing it for his sake, not theirs. But he'd been trying to protect them, dammit, and didn't that count for something...?

Megumi had a way of pulling the truth out of the mire of bullshit he covered it with. Surgeon's eyes, seeing past malingering and false symptoms to the real disease. He wanted to talk to her – he just didn't have the right. Not when she was carrying so many burdens of her own.

After the war, maybe... maybe once Kanryu was dead and rotting, she'd consent to let him carry a few. And there'd be an after, for both of them. He'd make sure of it.

~*~

Megumi stopped walking when she reached the clinic gate. It was late – too late to be going out. Too late for anything. Even if she found Sagara at this hour, what could she possibly say?

Shinomori had sent to Kyoto and Kyoto had responded. She had her orders and she knew how important they were. Kanryu's latest scheme transcended her worst nightmares; he couldn't be allowed to succeed.

And he wouldn't. She could – she would – stop him. For a price.

But everything had a price, didn't it? For every life, a death: medicine was simply the art of choosing. Trading the child's life for the mother's, or the mother's for the child. The man with a festering gut wound eased quickly on his way, so that the man with a mere broken leg might live. No doctor could save every life. Sometimes there was no hope or help, and when those times came you could simply... let go.

She leaned against the gate, and thought for a moment that Sagara was pressing warm against her back.

It would hurt, letting them go. Letting her hard-won hope go, when she had almost allowed herself to believe that she would have an afterwards. But – one little future, willingly given, to secure thousands of happy endings.

Fair trade.

~*~

It was late, and Kaoru knew that she should be sleeping. But Yahiko's clothing had been torn in the fight and she wanted to have it mended before morning. She could sew, after all; she was a terrible cook and a mediocre housekeeper but she could at least keep herself and her family looking presentable.

So here she was, stitching away next to her paper lantern. It didn't cast the brightest light, so she had to sit almost on top of it. The needle gleamed with every stitch, trailing yellow thread and pulling the
tear closed, bit by painstaking bit. She worked small and slow, hiding the stitches in the weave of the cloth. By the time she was done, with luck, you'd never be able to tell there had been a tear at all.

Kenshin knelt patiently at her side, head drooping. His eyes kept sliding shut and staying closed for longer each time, but he refused to leave. He wouldn't sleep until she did, no matter how she insisted – so she really should be getting to bed soon, for his sake. But if she did, she'd only lie awake and stare at the ceiling and he'd know that she wasn't sleeping and stay awake anyway. At least this way she was doing something productive with her time.

Sewing was the one household chore she excelled at. The dojo hadn't been doing well since her father died; she had rather less income than anyone suspected, and her careful mending was one of the reasons she could keep up appearances so well. That, and the bolts of cloth in the storehouse that she used to make new clothing when the old garments became more stitching than cloth. It took time, but she had plenty of that.

Her mother had taught her how to sew. They were some of the clearest memories that Kaoru had of her. Her hands had guided Kaoru's, cool and soft, laughter in her voice as she counseled patience. It was a meditation, she'd explained, like the battle-discipline her father taught her. Stitch your feelings into the cloth, she'd said. Hope, and love, and the desire to protect: put it all into your work, and it will keep your loved ones safe and warm, and guide them home again.

Kaoru paused, then turned over the hem of the shirt. There was a little green frog embroidered there, a charm for safe return, and she rubbed her thumb gently over it. It was getting a little ragged.

First, the mending. There were only a few stitches left and Kaoru worked them carefully, an unvoiced prayer on her lips. Make us whole again. All of them – herself, Sano, Megumi, Yahiko, and Kenshin, too. Bring us safely home. Home being some far distant future, when everything was over and the world was new and free. Keep us safe. Let the roses grow far away from their door…

She finished and reached for her cup of tea. It was still mostly full, and long since cooled. There was a slight pressure in her skull, a growing headache – from the low light or dehydration, she couldn't be sure which. There was a small tray of riceballs next to the cup, and she remembered that she hadn't eaten since lunch. She still wasn't hungry.

She ate one anyway, without tasting it, and cast about for green thread. Might as well refresh the little frog, while she was here; all its power must surely have been spent to bring Yahiko safely from the sea.

With a soft sigh, Kenshin toppled gently over – a kind of half-controlled fall – and curled up on the ground next to her, his upper back resting against the side of her thigh, catlike. His hair draped over his neck, the color of autumn leaves and gleaming with gold in the dim lamplight. His eyes were closed, and he tucked his arms tight inside the curve of his body like a child in hiding.

"…Kenshin?"

He made a sleepy sound – just like Ayame or Suzume did when they didn't want to wake up – and curled a little tighter, pressing back against her. He'd never slept in front of her, not since he'd recovered from his injuries. Protocol, Megumi had said when she'd mentioned it. A slave never sleeps in front of their master, in case the master should have need of them…

Kenshin was sleeping now, or dozing at the very least. The lines of his face had softened: he looked so young, without the weight of consciousness.

Carefully, not quite certain why she was doing it, Kaoru brushed an errant strand of hair away and
tucked it behind his ear. He uncurled a little at her touch – relaxing, not stiffening. Then he stilled, his breath coming deeper and steadier as he sank into true sleep.

Kaoru stroked his hair again, soft as feathers, and a fierce, aching warmth bloomed in her chest. The urge to protect… the bone-deep need to cover him and keep him safe, a desire she had no right to but felt anyway. To fight, not because justice demanded it, but to keep him safe – because he was hers, and she would never let anyone harm what was hers. Not ever.

No right. She had no right to feel this way, not when he couldn't choose – not when he had no choice but to stay with her. He wasn't hers, not really. He hadn't asked for this any more than she had, and she needed to remember that. He could never be hers, because he had no self to give freely: Kanryu had taken it from him by force; she had taken it from Kanryu by accident. And now she held it in trust against the day that he was strong enough to take it back.

If she was lucky, he would remember her kindly when that day came.

Kaoru pushed the tears from her eyes and bent to her work.

~*~

Hiko stood before the gates to the Kamiya school, and the vial of perfume in his pocket burned like a brand. He clasped his hand around it, gently, feeling the weight of it. Such a small thing to rest his hopes on, and such a terrible thing to do to a man only half-healed.

But this was the way of things. Cruelty and kindness were all one, viewed from a distance: the ideal of the sword of heaven, to do what was necessary. And he was certain that this was necessary. Otherwise he wouldn't be doing it. Rather circular reasoning, specious really, but none of that mattered. He had a role to play in this, this drama, and he would play it to the hilt.

The boy hadn't changed, not in his heart. He'd need the push – he wasn't a coward, but he'd always avoided conflict and that was a flaw that ran straight into his heart, a flaw that Hiko had known would destroy him if not cured. Had destroyed him, Hiko suspected. That was why he'd let the little idiot go haring off after the Yukishiro girl in the first place, after all. Because it had been time and past that the boy learned to stand his ground and fight for something, and if the fight was futile then so much the better: two lessons in one.

Sometimes, you must fight.

Sometimes, you can't win.

Yet you fight anyway.

He started forward, then paused. There was no moon tonight, only the faint, cold stars and a low breeze rattling the trees. The little teacher's home felt… as peaceful as any place could be, in a world such as this, hushed and sacred as the unbroken snow, and that shouldn't have mattered but it did.

A few hours one way or the other… what difference did it make?

With a sigh like an ancient lion, Hiko turned away and went looking for a place to wait for sunrise.
it cries out in the darkest night

The day dawned clear, and Kaoru was there to greet it. She'd slept a little bit – catnapping over her sewing, mostly. She'd dozed off for an hour or two when the cool air began to lighten just before dawn. It hadn't been a pleasant sleep: she'd dreamed of sticky, salted tendrils dragging her across rocks like crashing waves, and hands the smelled of roses tearing at her clothes. The dream-convulsions of her body as she struggled to escape had jolted her awake right as the edge of the sun glimmered bronzely over the rooftops, and she'd watched it rise with a kind of desperate peace.

Kenshin stirred at her side. He'd slept the whole night through, and his deep, steady breathing had anchored her wilder moments. She'd kept still so as not to disturb him: instead she'd chased madly about the inside of her head, fearful and uncertain. There had been no particular order or sense to the things that she'd thought. Now, in the warming dawn, she could barely even remember them.

"Good morning," she murmured, picking up the needle she'd dropped in her dazed slumber and sliding the bright green thread back through the eye.

"Miss Kaoru." He pushed himself up on his knees with a terrible grace and dropped into a bow. "This worthless one begs your forgiveness."

"It's alright." She stitched briskly at the half-finished frog on the inside of the hem. "You needed the rest."

"This worthless one will prepare breakfast." He accepted her forgiveness without hesitation, and she had the sense that it had become rote – that he apologized, not because he feared reprisal, but because he was compelled to, knowing full well that he would always be forgiven.

She prayed that was the case.

"Go on. I'll be there once I'm done with this."

Kenshin stood and slid out of the room with perfect silence. She'd wondered how he managed to leave her room every morning without waking her, and now she knew. He left no trace of himself, when he chose to.

A few minutes later she smelled fire and saw smoke rising from the kitchen chimney on the other side of the courtyard. A few minutes after that, Kenshin returned. This time he had a tray with a pot of green tea and a cup.

"Kenshin, that's not – " Kaoru started to protest and then snapped her jaw shut around the words. He'd done so much, last night, broken so many rules – he might still be uncertain. Any sign of disapproval now could set him spinning.

"Thank you," she said instead as he knelt and poured her a cup. "That's very kind."

He glanced up at her, not startled, but something warm flickered for a moment in the back of his eyes, stirring like the flash of carp scales in muddy water. Then it was gone.

She sipped her tea while Kenshin cleaned away the tray last night's rice balls, holding the bitter liquid in her mouth and letting it slide slowly down her throat. It didn't ease the dull tension in her head.

"I'm going to let Yahiko sleep in this morning, if he wants to," she said as he started to leave. "He needs to rest, too."
"Yes, Miss Kaoru."

Kenshin nodded once as he slid the door shut, carrying the tray into the hall. Leaving Kaoru alone. She stitched determinedly at the frog – it was almost done, and she wanted to give Yahiko's shirt back to him today, whole and mended. It was important, although she couldn't quite say why…

The needle slipped through her skin, piercing it through with a quick stab of pain like a cat's displeasure. Kaoru hissed and sucked on it, shaking out her hand. A single pearly drop of blood flicked onto the shirt and melted into the cloth, spreading and seeping through the fibers. She stared at it. Now the shirt would have to be washed before she could give it back to Yahiko, and bloodstains were stubborn, there would always be the faintest marks and why, why could she not do this one, simple thing right – ?

It's only a little stain, some distant corner of her mind whispered. Futile, against the rushing tide in her ears and the dry, hot prickle behind her eyes. She clenched her unmarked hand in the fabric of Yahiko's shirt, temples aching, and refused to cry. Not over something this small.

"Miss Kaoru?" Kenshin's voice from the hall. "The morning meal is prepared."

How much time had passed? She forced herself to swallow, imagined pushing it all down her throat into her belly to be digested, and managed to speak with only a slight waver.

"I'll be right out."

~*~

Yahiko hadn't woken up by the time Kaoru was done eating, so she set aside a plate to keep warm for him. Then she sat on the porch, sipping barley tea for the long, slow throbbing in her head, and knew that she should be in the dojo. Her student had earned a morning off; she hadn't. There were things to do – so many things, and more of them every day – and here she was sitting and relaxing in the watery sunlight, as though she had time to spare.

But she couldn't seem to make herself move.

Kenshin emerged from the house with a basket full of clothing, some of it spilling over the edges. He went about setting up the laundry tub with a practiced efficiency, pouring in just enough water from the well and shaving soap with a careful eye. She knew he did the laundry every day that it wasn't raining, because it needed to be done; by the time the morning lesson was over, he'd usually be hanging the clothes out to dry. On rainy days – and there had been so many – he would clean the house in the morning, instead. She knew that he ate lunch, because she made sure that he did, but she wasn't usually home in the afternoon…

What did he do, then, on rainy days when he'd spent the morning cleaning and it didn't clear in time for him to wash their clothing? She'd never thought to ask. The chores were for his benefit more than hers, because Megumi had said that he needed something to do, something of worth so that he knew he was useful. So she never really checked… did he simply wait, then, on those days when he couldn't do some part of his routine?

The vision of him kneeling patiently in the foyer, waiting for her return hit her like cold water. Surely not that – surely he found something to do on those days, something other than shut himself down like an unused toy –

"Kenshin…" she started to say. He looked up, and the question froze in her throat.

"Yes, Miss Kaoru?"
How could she ask without sounding like—like she was criticizing, expecting more of him than he'd already given?

"Nevermind," she said quickly. "It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

Kenshin stared at her for a heartbeat more, wide-eyed, and then dropped his gaze back to the task at hand. Kaoru took a long pull of tea. It landed heavy and leaden in her stomach. She was tired, that was all—very tired. She'd rest before she went out this afternoon. Or maybe take the day off entirely. No one could blame her for that, after last night.

"Miss Kaoru." Kenshin had paused, raising his head to look towards the gate. His hands were clenched tight in the cloth of the towel he was washing. "There is a guest coming."

"Thank you, Kenshin," Kaoru said, and tried to will herself to stand. It took too long: long enough that Kenshin tilted his head ever-so-slightly, watching her like a puzzled bird.

Then he got smoothly to his feet and walked to the porch. He paused for a moment in front of her—she realized, abruptly, that he was standing over her, as he was always careful never to do. They were nearly of a height, and it wasn't hard for him to round his shoulders and give the impression of smallness. But with him standing on the ground and her kneeling on the veranda, there was no way he couldn't tower over her.

His throat worked subtly, and then he offered her his arm. Kaoru blinked. Then she remembered—her hesitation outside Kanryu's manor, her fear of the Western home crouching like a monster to devour her. He'd offered his arm, then, to guide her—because he'd been trained to, in those situations, but this was different so why now—she didn't know, anymore, what was truly him and what was Kanryu's lingering touch. And he still had no words to tell her.

Heat behind her eyes. She blinked it back and managed to stand without stumbling, resting her fingers lightly on Kenshin's forearm.

"It's alright," she murmured. "Go back to the laundry. I'm not expecting anyone," she added, not quite sure why. But it seemed to reassure him; his shoulders relaxed a little and he stepped away with a lingering bow.

She knew it was Mr. Hiko at the gate before she opened it. Even reigned in and damped down, the sheer force of his presence was unmistakable. He'd stopped by the Oguni clinic shortly before her meeting with Kanryu to say that he would be traveling and expected to return shortly. No one had heard from him since. She hadn't known whether or not to believe him, at the time, but it seemed he'd kept his word.

"Good morning, Mr. Hiko," she said, bowing in greeting. "What an unexpected visit."

"There wasn't time to send ahead," he rumbled. "Things seem well enough." There was the faint trace of a question in his voice, and she wondered if he didn't want to know about Kanryu, about what had happened during the tea that never was.

If he wasn't going to ask directly, she wasn't going to bother telling him. It was too raw and intimate a thing to offer up casually: the smile that was almost a leer and the too-bright sunlight beating down on the muddy hell hidden under the stench of roses.

"It's been rather quiet," she lied. Because that, too—the salt fear on her tongue as the two people she was most bound to protect disappeared beneath the waves, and all that had followed—was none of his concern. "How was your journey?"
"Productive." Finally, he returned her bow with a slight incline of his head. "May I come in?"

"Of course," she said blandly. "Do you mind sitting on the porch? It's such a lovely morning. I was having tea there."

"No." His eyes glinted with something like amusement. Let him be amused. This script was an easy one, ingrained in her since childhood, and she was too tired to press him for answers.

*Beauty is a woman's armor, and courtesy her weapon.* Kenshin's teacher wasn't her enemy, but neither was he her friend. He'd said, on the bridge, that he'd come to discover the truth, and she believed him. What she didn't know was what he planned to do after that.

Mr. Hiko's eyes flicked over to Kenshin crouching at the laundry tub as they walked to the courtyard, but he didn't say anything. Kenshin stilled for half a moment before continuing in his task as if nothing had changed. Kaoru stepped up out of her shoes and on to the porch, while Mr. Hiko merely sat on the edge.

"Just a moment," she said, voice unnaturally bright between her bared, smiling teeth. "I'll fetch another cup from the kitchen."

When she came back he was playing with something small and glittering, passing it restlessly from one hand to the other. She knelt on the porch, on the other side of the tray from where he sat, and poured out another cup. He didn't touch it.

She felt, vaguely, that she should ask what he was so busy toying with, but she couldn't seem to make herself care. Which should have frightened her; on some level, it did. She was just so *tired*…

Sleep, that's all she needed. She'd take a nap this afternoon.

"I went back to the village," he said abruptly. "Where the Yukishiro family lives."

"Oh?" Kaoru sipped her tea, too tired to try and stop her heart from racing. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"In a sense." And then he made to hand the glittering thing to her. She put out her hand reflexively and it dropped into her palm, slightly warm from his handling. A corked vial, with full with some kind of clear liquid.

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure." He watched Kenshin, eyes dark. "Maybe nothing at all."

Kaoru held the vial up to the light, tilting it one way and then the other to watch the liquid swirl from side to side.

"It looks like water," she said dubiously. "Should I open it?"

He stilled for a moment, as though she'd said something unexpected. Then he snorted.

"No," he murmured, almost to himself. "It's not your responsibility… give it here, girl."

She hesitated before handing it over, struck with the sudden feeling of the tide receding before a wave.

"…what do you mean?" The vial was queerly heavy in her hand. He took it away from her, without waiting for her to give it to him.
"You'll see in a moment," he rumbled. "If there's anything to see."

Then he pulled out the stopper. A wave of scent drifted from the small bottle, too potent to have come from such a little thing. Yet there it was: crisp and floral and calming. And white – though how a perfume could be colored, Kaoru couldn't say. Except that it was: white and cool and gently sensual, easing through her senses to curl soothingly around the wild pacing thing in the back of her mind that wouldn't let her rest…

The wet slap of cloth falling into water. Kenshin gave a soft, animal cry, and there was more pain in that strangled sound than he had ever expressed: pain enough to rip a man in two. Kaoru whipped around to face him.

"Kenshin…"

He was frozen in place, blank eyes fixed on some unknown point past the horizon. There was nothing in his eyes, not even the dull animal fear of his earliest days with her and time slowed with her horror as she watched Mr. Hiko slowly, deliberately, waft the scent towards him. Kenshin moaned and lost his balance, barely catching himself on his forearms as he collapsed.

"Stop!" It ripped from her throat, guttural and aching. "Stop it!"

She didn't give Mr. Hiko time to react before she stood and slapped at the hateful glass thing clutched so delicately in his massive hands. He dodged out of her way, standing, and she launched herself wildly after him, no thought in her head except that Kenshin was hurting and it need to stop –

"Don't interfere!" he snapped, holding the vial out of her reach: easy to do, with his height. Kaoru twisted her hand in the cloth of his sleeve, pulling down to no avail.

"Stop it!" she cried, her other fist pounding uselessly against his arm. "Stop, you're hurting him – "

Kenshin was shaking, barely holding himself up, the tip of his long ponytail dragging in the dirt. A wounded sob escaped her and she rushed to his side, forgetting everything else in her urge to shelter him. He wound his fingers in her skirts as she knelt next to him, almost resting his head on her lap.

"You're hurting him," she repeated, pleading. Mr. Hiko's face was cool as carved stone, except stone had more character and feeling. "Stop. Please."

How a scent could have that power, she didn't know – all she knew was that Kenshin was curled tight as she'd ever seen him, hot and shaking like he'd been after Kanryu – after Kanryu had taken them into that low stone building and opened the door to hell, made Kenshin remember –

Her hands, spread over Kenshin's back, tightened.

"How dare you." She didn't recognize her own voice: it was cold and thin and sharper than any blade. "How dare you. You have no right – "

Her head snapped up to glare at Mr. Hiko. He didn't recoil – not that she'd expected him to – but his eyebrows arched in surprise. Fury pounded in her veins like a temple drum and something was whipping in her soul, lashing and clawing at the earth with fangs that ached for blood –

"You were trying to bring his memories back." Her voice was soft as snow. "You – that scent – you thought it would make him remember, before he was ready. Without even asking – you have no right!"

"And you do?" he shot back. But he stoppered the vial. "I am his teacher, girl; who can make the
"You lost that right ten years ago!" Kaoru cried. Kenshin flinched in her arms. "When you let this happen to him!"

She saw the words hit home, saw his eyes widen and his hand twitch towards his sword hilt and she hated herself, a little, for hurting him: for tearing at a wound she knew was already raw and bleeding. But he had come into her house and hurt someone she cared for and he had no right, no right to do such a thing. Whatever his reasons.

"Do you claim the right, then, in my place?" he asked, low and dangerous. "Forgive me. I should have asked the mistress' permission before I interfered with her property." His words were bitten-off, deliberate, and she shuddered but did not break their locked gaze.

"He is under my protection." Her voice matched his, clipped and careful despite the bile rising in her throat. "You haven't been here, the past two months. You haven't seen him in ten years! You have no idea what's happened to him, what it's been like. You're expecting too much!"

"And you expect too little!" he thundered back. "He is stronger than you know, Kamiya – he has endured this much, and he can endure a little more if it will win him back his soul – " Mr. Hiko paused, then, and his silence was the greening sky before the hurricane. His eyes narrowed.

"...or would you prefer otherwise?" he asked softly, deadly as poison smoke. "How much have you lost, this past year? Your father, his students, what little prestige and honor this school possessed – that's quite a lot for one young girl to endure. At least he," he nodded towards Kenshin, huddled on the ground, "can never leave you, not in the state he's in..."

Something in her heart shattered. Shards of it flung themselves through her veins, racing to numb her extremities and her skin tingled with shame. Because hadn't she thought the same thing, or near enough? That Kenshin was hers – that she would protect him, not because it was right, but because he belonged to her the way Yahiko and her father's school did, because she had taken him in and come to care for him and she would not let him be stolen from her –

"Get out." Kaoru found herself on her feet without knowing how, nails digging into her thighs where she gripped her skirts, almost tearing through them. "Get out!"

Mr. Hiko's face was a shade paler then it had been, she observed from somewhere under her shrieking rage. He took a step back, and there was shift in his stance, almost conciliatory. She didn't care.

"Leave my house!" Just let him try to stay – let him challenge her here, on her home turf, where she had been born and raised; let him just try, after accusing her of such an evil – (oh but can you call the accusation false, little girl?) something small and vile whispered inside her heart.

"Get out." Her voice was cracking, broken, barely a whisper. He stared at her for a long moment.

Then he left, and took the vial with him. Kaoru sank slowly to her knees, wrapping her shaking arms unconsciously around her torso. Kenshin was frozen; she was frozen, too, colder than she'd ever been, and she knew that she should move to comfort him. Except she couldn't.

At least he can never leave you rang hollow in her mind. A sob fought its way free of her lungs, and her teeth were too slow to catch and hold it. The hot pressure behind her eyes – the pressure that had been building all night, and all morning – was too much, now, and tears slid in a steady trickle down her face. She wept silently, after that first sob, as she had never done; wept and fought to stop
weeping, because there was no time for selfish tears.

She could feel Kenshin watching her as she pulled air in and held it for heartbeats before breathing out again, grabbing at the frayed strands of her control. It would be so easy to tip over; there was so much coiled inside her belly like a venomous snake. Except that she couldn’t, she mustn’t, she wouldn’t. She had chosen this, after all.

Her fists were still tangled in her skirts, her palms protected from her nails only by the layers of cotton and silk between them. The laundry lay in its wooden tub, half-done and forgotten, growing heavier and heavier as the water seeped in. How much could it absorb? Was there an upper limit or would it simply suck the water in forever, fibers growing fatter and fatter until the cloth dissolved?

Her chest ached.

There was a warm pressure against her arm and she glanced down despite herself, feeling as she moved as though her body was not her own. Kenshin was curling against her side, again, head tucking into the small space under her arm. Too small: it was either let go of her skirts with that hand or leave him nowhere to rest his head. She let go, and he shifted in a way that brought his hair under her hand. He settled into the caress, catlike.

His hands tangled in her skirts. One of them was very near her own, close enough that his littlest finger brushed against her thumb. Carefully, uncertain, his fingers began to move in a kind of slow rhythm. Not gripping – almost soothing, as if he was stroking the cloth. She mirrored him, half a beat behind, petting her free hand through his hair. He seemed to grow more certain when she did, although his rhythm never changed.

He shifted again and relaxed fully against her, and she didn't know what this meant – this strange sort of reaching-out, his fingers moving in a steady pattern against the top of her thigh. But it anchored her: the touch of his hand, his warm weight at her side, the silk of his hair under her fingers. The flood drained away, withdrawing slowly back to whatever hollow chamber it had come from.

Not gone. Only delayed. But that was enough, for now.

They stayed that way until she heard Yahiko banging about in his room: then she untangled herself from Kenshin and stood. He straightened up, watching her with bright, focused eyes.

"It's alright," she told him. "Don't worry. Everything will be fine. I'm – well, I suppose I should go to the Maekawa's today. It's not good to skip training…"

"Yes, Miss Kaoru," Kenshin ducked his head obediently as he plunged his hands back into the neglected laundry. Kaoru watched him for a moment, then went to check on Yahiko.

She didn't look behind her, so she didn't see Kenshin raise his head and look at the gate his teacher had left through, eyes dark with worry and something stranger.

~*~

The sun had slit her throat and fallen below the horizon, leaving only a faint smear of blood along the rooftops. In the east, the stars were coming out. Their song was a faint, shameful thing against the rich glow of the sleepless city, muffled by the smoke and stench of too many lives huddled together, praying for protection from the storm. Not like the mountains – the air was clear, there, and even
unworthy men could hear the starsong ringing.

And Hiko knew that there were no worthy men.

Least of all himself, right now. There was no excuse for what he'd done, finding the crack in the girl's soul and tearing it wide open. She had no malice in her, and she was not to blame for this – for his helplessness, for his failure. But she had rubbed his nose in it, dared to throw it in his face, that if not for his own shortsightedness Kenshin might have –

Hiko wrapped his hand around his lower jaw, trying not to grind his teeth. The grass was cool where he sat on the hilltop, under the greening leaves of the cherry tree. There were no blossoms, not anymore. The season had come late and left quickly, ushered away by windstorms and driving rain.

Yes. If not for him – for his foolishness, for his pride. Don't hide from it, idiot, he could hear his own master saying across the years. Don't add cowardice to the list of your sins.

All she had done was try, in her halting way, to fix his mess. Taken responsibility for his apprentice. Done what he should have done, ten years ago, when he'd gotten word that the boy had fallen in with Kanryu and his band of serpents.

Hiko did not sigh. He stared, impassive, out across the sea of houses and bridges and the thin silver canals that wound through the city like wires in an old puppet, holding the wretched mess together for just one last dance.

Kamiya was not to blame. And neither, it had transpired, was the village girl from so long ago. Tomoe. She was a victim, too – victims, all of them, and what was the purpose of the sword of heaven if not to defend those who suffered in every era? He had been taught that, once, before the talk of balance and necessity. He'd made the argument in front of his master as Kenshin had in front of him – what good is any of this, if we never use it? So he'd sent the boy off to learn the hard way, as his master had sent him, and thought no more of it.

Hiko wondered, now, for the first time, what he had really learned when his master had set him to the same test. He'd failed then, too. Which had been the lesson: sometimes, there is no success. Some things cannot be fought. We do not seek to move the mountain, his master had told him, staring down his hawksbeak nose. We only protect those who live on it from those dangers they did not bring on themselves.

Wracked with guilt, he hadn't questioned it. And the morning had brought a new set of lessons, harder ones, more tests of strength and endurance that beat away his remaining weaknesses and ended only when he'd won his master's name. He'd planned to do the same to Kenshin, leaving only that last lesson ringing in his ears, unexplained. That was the way of things. Who was he to question it?

Only the master of the Hiten Mitsurugi. Wielder of the sword of heaven.

For all the good it did him.

He'd thought… he'd thought to let the style die with him. Let the world balance itself, as it had done before. This new age of steel and steam and clockwork had no time for legends. Better that the style should pass from the world pure, untouched, and become myth. He'd not sought an apprentice, nor made his existence known. So why had he chosen Kenshin, all those years ago? What had he seen in the boy that made him think yes, this one, this one is worthy of my death?

Nothing, really. Except, perhaps, the boy himself: the fierce focus in his strange eyes, and the broken
blisters on his hands, smeared with blood and pus. Hiko had spent a good hour that first night picking out splinters as the lad winced and refused to cry. His name had still been Shinta, then, although Hiko hadn't bothered using it. The first time he'd called the boy by name was to steal his birth-name from him: to take his great heart and give him a sword-heart in its place.

Who might Shinta have grown to be, if Kenshin hadn't taken his place?

And who might Kenshin have become, if Kanryu's manslayer hadn't subsumed him?

Kanryu, too, had taken Kenshin's name.

There was a difference, he knew, between himself and Kanryu. And yet…

Hiko shook his head, letting his hand fall to his side and dangle in the folds of his cloak. The air was too still.

He'd spent the day wandering aimlessly around the city, the glass vial burning in his pocket, thinking that he should go back and force the issue and finding himself unwilling to.

You have no right!

No. Not, perhaps, to fix what he had allowed to be broken – but he was not completely without rights in this.

If you assist me in this matter, Takeda Kanryu will be dead before the year is out.

Kenshin's fate was out of his hands. That was cold truth: there was no spell or potion that could change what was. The girl had taken up what he'd let fall, in his pride, and earned the right to make the choices that his apprentice no longer could. But Kanryu… was another matter. The sword of heaven had neglected its duties, of late. And that – that could end. Would end. Now.

Hiko braced one hand against the damp grass and froze at the spark of sword-spirit that curled to life behind him. Not even a spark – an ember, a pale shadow of the former flame. But he knew it. He'd spent five years nurturing it.

Kenshin slid carefully into view from the other side of the hill, eyes downcast and shielded by his red bangs. He stood like a startled deer, ready for flight; except instead of bolting his throat worked, once, and he knelt slowly on the ground. Not collapsing into a bow – only sitting.

Hiko said nothing, did nothing, tried not to breathe too deeply. The boy had brought a jug of sake with him.

"The cherry trees are not blooming, sir." He looked up as he said it, and there was something striving behind the blankness in his eyes. "But the stars are out."

"…so they are." How long ago had he tried, in one of his more sentimental moments, to teach the boy how a man drank?

Kenshin's fists clenched and unclenched, convulsively. Hiko waited, thick-throated, and didn't allow himself the luxury of hope.

Finally, Kenshin seemed to give up. He pushed the jug towards Hiko, who caught it neatly.

"Does the girl know you're here, Kenshin?" Hiko asked the question carefully, uncertain what the answer would mean. Kenshin swallowed, and his chest rose and fell as his breathing sped up.
"...no. Sir."

"...I see."

This was Kenshin's choice, then. **Kenshin's** choice. And Hiko did not allow himself to consider all the implications of that: he was too old for miracles. Instead, he reached carefully into his pocket and took out the vial. It was cool in his palm, too heavy.

Without looking at Kenshin, he set it in the grass to one side and busied himself with the jug. The sake was of passable quality: he poured a draught into the cup he that always carried with him and sampled it absently. The dull ember of Kenshin's spirit faded into the distance, and was gone.

Hiko glanced over, taking a second sip, and saw that the vial was gone, too.

~*~

Even blind or blind-stinking-drunk, Sano always knew when he had left Kaoru's neighborhood behind and entered the row houses. It was the smell, and the change in the ground underfoot. The Kamiya school nestled comfortably among other respectable houses, bound to one another by well tended, hard-packed dirt roads. When the road turned muddy with overflowing gutters, when the clear-cut lines between buildings and houses blurred with the earth that every step tracked in, that meant he'd left her world behind.

And the **smell**. People in Kaoru's neighborhood took care of their trash, dealing with it themselves or paying someone else to take it away. That **someone else** usually lived here, and carried the stench of it with them when they came home at the end of each long day. No one hauled trash, here; no one could afford to have the scattered garbage cleared away if their neighbor decided just to dump it in the street. As the smell testified.

Not that the folk here weren't decent, in their own way. There were dozens of families here, good people, mixed in with the scum – too poor to paint and too proud to whitewash. It wasn't the worst neighborhood, just damn close. Close enough to keep everyone on their guard and waiting for that axe to fall, terrified of losing what little they had.

Sano wasn't blind, and he wasn't drunk – for a change. It had been almost a year since he'd come back to his tiny room for any reason other than to sleep it off somewhere the little missy wouldn't give him an earful. He kept paying the rent on the place, all five mats of it, because it was handy in a pinch and he liked having his own space, if he needed it. But he **lived** at Kaoru's; everyone and everything he cared about was there.

Well. Everyone except one person, but he didn't call her Fox for no reason. That one went where she pleased.

And apparently it pleased her to come see him. Sano blinked and stopped in his tracks as he rounded the corner and saw Megumi standing outside his door, swaddled in the light of the setting sun. It curled around her, long pale beams parallel to the ground, and softened her edges until she was mostly shadows.

"Fox?"

"Sagara." She turned, graceful as always, and only the very slight tremor in her voice gave her away. "I – wanted to see you – "

Megumi took a step forward. Her knees gave way, inexplicably – there wasn't anything to trip on – and he caught her without thinking, setting her back on her feet
"What's up?" Normally, she would have pulled away as soon as she was stable again. But she didn't, this time; she stayed close, almost touching, and didn't flinch from his hands resting carefully on her arms. He thought that he should be the one to move, instead. Except that he didn't.

Her face was flushed. Even through the layers of silk she wore like a shroud, he could feel the heat of her skin, and his fingers moved restlessly, unconsciously across her sleeves. Megumi shuddered, eyes hooded, and leaned into him.

"Hey," he said softly, searching her face and seeing neither fear nor pain – only a strange kind of focus in her heated eyes. "Is somethin' wrong?"

"We should talk inside, Sagara." She was close enough, now, that he could smell the sake on her breath. His sense of alarm deepened. This wasn't like her – she rarely drank, and never enough to get noticeably tipsy.

"Alright." Sano let her go and slid open the door. "Ladies first," he said, gesturing as Megumi walked unsteadily past him. Her gait was pitchy, like the ground wouldn't stay still, and she sat heavily on the raised mats without bothering to slide out of her sandals, leaving her feet to cross neatly in the small, shallow cubby just inside the door. Her hands she cupped loosely in her lap, one over the other, and examined them with a fierce concentration as he shut the door and sat against the opposite wall.

"How did last night go?" she asked, as soon as he'd settled.

"Last night?" Sano shrugged, not sure what to say, or how much. "…complicated."

"It was Kamiya's first run." She picked at her cuticles, her long hair draping over her shoulders and hiding her eyes. "Complicated…?"

"Uh." He swallowed. "The kid followed us." And then some. He'd about died of a heart attack when the little brat had pitched over; he didn't blame Kaoru in least for snapping like she had. Bad enough that the deal had gone south when that pig of a smuggler had tried to get Kaoru's favors included in the payment price – the little twerp could have been killed, and for what?

"Yahiko?" She sounded almost disinterested. Now he knew something was wrong. That bit of news should have snapped her alert even if she was a few sheets to the wind – she should be on her feet and ripping him to shreds about now. "He must be fine. Otherwise you wouldn't be here."

She said it more to herself then him. Sano stretched his legs as much as he could without kicking the side of her thigh and tilted his head back, trying not to let his worry show. She'd only shy and bolt…

"Kenshin showed up, too," he said, hoping for some kind of response.

"Did he?" Megumi's hands stilled. "I hadn't thought Kamiya would be that careless."

"She didn't tell him to. 'Parently he did it by himself."

"I see." Was there pain in her voice, or was he imagining things? "Good. That's going well, then. I was right in that, at least…"

More talking to herself, instead of him. Sano pulled one leg up and rested his arm atop it, watching her intently.

"What do you mean?"
"If he's making choices already…" She made an abstract gesture, almost dismissive. "I hadn't thought he'd make it even this far, not really. I'd hoped, though."

There was anguish there, twisting around her black-silk voice like a clinging vine and tearing at the undertones. She was still hiding her face behind her long hair, and she'd settled her hands one over the other like a proper lady, enacting herself in protocol the way – the way she'd done when they'd first met, less than a year ago. When she'd been only Kanryu's meek little near-slave, before he'd known who she was, before she'd let him see the fox-woman she'd kept curled inside her all those years, safe from the worst of it. Of what she'd endured. Whatever that was.

He didn't know everything – didn't want to know. What he did know was already too much.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Rain began to fall soft against the roof, light as rice-grains. Someone shouted for their children to come inside, before they caught cold.

"I'm glad," Megumi continued, swaying a little. "That he'll be looked after. I always – regretted – "

Her voice was thick. Sano glanced up at the ceiling reflexively – the place had a tendency to leak – and saw rainwater gathering just above her.

"Hey, fox, you might wanna come up here." He almost patted the mats beside him, then thought better of it. "It's about t'get real wet where you are."

She started, turning towards him, and he caught a flash of red-rimmed, teary eyes before she lowered her head to hide them. He pointed up.

"The roof leaks."

Something that might have been a laugh or a sob escaped her, and she slid haphazardly out of her sandals, swinging her legs up on to the matting. She tried to stand and stumbled, catching herself before he could. A few shaky steps and then she fell gracelessly to her knees beside him, leaning her shoulder against the same wall as his back.

"Don't you want to know what I regret?" she asked. Her eyes were smoky, gazing up at him through lashes thick with unshed tears. She'd landed half on her hip, her legs unbending out to one side and supporting her weight with one arm; her other hand was draped languorously across her waist. She smoothed the folds of her kimono as he watched her, throat tight, and tried to find an answer.

"I – shit, Fox." Sano blew out a long, complicated breath. "I mean – yeah, if you wanna tell me. I guess."

"You guess." She smirked, turning away, and pushed her hair back from her forehead with a bitter smile. "Of course."

"I mean it's up to you," he tried again. "What you wanna tell me – or not tell me. I don't – I mean it ain't my business, 'less you want it to be."

Megumi almost snorted. "Was that the last shipment, then?"

It took him a moment to realize what she was talking about. Her voice was crisp, and if not for the red traces in her eyes he could almost think she was entirely herself again.

"Yeah. Last one for the people we got, anyway. Anything else…” he shrugged. "Surplus, I guess. If this political bullshit's done one good thing, at least we ain't gonna be underequipped."
"There is that." She pulled a few strands of hair away from the thick, shimmering mass over her shoulders and began to braid them, idly. "And they're all safely away?"

"Yep. The usual recipients." The clinic, Katsu's, and a few others. From there they'd spread out through the ranks, until the last few unarmed folk were squared away, and then…

"So it's finished."

"Yeah. Now it's just waiting."

Waiting, waiting and more waiting – as they'd been doing since midsummer last year, when the negotiations fell through. It was a crazy plan, sure, but it stood a decent chance of working, was the thing, if only those recalcitrant bastards could see it. It wasn't as if any of them had any decent ideas.

"Not for much longer…" she said, and shook her head when he gave her a quizzical look. "Nevermind. Just – woolgathering."

"Is that all y'wanted to ask me?" Sano sat up a little, holding himself away from the wall. "About the shipment?"

"No." She swiped at her nose with the back of her hand, sniffling. The smell of someone's cook-fire filtered in from outside, woodsy and enticing. "I wanted –"

Megumi shifted to face him and overbalanced with a startled cry, putting her hand out to catch herself on the wall next to his head. Suddenly she was right in front of him, her face barely a handspan from his and her lips parted in astonishment. She blinked, wide-eyed. Her breath reeked of sake.

Sano didn't dare to move. Like a woman entranced, Megumi reached out with her other hand and traced the air just above his lips, her fingers shaking.

"My regrets…" she murmured, and kissed him.

Sano swallowed a startled gasp as her lips slanted hard over his and she took advantage of the moment to curl her tongue into his mouth. He couldn't not respond, not when she was pressing herself against him all warm, soft curves and delicate hands tangling in his hair. Strong hands – graceful and steady.

"…Fox…" he breathed when she finally drew away, eyes half-closed and gleaming under her lashes. "What…?"

"Megumi." Her hand stroked down his neck to fist in the cloth of his shirt; the other stayed buried in his hair. "Use my name, Sagara."

He couldn't think, could barely breathe. She stole another kiss from him, deeper this time and trailed smaller kisses down his jaw after they finally surfaced, gasping. At some point in the proceedings he'd worked one hand under her doctor's smock, curling his other arm around her waist and holding her tight against him.

"Megumi – wait – " Her legs were on either side of his hips, holding tight, and she began to rock slowly against him, sending shivers of fire down his spine.

"No," she mumbled around his earlobe. "Unless you want me to stop."

Sano sucked in a shuddering breath and moved his hands up to cup her face, resting his forehead
against hers.

"I don't – just – why?"

She shifted in his lap, pulling her hips closer to his and curling her hands around his neck, trying to draw him into another kiss. He resisted, barely: every nerve was singing her name and her scent twined around him in a lover's knot. He'd dreamed of this for too long, of her warm and wanting in arms, the two of them moving as one thing.

"Just tell me why," Sano managed to plead. "It ain't that I don't – I dunno if I ever wanted anything so bad just – tell me why."

Her eyes darkened. But she didn't draw away. Her fingers traced along his jaw, his collarbone, and he kept his hands very still because if he did what he wanted to do – if he grabbed her hips and pulled her into him, rolled them over to press her to the ground and lost himself in her, in her breasts and hands and long shining hair – he wouldn't know. And he needed to.

"'Cause I – " Another deep breath as he tried to stabilize himself, heat rushing to his face. "I don't – we do this, it's gonna be – different."

And he hated himself, a little, for not being able to say it: that he didn't want her if he couldn't have all of her, all her pride and brilliance and every shadow, too. So that when he finally took her there, to that breathless place, she'd stay and let him carry some of the weight on her back – or he could carry her, at least, if the burden wasn't one that could be shared.

She took her own shivering breath, as if she was fighting back tears.

"I just," her tongue darted out to wet her lips. Sano nearly groaned with the urge to bend her back and kiss her breathless. "I want to know. What it's like to – to choose. Just once."

Her head came to rest slowly on his shoulder, her hands grasping his shirt like a lifeline.

"Please. Just once. With someone I – I just want to choose, this one time. I want to know…"

He voice cracked. She was shaking like a leaf; he wrapped his arms around her and stroked at her hair as her back heaved, once, like she was stifling a sob.

"Hey. Hey, now. That's enough a' that…"

Warm wetness on his shoulder and he realized, with a jolt, that she was crying. And Megumi never cried, not matter how bad things got.

"Aw, Fox," he mumbled around the fall of her hair, curving himself around her as if he could keep out the cold. "Megumi. Sorry. Didn't mean to – "

"Don't." Her voice was muffled against his shirt. "Don't. Just show me. Please. Please just – I don't want to be alone, Sagara, not anymore – "

He held her tighter, heart cracking to hear her beg. Shit. Shit. He couldn't not – not when she was here, needing something and asking for him to give it and –

"Hey," he murmured, and his hands played gently with the folds of her clothes. "I got a name too, y'know."

A long, fraught pause. Her hands tightened around his shoulders. And then:
"Sano," she breathed. He pulled a little away and she tilted her head up, tears still glimmering in the corners of her eyes. Sano mustered a shadow of a grin and bent his head to hers, kissing them away.

"'Sall right," he said, smoothing one hand down her back. She was small; he forgot how slender she was, with all space her spirit took. "C'mere."

He kissed her properly, then, easing her down and rolling over so that his back would bear the brunt of the hard matting. She shuddered against him, crying out – small moans and gasps, and he liked the sound of them so much that he brought them out by the dozens, with lips and hands and fingers, before he thought of his own pleasure.

Megumi clutched at his back when she let him inside, biting her lower lip. He soothed his thumb across it and kissed her deep and slow, waiting for her to relax around him.

"No regrets?" he asked, unable to keep the worry from his eyes.

"No," she murmured, resting her fingers on his lips, and twined her legs around his. "No regrets at all."

So he slid a hand under her hip and brought her to the peak again, one last time before he let himself follow her over.

They lay together, afterwards, tangled in their clothing and each other's arms. The rain beat down overhead, muffling the sound of Sano's neighbors. He thought, vaguely, that he should have done this somewhere else – that she deserved better than this hovel, where the most you could do for privacy was pretend not to hear your neighbors. She stirred against his side, as though she could hear him.

"You cold?" he asked.

"...no." She burrowed deeper into his arms and he laughed softly, brushing the hair from her eyes.

"Well, I am. Lemme get a blanket."

"No." She squirmed closer, like she was trying to crawl into his skin. "Don't go."

"Ain't goin' anywhere." He pressed his lips to her temple, running one hand down the long curves of her body. "Not without comin' back. Promise you that."

The room was small enough, and he was lanky enough, that he managed to grab a blanket from the haphazard pile he kept his bedding in without actually getting up. He draped it over them, laying back down and pulling her close against him. She sighed in his arms, and he kissed the top of her head. This was how it should be: her safe in his arms, warm and satisfied.

"You just get some rest, Megumi," he murmured, fingers brushing slow across her neck. "I'll still be here in the mornin'."

He was on the very edge of sleep, falling fast: that was the only reason he missed the quick hitch in her breathing, and the hot tear that leaked across her cheek.
For the first time in a long time, Megumi woke slowly. She did not snap her eyes open, did not bolt from some cloying nightmare into the bright relief of her little room in Dr. Oguni's clinic, his granddaughters sprawled unselfconsciously beside her. She drifted up from dreamless peace into a drowsy warmth, nestling deeper into the strong arms that held her close even as she blinked her eyes open, unhurried, luxuriating in an uncommon sense of safety.

Memory seeped in slowly around the edges of her comfort: callouses catching roughly on her skin, gentle hands and warm murmurs and an enveloping strength that had cradled her, cherished her as she traced patterns of desire on his skin, her body pressed against his and yearning. There had been nothing hard or shameful between them, no little games with her as the gamepiece. When she'd told him yes, more he'd given more freely, and when she'd pushed his hands or mouth away from a spot grown too sensitive he'd simply found another place to touch or kiss…

Heat stung at the corners of her eyes as she raised her head to look at him. Sano was still asleep, his free arm tucked under his head and his unruly hair falling ragged against his skin. His headband lay discarded somewhere in the pile of clothing strewn around the room, doubtless next to her smock or under-wrap. It made him look younger, less serious, his eyes wider and his face softer.

Sunlight was easing its way over the rooftops and into the room. Soon it would be true morning, and too late – it was time to leave, before he woke up. Before she would have to explain.

It was cruel, she knew. Cruel to come to him as she had last night, to take comfort in the love she knew he had for her without explaining that this was the end, and not a beginning. There would be no more beginnings for her. She should have told him what it really was: succor for a dying woman, a last meal for the condemned. Except that if he'd known, he would have tried to stop her. And if he had tried to stop her, he might have succeeded. Which could not be allowed. There was too much at stake.

This was cruel. But it was crueler still to risk everything for a childish dream.

Selfish to the last, she bent down to kiss him one last time. He half-woke as she did, chapped lips
moving against hers as his arms tightened across her back, yielding his mouth up to her. "M'gumi…?" he slurred, eyes slitting open. She pressed the tips of her fingers across his lips, hushing him softly.

"It's alright," she lied. "Go back to sleep. I won't be gone long."

Another, smaller kiss – a mere press of her mouth to his as his arm fell away, freeing her – and she pulled away. He rolled over into the warmth her body had left behind, curling around her absence. She looked at him for a long moment, heart breaking.

Then she dressed herself and left.

~*~

Shinomori was waiting for her at the end of the rowhouse, tall and cold in his white leather coat. It hid his leanness and made him more of a presence than he really was; without it he became a narrow streak of ink in the shadows, glass-green eyes narrow behind his bangs.

He didn't bow as she approached. She appreciated the gesture.

"Have you said your goodbyes?"

"…no," she said, refusing to glance over her shoulder. "But I've left."

A shallow sigh as he fell into step beside her.

"That will make things difficult."

A number of responses occurred to her, and she didn't say any of them. Shinomori, to his credit, didn't press the issue.

They walked in silence as the sun rose, heating the air. Raindrops rose from the grass and ground as a gentle mist. Megumi closed her eyes as she breathed it in, lifting her face to the rising sun. Her head ached gently, a reminder of last night; her mouth was full of sake's bitter aftertaste.

The world was stirring: the earliest risers were up and about, preparing for the day. In the clinic, Dr. Oguni's wife would be padding down the hallway towards the kitchen, blinking sleep from her eyes and wondering where Megumi was. She was normally awake by now and drawing water from the well to make the morning rice.

Mrs. Oguni would probably have to wake one of the girls to help her. Ayame, probably – she was just big enough to be helpful, and Mrs. Oguni had a bad back.

Kenshin would be awake, too, over at the dojo. Kaoru as well, perhaps. If not right now, then very soon; it would bother her to lie abed while he was working. That wrong, at least, she had lived to see righted. She hadn't been able to save him – hadn't had the courage or the wit bring him with her, that frantic night when she had finally won her freedom – had left him to suffer and saved herself, selfish wretch that she was.

But he had found his way to safety, in the end, and she had played some small part in it. It was strange that that one life should mean so much to her, when there were so many that she had condemned to hell. Yet it did, and she would take whatever comfort she could find, here at the end of things.
Kaoru… Kaoru would take care of him. There was strength in the girl, more than she had reckoned. More than Kaoru herself knew. She would hold steady through the storm, and bring her people safe to harbor.

Megumi took another deep breath, trying to memorize the smell of wet earth and sunlight, dew and mist and the earth slowly waking to life after its cold slumber. Soon enough she would have only air that reeked of roses.

"Thank you," she said to Shinomori, after some time had passed. He stirred beside her and said nothing: nothing needed to be said. Not between them. They were not friends and never would be, but they understood one another, understood what it was to have ghosts and regrets hounding at your heels. To be driven by your sins – by all the oaths lying broken in the dust behind you, all the obligations left unfulfilled.

"He does not expect you." Shinomori seemed to sigh as he said it. "Time is not of the essence."

"I have no other business." The sun would push off from the horizon soon, arcing across the sky in a grand leap towards night. The air was warm and clear. It would be a fine day.

There was no reason to delay, except cowardice. Except selfishness. And she had been selfish enough, last night. This morning.

No more.

"Let's go."

She knew the way like she knew the lines of her bones. The estate called to her, north star to her lodestone, squatting inescapably across her destiny, across every path she might have taken. It made her wonder, sometimes, what she and he had done and been in previous lives to be bound so thoroughly and so sickly in this one. She hoped they had enjoyed it.

But it was fitting, really. Kanryu needed her. Had always needed her. Not only as a doctor – she defined him in some heartbreaking way, filled in the boundaries of his strange and broken self. So it was right that she do this, not merely necessary. For the sake of all that he had stolen from her. For the sake of all that she had meant to him.

It took less time than she had thought, or perhaps she only felt time moving faster, cascading wildly downhill now that the choice was made and could not be undone. She thought that this must be how her ancestors had felt in the centuries before the great Tokugawa peace, when they donned their armor and rode out to meet whatever foe their overlord had commanded them to fight. She wondered if they had ever been afraid.

She wasn't.

So when the gates loomed before her like metal jaws in the early-morning light – when the guards, at Shinomori's nod, opened them and she took that final step under the bright morning sun – it was the easiest thing in the world.

~*~

Kaoru woke easily but did not rise for long minutes after she had opened her eyes. She lay on her bed instead, staring at the ceiling, and knew that she should get up. Should go to the kitchen to check on Kenshin and begin her morning chores. Should – do so many things.

But it was hard, and she didn't want to.
And that never would have stopped her before; she couldn't say why it stopped her now. She wanted to think that it was because this wasn't just hard, she didn't just not-want-to. That it was because of some weariness that had sunk right down into her bones, poisoning the marrow. But that would be melodramatic and self-pitying, and what right did she have?

Yahiko and Kenshin needed her. She would be strong, for them. She would get out of bed and go about her day and keep the smile on her face if it killed her – she thought sometimes that maybe it would – because they were relying on her. Because the sword that protects cannot afford to falter, cannot allow itself to fail.

With that thought ringing in her mind, she climbed out of bed and started her day.

She went to wash, first; she'd gone to bed the night before without a bath, and felt desperately grungy. There wasn't any point in a relaxing soak before a day of training, but she did feel the need to scrub some of the night's sweat off her skin. She'd had more bad dreams last night, less coherent than the night before: she had been looking for someone, or something, stumbling through a dark stone labyrinth and crying out into the consuming dark. Needing to find a thing that had been lost, only she couldn't remember what it was…

Kaoru shook her head firmly and overturned the bucket over her head, letting the cold water shock her system. They were only dreams. Anyone would have bad dreams, after the last few days.

She'd ended up staying home yesterday after all, to rest herself and to keep an eye on Kenshin. He'd seemed alright: he'd finished the laundry without incident and then gone to work on the little garden he'd started the day before. Yahiko had joined him, once he'd eaten. She'd thought about offering to help but then thought better of it. The garden was something that Kenshin had decided to do himself. If she got involved… there were too many ways that it could become about her, about his mistress, and not something he was doing because he wanted to. At least, she hoped it was because he wanted to, at root, even if he'd found some way to justify it with her orders.

And there was a certain peace in watching them. She could almost imagine that things were other than they were: that the three of them were a family passing a lazy day, and nothing more.

Around midafternoon, Yahiko had disappeared into his room and emerged with his shinai clasped in garden-grubby hands and an expectant look on his face. The tight bands around her heart had eased a little and she'd hurried to respond to his unspoken request. They hadn't discussed things since the night before, and they hadn't needed to; everything that needed to be said was said that afternoon, in his fierce focus and unending backtalk, in her careful guidance and equally pointed sarcasm.

They weren't completely normal again. But they were in the ways that mattered.

Dinner had been quiet, but gently so; the silence had wrapped them up like a warm blanket on a winter night, protective and comforting, and even though Kenshin had taken his meal in the kitchen as he always did she had felt, somehow, that he was with them. She'd gone to bed early, trusting Yahiko to lock up the house and check the grounds one last time, and found her mattress already laid out and turned down when she got in from her bath. Kenshin had been kneeling behind his screen.

She'd thanked him, quietly, and curled up under her blankets with a sigh, counting her heartbeats in time with his breathing. And sleep had come, eventually, heavy and thick as sweet syrup, dragging her down into nightmares. But her body was rested; that was enough.

She toweled herself off and dressed, sighing as she pulled her hair back in a loose tail as she always did. It was shaping up to be a beautiful day, the best one of the year so far: the sun shone warm and strong, casting the world in richer colors.
Yahiko was up and about when she padded back into the house, rubbing at his eyes as he ambled wearily down the hallway from the kitchen. He yawned hugely, stretching.

"Morning," he rasped out, voice dry with sleep.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah, I guess. Where's Kenshin?"

Kaoru's breath caught.

"What do you mean?" she asked carefully, willing her heart to be steady when it wanted to beat from her chest.

"He's not in the kitchen." Yahiko jerked his thumb in the general direction of the well. "I didn't see him when I went to the well. I was comin' to ask you…"

"I haven't – " She tried to swallow past the numbness in her throat, raising a hand to her lips. "I haven't seen him this morning. He's usually awake a little before me, anyway, so I thought he was just making breakfast, and then I went to the bathhouse…"

Yahiko's eyes widened as she spoke – babbled, really – and she knew that the worry in his eyes was reflected in hers. It seemed unreal. Kenshin was always here, always doing something, he didn't just – leave. He couldn't.

"Well, he's gotta be here." Yahiko ran a hand through his hair, scratching anxiously at his scalp. "I mean, it's not like he'd leave, right?"

"I – I wouldn't think so…" Her hand dropped down to clench at her collar. She wouldn't think so, no, except that he had left once, of his own accord, just the other day. Following her, following Yahiko… but small steps lead to bigger ones, every teacher knew that.

"I'll check around outside," Yahiko said, stepping on to the porch. His eyes were very dark. "You look in the house, okay? It's not like the place is that big, and he's gotta be here somewhere."

"Right." She nodded firmly, trying to imbue her voice with a confidence she didn't feel. "Don't forget to check the storehouse!" she called after him. He waved back at her as he jogged towards the training hall, calling Kenshin's name.

It didn't take long to search the house and the grounds. Kenshin was truly gone; he wasn't in any of the buildings or underneath them – Yahiko had thought of that, pointing out that if something had frightened or upset him, he might have tried to hide from it. So he'd crawled under every building with enough of a gap in the foundation, checking, and found nothing. There were other hidey-holes, Yahiko added, but he'd already looked there and they were empty.

She didn't need to ask why he was so well-acquainted with all the places a person could hide on her property. Yahiko hadn't trusted her either, when he'd first come into her care.

"So he's gone…" she murmured, barely able to hear herself over the buzzing in her ears. Yahiko turned his head sharply away, jaw tense, and wiped at the dirt clinging to his clothes.

"…we could report it to the police." His voice was wary.

"No!" Not that – even if they reported him stolen rather than escaped, it would still mean officers with weapons bringing him home, men who'd think of him as property, who wouldn't care if he was
hurt or frightened. And what if he hadn't been taken at all?

"If – if he's run away – that's his choice. I just want to know that he's safe…" Kaoru pressed a hand to her breastbone, as though she could physically still her racing heart. "We should – Yahiko, go to the clinic and tell Megumi. I'll find Sano. They can help us look."

She hurried towards the gate, Yahiko only half a step behind. Sano and Megumi could get the word out to the rest of the network. If Kenshin was still in Edo, someone would spot him – if he'd run away, with any luck he'd cross paths with the rebels eventually and someone could get word to her. There were hundreds of people across the country who helped slaves escape to safe camps in free provinces and then out of the country, who kept a weather eye out for the odd slave who managed to escape on their own. Surely *someone* would find him, sooner or later.

The reason he was gone didn't matter. As long as she knew that he was safe, that he hadn't been stolen or gotten lost, that he wasn't hurt…

"Kaoru, you should go to the clinic," Yahiko started to argue as she threw open the gate. "Sano's probably back at the rowhouse – "

Mr. Hiko was waiting across the street, sitting under the dogwood tree growing between her neighbors' houses and watching the dojo with all the calm of a cat at stalk. The sun was bright and high enough that the tree cast him all in shadow, blurring his outlines.

Kaoru froze, rage strumming sudden in her veins.

"What did you do?" she breathed.

Mr. Hiko got to his feet. His eyes were remote, and his face was very still.

She was across the street before she understood that she was moving, fingers twisting into claws – she didn't have a weapon, why didn't she have a weapon? – as she thanked her father for incorporating hand-to-hand combat into the Kasshin, so at least she wasn't totally helpless –

"*What did you do?*

"Nothing." He opened his hands, keeping them away from his sword, and the gesture – *I am not here to fight* – forced her to halt. "I swear to you, girl, it was his own choice."

"Explain." It was absurd, really, to order him like a wayward student, but she was beyond propriety. She felt Yahiko move up behind her, his stance a little too casual, and made sure to keep herself between him and this – this *interloper*, who'd come to her home and accused her of foul things, and hurt someone under her protection.

"He came to me." Mr. Hiko spoke very carefully, not breaking their locked gazes. "He asked for the vial. I let him take it. I did not force anything on him, Kamiya."

"Why should I believe you?" she demanded, even though something in his eyes made her believe he was telling her the truth.

"I swear on my sword," he said simply. The sunlight stripped his face of shadows.

Kaoru held his gaze for a moment longer, searching, and could not find a lie.

"…he's gone," she said finally. "He wasn't in my room when I woke up, and neither of us have seen him since last night."
Mr. Hiko frowned, brows drawing down like stormclouds.

"Do you know where he might be?"

Kaoru shook her head. "He doesn't know many places around here – really just the clinic, and the market. I was going to start there…"

"I can search the market, if you'll allow it. Although I don't think he'll be there." Mr. Hiko rested a hand on the hilt of his sword, uneasiness sparking in his eyes. And a certain helplessness, she thought; she knew that look too well, these days. "Is there anywhere you can think of that would mean something to him? A place where something important happened, or where he might feel safe?"

"Megumi lives at the clinic…” Kaoru bit her knuckle, uncertain. "He knows her, from – from when Kanryu had him. And she treated his wounds, after I found him."

"Where did you find him?"

"By the river, about a mile or two from here." Her eyes widened. "You don't think…?"

But it made a kind of horrible sense: that was where he'd gone before, when he'd been hurt beyond bearing, and that was where she'd found him. If he had any faith in her at all, then maybe…

"It's worth checking." he said briskly. "You, youngster – "

"Yahiko Myojin." Yahiko had crossed his arms and was glaring up at Mr. Hiko. "First disciple of the Kamiya Kasshin style."

"Stay here, in case he comes back."

"I don't take orders from you – "

"He's right, Yahiko." Yahiko looked about to protest; he subsided when Kaoru looked hard at him. "The clinic's on the way," she continued. "I'll look there afterwards. You check the market, Mr. Hiko. If he's not – if I don't find him, I'll get Sano. He might be able to help."

"Very well." Mr. Hiko turned towards the market. "I'll return," he called over his shoulder as he walked away.

"Yahiko, you wait here." Kaoru faced her student, not really surprised at the black anger building in his eyes

"You're gonna trust him and not me?" he spat, and she shook her head.

"I don't think Kenshin's anywhere near the market, and neither does Mr. Hiko," she said, crouching down until she was at eye-level. "It's just that he needs to do something – and if Kenshin does come back, someone he knows and trusts should be waiting. You understand?"

Yahiko looked away, jaw set like stone.

"…yeah. I'll wait here. But you hurry, okay?"

"I will." She squeezed his shoulder quickly and ran.

~*~
Sano woke up because he was cold. He was still tired – pleasantly tired, wonderfully tired from holding Megumi all night, from learning her skin and her sighs – but he was really, really damn cold. The persistent, creeping coolness and accompanying sense of wrong poked and prodded him out of sleep and made it impossible to sink back down again, no matter how hard he tried.

So he opened his eyes.

Megumi was gone.

He sat up with a jolt and looked around his tiny room, not entirely certain why. It wasn't like there was anywhere to hide. She was gone, and her clothes were gone, too. If not for the lingering trace of her scent – poppy and sharp medicine – and the faint warmth still remaining where she had lain next to him he might have thought he had only dreamed the night before.

But he hadn't dreamed it. There were other traces, too. His own lack of clothing, for one, and the pleasant lethargy that had suffused his bones until he’d opened his eyes to find her missing. The faint numbness in his arms from lying with her head on his bicep all night, and the vague ache where he’d had to contort his lanky frame to accommodate her in the smallness of the room.

It had happened and she had enjoyed it – at least, that’s what he remembered, and she'd been drinking last night, not him – and now she was gone.

It's alright. Go back to sleep. I won't be long.

The words drifted across his memory, all black silk and deep water and he pressed the heel of his hand hard against his forehead, furious with himself. Of course. Of course she'd leave. Why had he thought for a moment that she'd do differently, wary as she was? He should have realized – of course she'd try to pretend that nothing had happened.

Well, he damn well wasn't going to play along, not this time. She'd come to him: she had to know that he didn't want to cage or tame her. It hadn't been a dream and he wouldn't let it be a one-night stand, because he knew her, better than anyone thought, better than she wanted to admit he did. It hadn't been a one-time thing, whatever she might have told herself when she left. She wouldn't have trusted herself to him if she’d wanted that.

She'd be at the clinic, probably. It was a workday, and she was nothing if not dutiful. So he'd go to the clinic and – and talk, dammit, really talk. With her. About the things he’d wanted to say and hadn't said last night, overwhelmed by the feel of her, by the scent of her hair and the warm, secretive dark. And he'd convince her – somehow – because she didn't have anything to be afraid of and she knew it, deep down, or she never would have come to him in the first place. She just needed a little coaxing out from the underbrush.

With a sharp exhale and a determined look, he pulled himself together and went to find Megumi.

~*~

Sano sauntered alone as the neighborhood changed from rough to polished (never an abrupt transition, always a smooth downhill slide from one state of being to another, so subtle that you couldn't see what had happened till the boundary was far behind you), hands in his pockets, enjoying the sun. It was the first proper day of summer so far, clear and warm and bright, and even the crowded city air smelled somehow purer for it. Not a bad day to start on.

He was nearly at the clinic gates when Shinomori emerged from around a nearby corner and fell into step beside him, silent as the winter snow. Sano slowed his pace to match the spy's, sliding his eyes
over to assess him without looking fully at him.

"She will not be there."

Sano stopped.

"What d'you mean?" A slow unease unfolded in his gut.

Shinomori stopped with him, turning to face him so they stood at right angles. Sano followed, making the lines parallel. There was something almost like pity in the too-fine lines of Shinomori's face. The back of Sano's neck tingled.

"Miss Takani has..." A deep sigh like the blast of air from a new-opened tomb. "She received instructions from Kyoto two days ago."

"She didn't tell me." Sano's skin was tingling now, tight and anxious in the too-warm air as he tried to keep calm and not jump to any conclusions. It didn't necessarily mean anything.

Shinomori inclined his head by the merest fraction.

"No. She did not."

"What were the orders?"

"The negotiations have been completed and finalized," Shinomori said calmly. "The plan is underway once more, with certain adjustments. Takani will be operating from the inside; at the appointed time, she will weaken the estate's defenses to permit easier entry to our forces."

Sano didn't think; he couldn't, couldn't allow himself the time and the pain that thinking would bring. He grabbed Shinomori by the collar and slammed him against the wall surrounding the clinic, grinding his knuckles against Shinomori's collarbones.

"That was never the fucking plan!"

"New information necessitated a change in strategy," Shinomori said, and slammed his knee into Sano's gut. Sano dropped him and pulled back his fist; Shinomori ducked away, sliding out from between Sano and the wall. Sano's knuckles embedded themselves in the stone, and the crushing scrape of the crumbling rock digging into his skin forced a terrible clarity. He hissed, whirling to face Shinomori.

"What new information?"

Shinomori paced back, putting himself out of range, and Sano forced himself not to pursue.

"Kanryu has begun a new project." His eyes bored into Sano's, all cold glass and glacial fire. "On a scale unlike anything attempted before. Miss Takani was the only available asset capable of ensuring both the success of our mission and the failure of this new project."

"She's not a fucking asset," Sano wanted to spit, and swallowed hard instead.

"I didn't hear about any damn project," he snarled. Shinomori gave another slight, meaningless nod.

"She insisted."

"Who the fuck's in charge here, huh?" Sano demanded, fury igniting in his bones and whirling, building up behind his eyes in a terrible wave. "Since when do you fuckin' keep information from
"You are not capable of objectivity where Takani's safety is concerned." Shinomori's hands tensed. "It was a known factor. We compensated for it."

The wave broke, and everything was so simple here, where his anger ruled him.

"Compensate for this – " he growled, and rammed Shinomori. The spy was too graceful to go down clean; he grabbed hold of Sano's shirt and flipped them over halfway, landing with his forearm pressed against Sano's throat. Sano arched up and threw him off, springing up into a crouch. Shinomori glided back and away, out of range again.

"You are proving the accuracy of our assessment," he said, and his voice had real bite in it – more of an edge than Sano had ever heard coming from the man. Enough to give him pause.

Sano sucked in air, shuddering with rage, and made himself remember that they were on the same side: that Shinomori may be a cold fish and too damn practical for his own good but he wanted Kanryu's poison gone as much as any of them did, maybe more.

"So tell me about this damn project," he ground out between aching teeth.

And Shinomori did. He explained it as he did everything else – in short, cold words, dispassionate and analytical as he had been trained to be, so calmly that it took Sano a few moment to understand what he was really saying – what Kanryu was doing. What Megumi was risking herself to stop.

For a long moment after Shinomori was done, Sano could only stare.

"But… he can't fuckin' do that." He shook his head, heart racing. "That's impossible."

"Not any longer." Shinomori's eyes hadn't left his; now, though, they flicked away. "She is the only person capable of stopping him, now."

The words barely registered with Sano through the haze of rage and the salt-grief on the back of his tongue. He clenched his fists hard, only half-noticing the pop as his nails dug under his skin. Blood welled up between his fingers.

"There's another way. There's gotta be another way."

"There is no other – "

But Sano had already turned on his heel and started stalking towards the dojo and his one remaining ally, his helplessness ringing like a blow between his ears.

~*~

Kanryu kept her waiting for two hours. Megumi spent the time trying not to think, forcing herself to recite chemical formulas and diagnostic procedures instead of wondering when he would come for her, what he had planned, how much it would destroy her. She did not permit herself to remember last night, to dwell on Sano's strong hands and his rough voice panting incoherent admiration between groans of pleasure or the memories of her own nerves singing, of his mouth soft against her breast. It wouldn't do any good to remember.

So she recited her lessons to herself until her mind was clear, because that was the trick to surviving Kanryu. Anything might happens, so expect nothing, feel nothing. Bit by bit she allowed her body to recede until she was only an observer looking out from fragile skin. Hidden in the underbrush where
the hunter couldn't see.

He would have done better to meet her immediately, instead of giving her this time to lock herself away. Was that intentional, or had she changed enough to slide between his manipulations? And if so, could she use it? His pride had always been his weakness, and if he still thought he could control her when she had grown beyond the old dance then maybe she could turn that against him –

And maybe he had given her this time to make her think precisely that. There's no point in taking from someone with nothing left to lose.

She took a deep breath, lungs absorbing the stench of roses.

It didn't matter: she could not allow it to matter. There was no past or future in Kanryu's grip, only the terrible, shifting present. Only now. What would happen, would happen and she would endure it, hidden away safely inside the den behind her eyes.

At long last, the door to the small parlor swung open. The house-slave had escorted her to one of the more intimate rooms, done in shades of green with deep blue accents like the shadows on a forest floor. He'd always had exquisite taste.

She stood as the door opened, brushing back a strand of hair that had fallen in her eyes, and kept her gaze level as her eyes met his. Kanryu smiled warmly.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, dear doctor," he said, eating up the space between them with long, graceful strides. "I'll make it up to you."

He took her hands and kissed her, hard and deep, and she responded. It was important to him that she desire him: how many times had he whispered hotly that her body never lied? So she closed her eyes, arching into his caress, and did not think of Sano as Kanryu's hands tangled in her hair.

"There," he murmured as they parted. "That was worth the wait, wasn't it?"

She shuddered, cold at the raw lust in his voice, and laid her head against his shoulder in the hope that she could disguise it as desire. He chuckled and curled a finger under her chin, lifting her eyes to meet his. They searched her face, dark and narrow.

"Now, tell me truly – do your little friends have something planned? I know that you're fond of them, and I don't mind keeping them around to amuse you – but I really can't have any interference now, at this critical stage."

"No. They won't come after me." Long discipline kept her voice from cracking. He smiled benevolently down at her, stroking his fingers through her hair.

"And you're not lying to me, are you, my sweet one?" He pressed his forehead against hers, grinning. "I'll find out, you know."

"I know." It was hard – so hard – to make the words sound smooth when her throat was so thick with fear. She knew that her voice trembled a little as she said it. She also knew that he enjoyed it – as he would enjoy himself tonight, when he did his best to wrest the truth from behind her sighs and sobs and desperate pleading.

"Well, then." His smile deepened. "I suppose our faithful hound delivered my letter?"

"Yes." She swallowed. "You need to replenish the stockpile." So he'd crooked his fingers at her, convinced that she would come running, certain of his unbreakable hold on her. He'd said as much in
the letter Aoshi had included in the report that had started her on this path: that he'd been glad to let her have her head, happy that she was happy with her 'charitable works,' but the time for play was done and she was needed. Menace and threat wrapped around every syllable, in mildly-phrased inquiries after the health of Doctor Oguni and his family…

She'd known that Kanryu was perfectly aware of where she was and what she was doing. He simply didn't consider the rebels a threat, unaware that his spy in the enemy's camp had turned against him and was feeding him falsehoods to keep him happily complacent. That didn't make it any less terrifying. Shinomori had to tell him truths to make sure that he'd swallow the lies, and so Kanryu knew every tender spot, every name to drop to make his message clear. *Return to me, or I will destroy them all…*

"And did he tell you why?" His eyes were fever-bright, his face still too close to hers – no, she couldn't think that way, not anymore. She'd learned early on that she had no right to hold him at arm's length; she wasn't allowed to have a _too-close_ where he was concerned. Her body was his, and he would do with it as he pleased.

"Some new project," she murmured, refusing to feel anything as arm curled around her waist, as his hand stroked hard across her hipbone, just shy of bruising. "He didn't say what."

Kanryu hummed deep in his chest, turning and sliding his arm from around her waist. She wrapped her arm around his, understanding the signal, and let him escort her from the parlor.

"Come along to your workshop and see the improvements I've made. I'll explain it to you on the way."

~*~

Kanryu kept her arm trapped in his as they walked through the grounds, pressing her close against his side. The roses were brilliant under the clear summer sunlight and their smell was inescapable, that sweet-rot that haunted even her gentlest dreams. He told her about the project as they strolled, stroking his thumb back and forth across her skin where he kept his hand curled over hers. It was distracting; he was still wearing gloves. Back and forth, back and forth, the cloth fibers catching against her skin.

"You know, of course, that I've long admired the efficiency of Western industry," was how he started. "They're barbarians, of course, with little real culture to speak of, but they are tremendously good at _making_ things. You'll recall that some years ago I sent a few of my junior officers overseas to study their methods?"

Megumi nodded, keeping her eyes fixed attentively on his. She didn't dare look away; to deviate from her assigned role was to invite disaster. It was almost childlike, the way he sought her approval for every new endeavor – except that if she failed to respond, to encourage and support or blanch in horror and beg him to reconsider, then his happy smile would twist like burning tinder and he would _make_ her react. One way or another.

"Well, between what they learned in Europe and my own considerable talents, I found several ways in which the current conditioning process can be improved. To the point where, once the new system is implemented, I believe I can double production every year. Within a decade I should be able to supply the whole country with slaves. Imagine it!" He threw his arm out grandly, as if to sweep the nation into his grasp. "Every slave conditioned and trained according to my methods. Escape and rebellion will be a thing of the past – not to mention, I'll have a full monopoly on the industry. I'll be able to manufacture them so cheaply that no one will want to risk an unconditioned slave, not when mine are so affordable. Then I can buy up the last few families that oppose me for dirt cheap."
He laughed and Megumi shuddered, swallowing bile. She'd known his plans; they were in the report, cold and detailed and terribly precise, all numbers and hard data. But it was different to hear it spoken aloud. To see the joy in his eyes and hear the pride in his voice as he extolled the virtues of his method – of a country full of blank-eyed automatons, men and women trapped forever in a hell not of their own making, unable to even conceive of escape.

"Which is, of course, why I needed my dear doctor to return to me," he said, drawing her even closer to him, so she was forced to let him support her as they went down the stairs to the pens and her laboratory. "I'll need more of the drug soon, and you need to find a way to keep up with the demand – you have some time to come up with it, and I'll give you the reports from Europe. But we can't keep doing it one handmade batch at a time any longer. Nor do I want anyone else learning how it's done. So I'll need you to break things down to their component parts, as it were… there's a concept I think you should look at first, I've taken to calling it an assembly line…"

The rest was a blur. He took her to her laboratory, newly refurbished, and showed her the reports. Helped her understand them. Talked through the new method with her. She listened numbly, nodding and repeating his points, letting her practiced mask hold his attention as she wept without shedding a tear.

~*~

Kaoru knew by the strain in her legs and the breath wheezing out of her lungs that she was running as fast as she could, and yet it seemed she wasn't running fast enough. Like a nightmare: her legs were lead, and the ground was soft muck pulling her in, and no matter how hard she fought the distance she was trying to cover never seemed to close. She flew past her neighbors, knowing that she must look a sight – hair whipping in the breeze, face reddened with exertion, eyes panicked and wide – but she didn't dare stop to speak to any of them even as they called after her, concerned. Her pulse hammered in her head, behind her ribs, throbbing like an open wound.

The path that she'd been taking home from the Maekawa's that day was a small one, rarely used except to fetch water or wash clothes. It ran between the river and the tall stone walls of the houses on the outer edge of her neighborhood, and dozens of small docks poked warily out into the rushing water from the river's edge. Only a few of them had land underneath, though – and the one where she'd found Kenshin had had a young dogwood tree growing beside it, its roots thrusting into the place where the wooden planks met the earth. The dock itself had been old and gnarled with weather and disuse, its wood cracked and half-rotted through.

She slowed her pace a little as she went along the riverbank, searching for the dogwood tree. If she couldn't find it – if she'd remembered wrong – then she'd just have to start over again, and check under every dock between here and the Maekawa dojo…

There. A young tree, not a dogwood, some other kind, but it was the only dock with a tree beside it that she could see. And the dock was old, as she remembered it being, reaching out with arthritic fingers over a patch of muddy earth.

"Kenshin – " she gasped, and scrambled down the low stone wall that kept the river from flooding the path. She had been cautious, the first time: now she fell to her knees without a thought for the mud staining her clothes. Because she hadn't known what she would find, that day, and now she did; he was more important than her kimono.

She peered under the dock, blinking as her eyes worked to adjust to the cool shadows after the bright sunlight.

He was there. She could see him clearly, this time, curled tight around himself and pressed against
the stone wall, tense and still as a cornered cat.

"Kenshin!"

His shoulders heaved, once; he made a sound like a bitten-back sob. She crawled under the dock, closer to him, and started to reach out.

"Kenshin, it's me…" Her hand touched his shoulder, lightly.

A blur of brown cloth and red hair and then he was on her, clinging to her as he howled incoherently into her shoulder, weeping. She wrapped her arms around him out of pure instinct, holding him tight and close as his hands fisted in the cloth covering her shoulderblades, as his mouth moved wordlessly against her collar and his tears fell hot against her skin. He burrowed against her and she held him, helplessly, as he sobbed.

The worst of the storm held him for only a few moments: then he calmed, curling up in her lap and shuddering as his breath wracked through him like waves surging against the shore. He never loosened his grip on her, though; if anything he clenched his hands tighter with each wild burst of emotion, until she felt like her ribs would crack if he held her any tighter.

She smoothed her hands down his spine, murmuring nonsense as he wept, and pressed her cheek against the top of his head where it was buried in the crook of her neck. He was shaking, trembling against her like a leaf half-ready to fall and she clung to him with all her strength, trying to shield him from the wind. Time lost meaning: it was as though they had always been here, under this ancient dock on this barely-trod path, clinging to each other like children in the cold mud. As though they had never left.

That she was no longer aware of time passing didn't mean it had stopped, though, and eventually his shaking eased into an eerie stillness. The eye of the storm, she thought vaguely, and breathed deep in relief as his iron grip on her loosened. Her ribs creaked with the breath; he'd held her so tightly that she'd had to gasp air in shallow pants.

He murmured something – words, this time, but so low she could barely hear them – and she bent her head closer to his to listen.

"…knew… Miss Kaoru… find m – find this – find – "

"Yes," she said, heart aching as he struggled for words. "Always. Always."

And it was a stupid thing to promise, a stupid, selfish thing to think – that he was hers and she would always find him, no matter what happened, would never stop searching until she did. Because he wasn't hers. He couldn't be. He hadn't agreed to this, to any of it. Hadn't chosen to join her family or her life. Everything had been forced on him, even her good intentions and she would not pretend that the ends justified the means.

But here, in this strange silence with the sunlight slanting down like lances through the wooden boards above, none of that seemed to matter. All that she cared about was the man in her arms, the man who trusted her like a child (because he has no choice, something in her wailed, no more choice than any child), who had believed that she would find him and bring him home.

She squeezed her eyes shut against her tears and hugged him tight.

"Miss Kaoru." His voice was ragged and small, yet somehow surer than it had ever been: a flag bleached white, all design faded, nonetheless still holding itself together against the storm. Still proclaiming itself to the world.
"Yes, Kenshin?"

"…this worth – this one – remembers. I. Remember. Everything."

"Okay," she murmured, her hand solid on his back as he leaned into her shoulder. "Okay."

"Tell. Want… to tell. Please…"

"You can," she promised, throat dry. It was hurting him to speak this way, without protocol and programmed scripts to guide him; she could see it in the taunt lines of his face, feel it in the tensing muscles between his shoulderblades. "You can tell us everything. We'll listen. I promise."

He sighed, then, like a door closing.

"Home?"

"Yes." Too many feelings: her throat was thick with them, scattered and inarticulate, changing form before she could fully grasp them. "Let's go home."

They crept out together from under the dock like newborns from a den, smeared with mud and tears and blinking in the bright sunlight. Kenshin swayed for a moment on his knees as she stood, as if some terrible weight had descended on him as he emerged. She reached out her hand, palm up.

"We can't stay here forever, you know." Echoes: she'd said the same thing to him almost two months ago, when he'd been only a sodden, nameless slave, wounded and bleeding and needing her help. "It's time to leave."

Kenshin looked up at her, eyes wide and bright as flowers. Her heart beat, slow and suspended.

Then he took her hand and stood.
The long walk home was an eerie mirror of their first meeting: Kenshin leaning heavy against Kaoru's side, wounded – not in body, this time, but heart and mind – and her own heart beating jackrabbit fast against her ribs. The few neighbors that they passed along the way glanced at them quizzically, and she wondered what they must see as Kenshin hid his face against her. Well, let them look. Everyone knew by now that she'd taken on a troubled slave, everyone knew that her soft heart had given her another useless dependent. Let them draw their own conclusions.

Mr. Hiko was waiting outside the gates, Yahiko lounging a little too far away to be friendly, dark-eyed and sullen. They both straightened as the two of them approached, and Kaoru thought that she saw relief widen Mr. Hiko's eyes before he covered the remaining ground between them in two quick strides.

"Where was he?"

Kenshin started at the sound of his former teacher's voice.

"By the river." Then she called out. "Yahiko, go to the clinic and get Megumi, he might be in shock –"

"No point in that, missy."

Kaoru turned her head to see Sano coming towards them. He wasn't running, as he sometimes did, or sauntering like usual – just walking, deliberate and calm, and his eyes were very cold.

"Sano?" She moved, reflexively, to stand between him and Kenshin. "Why do you say that?"

"She's gone." He stopped, then, right in front of her, and didn't seem to see Kenshin or Mr. Hiko. Or Yahiko. Or even her, not really: his eyes bored through her as if she was only half-real, or he had become too real, too sharp and potent for the world to bear. Like a thunderstorm just before it breaks. "Megumi's gone."

"Gone? Gone where?" She felt Mr. Hiko shift positions behind her, subtle and smooth as a breeze, coming around her side to flank Sano and keep Kenshin defended. "What are you talking about?"

"She's gone back to that shit." Sano spat. "To that motherfucker Kanryu."

"What?" Kaoru's throat seized halfway through the word, sending her voice spiraling up until it cracked. "How – ?"

"How the fuck do you think?" he snapped, the first crack of thunder in the gathering storm. "On her own two feet! 'Cause she's got some kinda fucking delusion – "
"Not here." Mr. Hiko's voice followed like the thunder. "Inside the gate, idiot, unless you want the whole neighborhood to know."

Sano curled his li, looking for a moment as though he might hit Mr. Hiko on general principle. Then he shoved his hands in his pockets and shook his head once, violently, like he was trying to clear something out.

"Fine." He walked towards the gate, leaning back in his stride but too stiff and precise for it to be the casual stroll he wanted it to be. "Inside. Then we'll talk business."

Only then, with Sano's rage tamped down, did Kaoru risk a glance at Yahiko. He was standing too still, his hands fisted at his sides as he watched the interplay between his teacher, his idol, and the interloper. He opened his mouth to say something as Kaoru reached him and she shook her head, grief clanging hard inside her.

"No, Yahiko. Inside the house."

"But – "

And part of her wanted him to stay. He had a stake in this, after all – her safety and his home. But there were so few people left that she could protect.

"Just do this for me. Please?"

Yahiko looked away, scowling.

She took Kenshin gently by the hand, fading out of his grip. He was tight as a wire about to break, every muscle standing out hard under his skin, and he was breathing like a wounded thing.

"Kenshin, can you…?" The question died on her lips when he raised his head and she met his eyes. His face was torn, his gaze wild and grieving: there was a scream ripping the space behind his too-bright eyes and she couldn't ask him to leave her. Not when he seemed so close to collapse.

"So he gets to stay, but I don't?" Yahiko crossed his arms.

"It doesn't matter." Sano snarled out the words like a curse. "It's gonna be over in a day or two, missy – let the kid stay."

"What do you mean, over?" Kaoru snapped, stepping on front of her two charges. "What's going on?"

"Megumi's gone to Kanryu's." Sano was smiling but there was no mirth in it, only a dark fury that sat uneasily on his face. When he spoke – in simple, easy sentences, like he was talking to a child – there was poison on his tongue. "She's going to set explosives. When they go off, we attack. Everyone," and he threw out his arms, grinning like a madman, "the whole fucking movement. Yay, us! It'll be a party. Wanna come?"

"I – I don't understand." Except that Kaoru did understand, because Sano had been waiting for this day as much as anyone, so only one thing could have turned it so bitter in his hands. "You don't mean that she's going to…?"

"Exactly." He let his arms drop, his face collapsing back into a dark glare. "Wasn't part of the plan, but Shinomori says it's gotta be done, so I guess that means we have to do it, right? I mean, I'm just the big dumb guy who does all the dangerous shit – what the fuck do I know? Guess the captain didn't really leave me in charge, I must'a misunderstood. Dumbass that I am. Which is why people
get to go makin' suicide runs behind my fucking back!" Those last few words tore from his throat like a battle cry, anguish and rage twining so close that they became one thing.

Kaoru's hand came to her mouth in shock. She felt the press of her fingers against her lips as if she was someone else, her body separated from her by a too-tight sheet of paper.

"But... why?" she managed, certain that she'd missed something. Because Megumi wouldn't – not without reason – she couldn't! She had more to live for than any of them: for revenge, and redemption, and the far-off day when Kanryu would be ended and she could finally live free...

Sano looked away.

"...Kanryu's got somethin' cookin'," he said, after a pause that was almost too long. "Somethin' about – well, he sent a bunch of folks over to the slave countries in Europe a while ago and 'pparently they came back all full of ideas 'bout how to make the – that thing he does," a brief nod in Kenshin's direction, "easier. So he can make, like a factory or something. For slaves. And they'd all be like – like Kenshin is."

Kenshin's breath hitched, almost sobbing, and that alone told Kaoru that she hadn't dreamed the words: she could barely process them, or what they meant. Mr. Hiko sucked in a sharp breath.

"That's impossible," he snapped. "Your sources must be wrong."

"I am not wrong." The gate slammed shut behind Aoshi. He looked scuffed, like he'd fallen somewhere and not had time to put himself back together. "If necessary, I can produce duplicates of the relevant internal documents."

"The information came from you?" Mr. Hiko's face was pale.

Aoshi nodded. Mr. Hiko's hands clenched tight at his sides for a single moment: then they sprang open, tense, his fingers curved like claws.

"I see." His chest expanded in a deep breath and he eyed Sano carefully. "Then your Ms. Takani's fears are not overstated."

"Does it fucking matter?" Sano exploded, starting forward with his eyes fixed on Aoshi. "We gotta go after her before she gets herself killed!"

"No."

Kaoru wondered, for a moment, why everyone had turned to stare at her, and why Sano's eyes seemed so betrayed. Then she realized that she had spoken, as if she had the right to – she was the one who had said no, and they had heard and listened.

"No," she said again, her whole being pulsing with her frantic heart, and she didn't know where these words were coming from but they rang with truth, filled her like the echoes of a temple bell. "We have to wait."

"The fuck?" Sano turned on her in a rage and Kaoru stood her ground, queerly unafraid. It was the same feeling she'd had before, when the Hiruma brothers had come to try and tear her world apart: like cool rain pouring over her, a quiet, slow certainty. The world seemed so very simple, and she couldn't quite say why – she only knew that it was.

"Mr. Shinomori," she said, taking a step forward. "The attack – it's been planned for the entire movement? Across the country?"
He nodded.

"So if we go early, it'll throw everyone off..." Her eyes closed for a moment, her heart breaking, for Sano, for Megumi – brave Megumi, who had walked willingly into that stone monster's jaws, like a heroine out of legend. "And Megumi – what she's doing in there, it will help the attack here in Edo? And it'll stop that – the project?"

"Yes," Aoshi said simply. "Ms. Takani is also falsifying her notes, so that the instructions to be sent to Kanryu's other facilities will be inaccurate. The project will fail."

"We have to wait," she said, turning to face Sano and feeling somehow taller. "She's risking everything for this – to give us this chance. We may never get one like it again! And she's chosen – chosen to do this. I'm sorry, Sano." It hurt more than she'd ever thought it would, to see herself becoming a traitor in his eyes. "I'm sorry. We have to wait."

Edo was the keystone. Kaoru knew it – Sano knew it, even if he had forgotten in the depths of his fury. If Edo fell, if the shōgun was driven from his seat, if Kanryu's estate was destroyed and the man himself taken off the board, and this project stopped a-borning…

"She was your friend," Sano whispered, his voice torn with shock. "Your fucking friend!"

"She is my friend." Kaoru didn't raise her voice: to do so would have seemed a blasphemy. "So I won't let her sacrifice be for nothing. She's chosen this, Sano – " and her voice failed her, here, although the words rang clear in her mind: and I have seen in ways I never dreamed possible how important that is, that power to choose, and the horror that follows when it is taken away. " – she's chosen."

Sano stared at her. His throat worked, his adam's apple bobbing fast like he was trying to swallow something that had lodged there, choking him. Like he could barely breathe. And the rage, the terrible black blood-rage was still bright in his eyes but it wasn't meant for her – and behind it, growing stronger, was a grief far more profound than his fury.

"...yeah," he said finally. "Yeah." He swiped at his nose, trying to sneer and failing. "I guess she did."

He turned and stalked away, hand thrust in his pockets and his shaggy head bowed with an unseen weight.

"Where are you going?" Kaoru asked, too hollow for tears.

"To Katsu's," he said, not looking over his shoulder. "I'll wait there. Like you said." A pause. "Boss."

There was a certain acid in his tone. Aoshi stood very still as Sano passed by, then nodded to Kaoru. There might have been respect in his cold green eyes.

"I will return tomorrow with instructions for the assault," he said calmly. "Please use this time to prepare yourself."

"I – I will." She returned his nod, still reeling. "Thank you."

He bowed his farewell and left. Kaoru watched him go.

It was Yahiko who broke the silence.
"So that's all you were hiding?" His black eyes were fierce. "Y'coulda just told me!"

"I – " Kaoru swallowed. "I wanted to protect you."

"Well, fine," he said, crossing his arms. "But that didn't mean you had to keep me in the dark! I mean – " He broke off there, scowling, and something too old for his years flitted across his face as he looked into hers. "…nevermind."

He rubbed the back of his neck and looked away.

"Miss Kaoru." Kenshin's voice, still small and cracked with weeping but more urgent than she had ever heard it. "Miss Kaoru, please."

"What is it, Kenshin?" She saw that he was shaking – saw his hands clenched hard at his sides and how his eyes were hidden behind his bangs. "What's wrong?"

"Please," he said again, something ragged tearing at the undertones. His breath hitched. "Go – to – tomorrow –"

He kept trying to speak, to form words that either weren't there or refused to come: choked consonants and half-formed vowels, and she reached out to cradle him as she went to his side.

"It's all right," she started to say. He flinched away from her, throwing out his hands to ward her off.

"No!" It shot from his throat like he'd been punched in the gut. Kaoru froze, hand still outstretched, as he raised his head and she saw the wildness in his eyes.

"No," he said again, shaking his head wildly. "No, can't – have to – tomorrow. Go. Have to –"

"Go?" It was hard to think past the buzzing in her ears and the race of blood through her too-narrow veins. She had wanted this, after all, wanted him to stop relying on her, to stand on his own – and yet it hurt, hurt like waking up that first morning to the knowledge that her father would never be there again. Empty and unreal.

And despite how much she'd hoped, there was a part of her that wailed in agony at his rejection, insisting that she'd lost something she'd never had the right to in the first place. She quashed it ruthlessly.

"But I have to go," she said, through numb lips. "At least to help with the wounded – I can't turn back now –"

Another violent shake of his head.

"No – this one – go. Tomorrow. With – please." His voice was high and strained. Kaoru's heart froze.

"You… want to…?" Her eyes were wide, unblinking; she felt the edges drying as she stared and could not bring herself to rub them moist again. Kenshin nodded, fists clenching and unclenching in his muddy clothes.

"Yes," he said, and there a hurricane of feeling poured into that one word.

"You can't!" she cried, oblivious to her surroundings. It didn't matter that Mr. Hiko was still hovering nearby, or that Yahiko was staring at them both with too-dark eyes, hand frozen at his neck.

"You can't." Her throat was dry, dry and aching. "It's too dangerous – I can't let you –"
"Please." Kenshin collapsed on his knees and she wanted to vomit. He was begging her, more passion and feeling in his broken voice than she had ever heard from him before. "Please, Miss Kaoru, please – "

"No." Kaoru was shaking her head now, as wildly as he had, backing up with her arms defensive and high, as if she could block out the horror of him on his knees before her. "No, no I can't – "

And she knew that it was wrong, after what he'd just done, what he was doing – seeking out his memories, arguing with her – that it was an insult to his courage and his strength to balk now. That she had been waiting for this, for him to want again, to choose of his own free will. But all she could see was his lean body lying broken on some bloody battlefield, his eyes clouded and unseeing. All she could think of was what if – what if Kanryu found him in the melee, found him and forced his will upon him, what if his spirit failed and he fell back into darkness –

"I can't!" Her voice broke. "Kenshin, I can't – "

Kenshin's face was pale and strained with the effort of speaking – of arguing with her, however incoherently. He was making those strange, helpless noises again, trying to speak words that he didn't know or couldn't form.

"Sir." He looked past her, to where Mr. Hiko loomed like a mountain peak. "Sir – tell – please." His shoulders heaved as he gasped for breath, every line of his face standing out in sharp relief around his wild, bright eyes. "Please."

His former teacher stepped forward, and then – unexpectedly – knelt on one knee, eye-to-eye with his wayward student. "Tell her what, Kenshin?"

Mr. Hiko's voice was very gentle. It terrified her. Kenshin licked his lips, taking a shuddering breath and never breaking eye contact with Mr. Hiko, staring at him with determination and terrible hope.

"T – Tomoe. Tell. Please. Can't – "

The older man grew very still. The world seemed to follow with him. Only Kenshin's harsh breathing punctuated the silence; that, and Kaoru's muffled, choking sobs.

"…very well," he said at last. Kaoru thought that she heard his voice catch, just for a moment.

"Kamiya," he said, rising to his feet. "Go inside. You, too, Kenshin. This is a long story; we may as well sit down for it. And you, boy – " he turned to Yahiko, who glared at him and shifted into a firmer stance. Mr. Hiko sighed.

"Must we?"

"Nobody's cuttin' me out again." Yahiko raised his chin. "Anyway, Kenshin's family."

Mr. Hiko snorted. "I don't have the time to argue with you, anyway. Inside, then, all of you." He seemed to sigh. "I don't want to have to repeat myself."

~*~

The story went like this:

Hiko had lived, at the time, in a small hut high on a mountain that held little interest for anyone. A village had nestled at its foot, just large enough to draw a decent amount of trade. There were things, after all, that nature couldn't provide – like a decent jug of sake. So Hiko sold his pottery through the
Kiyosato family, who had presided over the village since the rise of the Tokugawa. It was a decent arrangement, as long as no one pointed out that the Kiyosato were acting as merchants – samurai pride insisted that they think of themselves as his patrons.

Hiko had understood; he had been samurai, once, before he'd lost his name.

After he'd adopted Kenshin, he'd starting taking the boy with him on his monthly trips down the mountain. At first it was because the boy was still too rattled and shy to be left alone, and later it had simply become habit. So when the eldest daughter of the Yukishiro family, a girl named Tomoe, had come to stay with her then-fiancé's family in advance of the wedding – some imperious nonsense from her future mother-in-law, concerned because the girl had no mother to teach her 'womanly arts' – Kenshin had met her, and…

Mr. Hiko stopped there, glancing over to where Kenshin knelt at right angles to himself and Kaoru. Kaoru was facing Mr. Hiko, and she followed his gaze to Kenshin's hands, clenched so tightly in the cloth over his thighs that the knuckles were stone-white.

"...Sorry," he whispered, in a voice like the child he had been. "Sorry. I'm sorry —"

"It's all right," Kaoru said, heart aching, and didn't quite dare to reach for him – not after his reaction earlier. "You didn't do anything wrong. You didn't."

Kenshin only bowed his head, silent.

Yahiko – angled between herself and Kenshin – looked as though he already had an idea how the story would end.

"May I continue?" Mr. Hiko asked. There was no sarcasm in his voice. Kenshin nodded, barely, and Mr. Hiko picked up the thread again, a little more slowly this time.

The Kiyosatos' son, Akira – Tomoe's betrothed – had fallen ill. Some strange, possibly western disease that the doctor didn't know how to treat, that left him in almost too much pain to think although he wasn't wounded. His parents had gone looking for a cure for their suffering son, and found the promise of it in Kanryu.

"Western medicine," Mr. Hiko said. "More advanced than our own. He promised to pay for the boy's treatment, if…" And he looked at Kenshin again.

"Didn't know," Kenshin insisted, strained. "Lied." He was trembling like a leaf, hard enough that Kaoru thought he might fall to pieces.

"Yes," Mr. Hiko agreed. "They didn't tell the girl – only told her that Kenshin's assistance could help cure their son, her fiancé, and asked her to convince him to lend his aid. Begged her, as their future daughter-in-law. She did. We argued over it, he and I – " Mr. Hiko cut himself off again, closing his eyes for a brief moment.

"It wasn't the girl's fault," he said, as though it hurt to admit it. "The boy was her fiancé. His parents lied to her. Lied to them both."

Kenshin had left his master, and Hiko had let him go. He'd gone down the mountain, met with Akira's parents. They'd thanked him, for his kindness. For being willing to lend his services to their friend, to pay the debt for their son's treatment.

Lies. All of it. Kenshin had gone to meet who he thought was the man he would do a favor for, one
that would clear the Kiyosatos' ledger. He'd been met with an ambush – and Tomoe had been there, although she wasn't meant to be. She'd overheard the Kiyosatos talking a little while after Kenshin had left, realized what had happened and run to warn him –

Kenshin keened, low and aching.

"I don't know precisely what happened," Mr. Hiko said, quietly. The sunlight filtering from the garden was too bright; it made the scene seem unreal, angles and lines standing out too sharply against the deep shadows. "I wasn't there –"

"My fault." Kenshin was whispering again. "Couldn't stop – couldn't protect –"

"No, Kenshin!" Kaoru nearly did go to him, then, and only barely caught herself. "It's not – it's Kanryu's fault, not yours, there wasn't anything you could have done –"

"My fault," he held, clinging to it like a drowning man. "Mine. Have to – fix – have to –"

There was something there, struggling under the surface. She could almost see the shape of it, almost give it a name. But not quite: or maybe it was only that what she saw outlined there was too horrible to bear.

Yahiko interrupted, frowning.

"But why did Kanryu want Kenshin?"

"He was looking for test subjects," Mr. Hiko said, clipped and precise, and stared hard at the space just over Kaoru's head. "The Kiyosatos' description led him to believe that Kenshin would – be a better subject than his previous ones."

Yahiko swallowed.

"So they sold him out," he said, voice hot. "Bastards."

She thought that they said more, but their voices were fading and falling away as Kaoru looked at Kenshin – sitting huddled in on himself, shaking and bent under a weight that he could just barely carry. My fault. His hoarse whisper echoed, desperate and grieving. My fault.

"Kenshin…"

He looked up at her, and his bright eyes weren't filled with tears but she could see them anyway, hiding in the dark corners. Megumi had done it too, all those weeks ago. Wept without shedding a single tear.

"It's all right," she told him, "I understand. I –"

Her throat closed as she thought of him, of the little boy he'd been. Barely older than Yahiko. Of the girl he'd loved, and her loyalty to her future family. The loyalty they'd used, betrayed. To save their son's life. She thought of the girl whose face she didn't know running, crying out a warning, and the crack of gunfire or slice of a blade (which one had it been, she wondered) and Kenshin screaming as the blood ran clear and stained the earth below.

"I'll go with you," she said, into the silence that had fallen while she'd stared through the years. "We'll go. Together. If you want. You don't – you don't have to do this alone."

He sucked in a long, shuddering breath and let it out one long pant like an exhausted man.
Then he bowed. A clumsy, jittery bow, not the smooth elegance she was used to and she thought, for no real reason, that it was the first time he had bowed to her.

Because it seemed proper, she bowed back.

"Thank you," he said, and Kaoru did not shame his courage with her tears.

~*~

Kenshin calmed a little after that, although when Kaoru looked closely she could still see a faint tremor in his hands. She supposed that he must feel as she did – restless and impatient, knowing that there was nothing more to be done for the moment but nonetheless feeling the need to do something. At least he had his garden; she thought, again, about offering to help him but decided against it. The garden was his, and he hadn't invited her to share it. That mattered, in some obscure way.

Yahiko had left shortly afterwards, focus and intent written in every line of his face. She'd stopped him halfway to the gate, a sudden fear lurching up her throat.

"Yahiko, where are you going?"

"Out," he said, leaning back with his hands in his pockets and looking, for a moment, so much like Sano that her heart ached. "I gotta get something done for tomorrow."

"Yahiko," she started to say, "I know how much you want to help, but – "

He shook his head.

"Nah. This isn't anything like that. It's something else. You'll see." Then he cocked his head to one side, as if a something had suddenly occurred to him – though she guessed by the thoughtful gleam in his eyes that it wasn't that sudden an idea. "Hey, can I stop by the clinic and ask Dr. Oguni about helping out, though? He's probably gonna be doing first aid, stuff like that. It'll be safe enough, right?"

She couldn't deny the logic. Dr. Oguni wouldn't be involved in the actual conflict, old man that he was, but he would be in charge of the support efforts. And it was pointless to tell Yahiko not to get involved, as if that was any way to guarantee his safety in the coming battle. It could well consume all of Edo before it was over.

It was the best solution. Certainly more practical than hogtying her student and shipping him to Sapporo, which was the only option she could think of.

"All right." Kaoru nodded. "Only if Dr. Oguni agrees that it's a good idea, though."

"Sure thing." He grinned reassuringly up at her. "I learn fast, remember?"

"Go on, then. And be back before dark!" she called after him as he took off. He waved back at her, vanishing down the road.

Mr. Hiko was standing by the front porch, sliding on his sandals. The day was still clear and too eerily bright for what was coming. The sun stood at its highest point, beating down like a warm embrace.

"You're leaving?" Kaoru had wanted nothing more than to see the back of him two days ago. Now, though… his eyes had been strange, as he told Kenshin's story. Older than his face: almost haunted. He'd kept glancing over at Kenshin, looking for confirmation and falling silent if it seemed Kenshin
was about to say something, anything, even if it was just a one of those terrible, hollow sounds like he'd forgotten how to speak.

"I hardly think my presence here will be productive," he said, adjusting his sword in his belt. "And I, too, have something that I should do in the time we have remaining. I'll return tomorrow evening, if that's acceptable."

"It isn't as though I could stop you," she pointed out, unable to keep a certain wry amusement from her voice. He looked up, suddenly serious.

"Let's not test that theory, hmm?" The corner of his mouth tilted briefly upwards. "Instructor."

She stared at him, bewildered. The word sounded alien, somehow, although he wasn't being rude. But she'd never expected to hear it from him, from this strange, hard man who'd treated Kenshin's pain like a personal failing.

"Or do you prefer 'assistant master'?" he continued, walking towards the gate.

"Instructor is fine," she said automatically, and just barely stopped herself from asking why. He seemed to hear anyway.

"The sword that protects…" He paused, then, by the lintel. "I can't say that I believe your school's philosophy, but I have to admit you wear it well. Tomorrow evening, then?"

Kaoru nodded, speechless. With a polite bow, he left.

With everyone gone except Kenshin, and Kenshin hard at work on his garden, tearing up the remaining weeds with frantic intensity, Kaoru had nothing to do. So she went to the dojo: it was a warm enough day, finally, to train with the doors open, and the training hall was near enough to the garden patch that she could keep an eye on Kenshin. He didn't seem to notice, absorbed in his labor.

She heard Yahiko come home in the early evening and went to greet him. Kenshin only raised his head, briefly, before tightening his grip on a stubborn plant and working it back and forth, digging at the roots.

Her student was carrying a long, narrow package and a stack of takeout from the Akabeko. The one he held back; the other he offered to her with a diffident shrug.

"Seemed like this'd be easier, you know?"

"…you're right," Kaoru said, and wiped a bead of sweat away before it could sting her eyes. "Can you take it inside? I should rinse off and change." She couldn't help eyeing the package, confused and slightly concerned – it was long enough to be a lot of things, but what it mostly looked like was a sword.

She thought about asking him, about making a fuss, but she was so tired and anyway, he knew better.

"Sure," Yahiko said, and trudged off to the kitchen.

She stopped by the garden on her way to the bathouse.

"Kenshin?"

He looked up; seeing her, he sat back on his heels. His fingers were black with earth. Sweat had
plastered a few strands of hair to his skin and there was a stunned, harrowed look in his eyes, like a man fighting to stay about the water.

"It's dinnertime," she said, not entirely certain where things stood. "Yahiko brought us takeout from the Akabeko, so you don't have to do anything, but you really should eat something. Okay?"

Kenshin stared at her for a long moment, as though he'd forgotten something. His throat worked.

"...yes, Miss Kaoru," he said finally, and stood with too much careful grace.

Yahiko's mysterious package had disappeared by the time Kaoru made it inside, shivering slightly from the cold well-water. Kenshin was eating in the kitchen, like he always did, but Yahiko had pulled the table up to the very edge of the raised dining-room floor so that he was almost sitting with them. And it was Yahiko who kept the conversation going, talking about nothing particularly important – neighborhood gossip, and his job, and the festival at the end of the month. It was soothing. Almost normal.

But not quite.

Yahiko offered to deal with the dishes and lock up for the evening.

"You've seemed kinda tired, lately," he said quietly, gathering up the plates. "You should get some extra rest before tomorrow, and all that."

It was the only reference he'd made all evening to what was coming.

"About that..." she started to say, and paused. "About that. Did you speak with Dr. Oguni?"

"Yeah. He says it should be fine – I'll be working at the clinic and stuff. So don't worry, okay?"

The look he gave her was so serious that her throat was suddenly full of things she knew better than to say: he already knew them. There was an echo of manhood in his straight back as he carried the dishes away.

"Alright, then," Kaoru said, feeling the closest to a smile that she had in days. "I'll go to bed."

"See you in the morning," he called in from the kitchen. Kaoru stood, heading for her bedroom.

After a moment of hesitation – she sensed it but didn't dare look back over her shoulder, in case she confused him into obeying when he didn't want to – Kenshin followed her.

He waited patiently in the hallway until she called him in and stood for a moment on the balls of his feet, as if waiting for something. Normally he went directly for his small space behind the screen. The moment was so brief that she didn't realize what had happened until it was over, and as soon as he didn't get – whatever it was he'd been expecting – he was away and settling behind his screen, silent as a ghost. It was still light out, though it was growing darker; light enough that Kaoru didn't bother with a lamp. Instead, she pulled the covers over her head and closed her eyes.

She didn't sleep. Neither did she lie awake. She drifted, instead, in a strange twilight where her body felt not quite itself, her mind racing while her exhausted corpse sank into the futon, overburdened by its own ponderous weight. Her thoughts were aimless and unfocused, flowing from sharp rocks like grasping fingers to blood on her tongue to the scent of roses and the strange gasping noises that Kenshin had made, trying to grab hold of the words he'd been denied. Her muscles ached; her body begged for rest, but the dead-eyed muddy men and women buried under the rosebush wouldn't let her sleep...
Their bloody hands tugged at her sleeve.

Her eyes flew open.

She sat up, gasping. Kenshin shied away.

"Kenshin!"

He cringed, falling back on his hands. Kaoru pressed her hand to her mouth, breathing hard: her heart pounded thud-thud-thud like slow, hard punches against her ribs.

"You – you scared me…" she breathed, trying to control her shaking. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Kenshin blinked at her. The moonlight fell across his face, cut with shadows where the wooden lattice intersected with the rice paper. He looked half-wild, stranger than he ever had, his eyes caught somewhere nearly human.

"It's all right," she said, and resisted the urge to comb anxiously at her braid. Instead she folded her hands neatly on her lap. "I was just having a bad dream."

He leaned towards her, his face tight with some unnamable urge. Kaoru held herself still as his finger brushed against her sleeve – once, twice – and then he grasped it tightly, sighing like the opening of an ancient tomb.

"…Kenshin?"

He bowed his head and didn't let go.

"…oh." The warmth that suffused her should have sent her spinning again, awash in self-recrimination – what right did she have to be glad that he sought comfort from her, when he had no true choice in the matter? – but it had hurt, before, to see him flinch away.

And he had rejected her, for the first time: if he drew near to her now, was it wrong to think that maybe, just a little, it was because he chose to?

She was so very, very tired of hurting.

Kaoru put her hand carefully over his.

"Okay," she said, squeezing lightly. "But we do need to sleep… here, let's get your futon, all right?"

He stayed at her side like a dazed, obedient shadow as she laid his bedding out next to hers, not quite touching. She had to urge him to lie down; he didn't seem to know how. In time, though, they were lying side-by-side on their separate futons. He reached out to grab her sleeves and she caught his hand in hers. Their fingers laced together. His hand was warm and rough with callouses, dirt still lodged under his fingernails.

"Everything's going to be all right, Kenshin," she told him softly, and almost believed it.

She slept, eventually. All she was aware of, the rest of the night, was his steady, even breathing.

~*~

Tomorrow came.

It came creeping across the rooftops like a wary cat, sliding through alleys and into hovels and
houses and grand shining manors. It came to everyone, without playing favorites, and was neither kind nor cruel. It came, without fuss, because that was what tomorrow did.

Yahiko woke that morning with his heart in his throat, knowing without remembering why that today was different. The gift lay propped in a corner of his room, waiting to be given. He wasn't sure when that should happen, precisely – only that it had to happen today.

Kaoru and Kenshin were already awake when he padded into the dining room, following the smell of breakfast. Kaoru's face was tight as an old drum, and there were cracks in her smile.

"Good morning, Yahiko."

"Morning. That guy come yet?" Mr. Shinomori, Kaoru had called him: he was the coldest man that Yahiko had ever seen.

She nodded. "I know what my position is." Her voice was soft.

"'kay. Dr. Oguni wants me to go over there this evening," he said, suddenly remembering, and that solved the problem: he'd give it to her before he left, and hope it was enough. "That okay?"

"If that's what he wants." Her hands were folded carefully in her lap. He wanted, a little bit, to be angry at her – for having kept him out of the loop, for treating him like a child – except that he'd seen the hollow light in her eyes when she'd defended Megumi's decision, when Sano had walked away (and that made him feel uneasy, like he'd eaten something a little bit rotten, because Sano was strong and the strong didn't walk away, right?).

Maybe later, long later, after all this was over, they could talk about it. But there wasn't any point to bringing it up now.

"What's for breakfast?"

"Nothing special," she said. "The usual."

"We gonna have a lesson today?"

She hesitated.

"I – wasn't sure – "

"'Cause I mean, you gotta keep up with it, isn't that what you're always saying?" He bowled right over her, not sure where the words were coming from but knowing that they were saying something that needed to be said. "Can't skip a day for no good reason. Anyway, I think I'm finally getting the hang of that thing you showed me," he mimed it out, nearly knocking the dishes to the floor. " – a couple more days and I should have it."

When he looked over at Kaoru she had her hand over her mouth, and he wasn't sure if it was to hide a smile or a sudden sob.

"All right," she said, finally, with a strain in her voice. "We'll train after breakfast."

Her voice was thin and near to breaking, but there was a smile in her eyes.

~*~

Megumi's laboratory was exactly as she'd left it. The first room – the clinic – had changed, obviously, in the time she had been gone. Someone had still needed to tend to the slaves, once they
represented too great an investment to be allowed to die of preventable causes. Kanryu had refurbished the working areas splendidly, sparing no expense. But the inner chambers, her private office, *that* had gone untouched, and Megumi wondered why.

Then she stopped. She knew why: it was written in the blue-black rose petals on her skin and the raw ache between her legs. In the self-satisfied smile that had wreathed Kanryu's face that morning and his cheerful hum as he'd fastened his tie.

One more night. One more night to endure, and then this would all be over. One more night of divorcing self from flesh and not thinking – even once – of loyal brown eyes and a roughened laugh. One more night. She could survive one more night.

Her breakfast sat too-large and heavy in her gut. She hadn't been hungry: she'd eaten anyway, straining for calm as bile had tried to force its way up her throat. Kanryu had had quite an appetite, so she needed to have one, too. It was that simple.

Today she was to review the previous months' progress and begin breaking down her formula and process into small, repeatable parts. The goal was to make it simple enough to be mass-produced, but in such a way that kept the essential components a secret. Well enough: it wasn't so hard to do. Not if you didn't care whether or not you succeeded.

No, she did care. She must *not* succeed: she had to give Kanryu something that he would think was what he'd asked for. In reality, though, it had to be worthless. Because the formula was to be sent out to his new manufacturing plants today, and she could not perform her mission until tonight. There was no time. She didn't dare fail to do the task in the time allotted. Everything had to be perfect. She had to be perfect.

Megumi picked up her brush, dipped it carefully in ink, and began to write.

There was a kind of peace here, wrapped in her formulas. As long as she didn't think too hard – as long as she didn't allow herself to remember the broken souls outside her door – she could lose herself in the complex puzzle of the human body and almost stop aching. It was the one thing that Kanryu couldn't take away: he could taint it, twist it, use it for his own ends but he couldn't steal it from her. He barely even understood it; his genius lay elsewhere, in numbers and efficiency and exploiting the cracks in the human soul. That was why he'd needed her mentor. That was why he needed her.

At least, it was one of the reasons.

There was a knock on her door and she set her brush aside.

"Come in."

The man who poked his head through the door was squat and strong, with a bulldog face and bright black eyes. He smiled to see her.

"Mr. Yamanashi."

"Afternoon, m'am," he said, touching two fingers to his forehead as he bowed. "Heard you'd come back. It's good to see you."

Mr. Yamanashi was one of Kanryu's foremen in the breaking pits; he oversaw the administration of the drug and the torture that shattered their spirits and left them empty shells to be remade. Megumi had seen him beat a woman her own age until she vomited blood, had watched him lift a dying man impassively over his shoulders and throw him on the garbage pile with the rest of the refuse, had
been unable to stop herself looking away when he tore a still-nursing child from its mother's breast and broke the poor woman's jaw for trying to fight him.

And Mr. Yamanashi had often brought her tea when she was working late. He had comforted her, in the early days, when she wept for her family and her innocence. He had a wife whom he loved more than anyone in the world, and two little daughters he doted on – she'd met them, at some function or other, and seen an echo of her own family's warmth in them.

Most of the men who worked here were like him: men who loved their families, who thought kindly of her and treated their wives and children with gentleness. Who talked of raising their sons to follow in the family trade and making good matches for their daughters. Good men, who simply came into work every day and had a job to do.

Some of those men would be working the night shift tomorrow morning, when the bombs went off.

"I'm glad to be back," she lied. "How can I help you?"

"Just thought I'd say hello." He smiled at her, glad to see an old friend. "Let me and the boys know if you need anything, alright? It's a right climb up those stairs."

"I will. Thank you."

Mr. Yamanashi bobbed his head once more and disappeared.

Mr. Yamanashi did not work the night shift. He would not be at work tomorrow, not that early in the morning; he would be safe at home, with his wife and children.

Megumi bowed her head and went back to work.

~*~

Yahiko and Kaoru trained; they cleaned house; they found things to do, ways to occupy themselves – Kenshin went to the garden and stayed there, tearing up the last of the weeds with a shaking fervor, as if the world depended on it – until finally the shadows crept oblong across the ground and Yahiko couldn't pretend that it wasn't time to go. So he ducked into his room, for a moment, and came out with his gift clutched tight in suddenly-shaky hands.

"Um. Kaoru?"

She looked up from her sewing.

"Yes?"

"I have to go now, but, um – this is for you."

He handed it to her. She took it, puzzled, Undid the string, slid the wrapping down.

"I know it should be wrapped better," he said, nerves compelling him to blather about the one thing that didn't matter, not right now. "But, um, there wasn't a lot of time, and anyway – it's only a token, just a small thing, but I missed most of last year, so…"

She'd unwrapped it now, the thing he'd been working for since the night of the Hiruma brothers, the night that she'd nearly died. He'd seen the bruises around her neck like a chain. Sometimes he thought that he still could.

He'd seen the splinters of her wooden sword, too, and thought if only...
Kaoru blinked, holding it up to the light. The polished wood gleamed, brown grain curled through with black abstractions.

"A wooden sword?"

"It's special," he blurted out. "It's made of ironwood, and it's reinforced. So it won't break. I mean, you can break it, just not – not as easily. It should be as strong as a steel sword. I thought – I thought you'd like it."

She took in a deep breath. He heard the choke in the back of her throat.

"…thank you, Yahiko." Without warning, she hugged him. He let her – hugged her back, even, because even though he was trying his best not to think about it, he couldn't stop knowing that it might be his last chance.

"Thank you," she said again, and her voice was thick. "You should get going."

"Yeah." He felt a little thick-throated himself. "I will."

He left, then: but as he passed through the gate he brushed his hand against the lintels, feeling the warm, smooth grain, and turned his head to look at the tiled roof rising over the whitewashed walls. And he made himself believe, the way he'd made himself believe in his own worth when he was sleeping in gutters and living off garbage heaps, that everything was going to be all right: that the night would end in victory and they would all come home.

We'll come home, he thought, and nodded firmly.

~*~

Lying to Kanryu was easier than Megumi had thought it would be. He believed her; or if he didn't, then he believed that her deception was a small one, something he could wring from her at his leisure and take his own time holding against her. But she thought, perhaps, that he did believe her when she told him that she was going to take the afternoon to work on a project of her own – something experimental, she'd told him, that she couldn't talk about yet because she wasn't entirely sure where it was going. Something that might be useful in the future. Just chasing shadows, she'd chattered (not needing to pretend nervousness), but there might be a flame behind them.

He'd smiled and nodded, and looked at her with covetous fondness. Then he'd kissed her on the cheek and reminded her not to work too hard.

The factory project had to be going well. He got like this, when things were running smoothly: generous and open and kind. But it never lasted. That had been the hardest thing to understand, that it would never last. There was no real safety here, no way to guarantee his sweetness.

There was a remarkable crossover between medical chemistry and explosives. Many of the materials she needed were things she already had to hand, and the rest weren't hard to find. Under other circumstances she would have worried that the news would find its way to Kanryu, that he would have questions – but Shinomori was spending the last of his power to hold those questions off. So she sent slaves running, fetching the instruments of their own destruction.

Kanryu's slaves slept where they worked. Many of them would die in the explosions or the coming battle. For the best of reasons, maybe: but no one had asked them if they wanted to.

At least they wouldn't die alone.
It took very little time to assemble the bombs. What did take time, though, was planting them. The staff was accustomed to long, pacing walks through the grounds to gather her thoughts, but she had to wait a little while between each stroll. She could only plant so many at a time.

Shinomori would ensure that the front gate was open. She was in charge of the back gate, as it were: her explosives would shatter the place where the walls around the manor and the wall between the grounds and the pens intersected, creating a second entrance and denying Kanryu's forces the use of the pens as a secure fallback. There were two locations: at the top of the pens, and down below at the wall between the pens and the breaking pits. The first location was the most essential.

The bombs were planted before she was called to supper. Megumi spent the time remaining kneeling in her office – her sanctuary, her prison – listening to the shouts and cries outside, to the crack of blows on flesh and the low chants as the broken slaves practiced their etiquette. She tried to remember her brothers' lessons, overheard so long ago, on how a samurai prepares for death. She remembered her mother and father, their pride and their love, and her older brothers and her cousins and aunts and uncles and she could almost hear their voices, now, so close to the other side.

She did not think of Sano.

~*~

Hiko stood outside the gates of the Kamiya dojo again, yet another dire thing burning like a brand at his side. Last time it had been a vial of perfume. This time… well.

It had taken Hiko the better part of a day to accomplish his task. His standards had always been high, and he would not accept less than the best available, not in this. Whether or not it was used, regardless of the choice that Kenshin made… it was, in a strange way, as if the boy was trying for his mastery. Destiny brooked no interference, not here, at the very edge of things.

All he could do was give his lost student the best of what he had, and see what he would make of it.

He knocked on the gate. Kamiya opened it, dressed for battle.

"There you are," she said, trying to mask her fear and doing a credible job. "We're supposed to leave soon – they're staggering the arrivals at the muster point."

"And Kenshin?"

"I was waiting for you." With that rather cryptic statement, she turned on her heel and headed past the house. For lack of any further clues, he followed her.

There was a small garden patch around the side of the house. Kenshin knelt there, working at the bare earth with furious purpose: his sleeves were tied back at his elbows, and his hands up his wrists were wet and black with clinging dirt. His eyes were distant and focused, staring hard at something that only he could see.

"Kenshin." Kamiya called to him softly. Kenshin looked up at her voice, focused on her like a stranded mariner sighting land, and stood in one fluid motion.

"It's time."

He gazed past her, meeting Hiko's eyes. For the first time since he'd found the boy again, Hiko saw the lad that he remembered. Just an echo, barely a ghost, and he was too old – ah, but he'd thrown in his lot with the dreamers, now, so he was allowed to hope.
Even if he was too old and bloodied to do it well.

"Before we go," Hiko said, holding out the package he'd carried at his side. "Here. Whether you use it or not is up to you; but I thought you should have the choice, when the time comes."

Kenshin didn't glance at the girl as he took it, though he did start a little at the weight. It was loosely wrapped; as it moved from Hiko's hands to his the rough linen fell away and the lacquered sheath gleamed in the dying light. Kamiya sucked in a breath, startled.

"Are you sure – ?" she began to say, then fell silent as Kenshin's hand tightened where he'd grasped it, just below the hilt. He bowed his head, his bangs falling forward to shield his eyes.

"It's your choice," Hiko said again, carefully. "Do what you think is right."

Kenshin nodded, once. His throat worked as he tucked the sword in his belt, next to the practice blade that Kamiya had armed him with. She had her own wooden sword ready at her side – a strange one, mottled black-and-brown and shining like steel.

"Ready?" she asked Kenshin.

"Yes, Miss Kaoru," he said, and raised his head.

His eyes were bright and clear.

~*~

Kanryu's manor loomed against the deepening sky. The sun was setting behind Mt. Fuji, casting the gate in darkest shadow. Kaoru watched it from the upstairs window of the house where the assault team waited, Kenshin tense at her side. Mr. Hiko sat quietly not too far away. Sano was somewhere below, with the rest of the force. He hadn't spoken to her, aside from a terse greeting.

They had some hours yet to go.

"The explosion is the signal," she repeated. "Shinomori will have the gates open. That's where we're going in. The other group will flood in through the gap Megumi makes…"

It was hard to speak. She took a small sip from her waterskin, just enough to moisten her mouth.

"If we can secure the manor, then the high lords with grudges against the Tokugawa will join us; otherwise, they'll pretend they made no promises. There are other attacks, set for the same time… so even if we fail here…"

"You won't," Mr. Hiko said. He studied her, not unkindly. "Have you been in combat before, Kamiya?"

"…no." Scuffles with muggers and men who had trouble understanding no probably didn't count. "Not like this."

He made a contemplative noise. "Stay in my shadow," he told her. "I'll keep the worst of it at bay. Help him find Kanryu."

She glanced at Kenshin. His face was pale, the lines of his face stark and tight. "Is that what you want?"

A long pause – too long. Then he nodded.
"He – will run. I – one knows where, where he'll run. The secret ways." Saying even that much seemed to take more than he had to give, and he lapsed back into shuddering silence.

Kaoru nodded.

"Then that's what we'll do."

She turned back to the window, watching the light bleed away.

~*~

Kanryu's evening was perfect. Megumi made sure of it. She was everything he'd ever dreamed: compliant and yielding, with just enough defiance to give him the pleasure of stripping it from her without having to work too hard for it. She made it perfect so that when she poured a glass of water after their exertions and served it to him, kneeling and covered only in her long hair, he would be so distracted by his pleasure that he didn't notice the slightly bitter tang. Raising his heart rate forced the drug into his system more quickly, she told herself, and did all the things he liked best until he fell insensate at her side, one hand tangled possessively in her hair.

She waited a few minutes to be sure that the drug had fully taken hold. It wouldn't last that long: he had some inborn resistance to them, as she'd learned when she'd tried this trick once before. Only once. Any stronger and she ran the risk of killing him…

And that was not her purpose. Change would come slow and hard – it always did. It was best that he live and stand trial, not die and become a martyr of the old regime.

So she slid away as he mumbled to himself and turned over into the warmth her body had left behind, dressing quick and silent in the darkness of their cloistered room. The moonlight cast pale beams over her flesh, slicing into her like prison bars.

It was the hour of the tiger, just before dawn. She padded through his hallways on silent cat-feet, her eyes bright and gleaming in the darkness. None of the house-slaves marked her passing.

The grounds were sheathed in silver. A frog croaked from the ornamental pond, sparking off a chorus, and the leaves whispered softly to the breeze dancing through them. She paused, for a moment – just one – to feel it on her face, and taste for one last time the reek of roses on her tongue.

Then she hurried on.

There had been no way to lay a long fuse and go unnoticed. She would light the master fuse and run, and pray that she could get far enough. There was the second set of bombs still to light, before her task was fully done and she could stop caring. The flint and steel were cool and sharp against her fingers, clenched in the palm of her hand.

Here it was: the tail of the fuse sticking out from where she had carefully hidden the cluster of explosives. Five seconds, at the most.

Her hands shook as she struck flint against steel.

Once. Twice. Thrice – it caught, with a fizzle and a pop and she ran, ran faster than she had ever run in her life –

~*~

Everyone saw the bombs go off.
come to burn your kingdom down

The explosion rocked the sky, sending birds screaming upward into the soft grey. The ground trembled under Sano's feet, or maybe that was his own muscle and bone straining, waiting – except the waiting was over and move, move now!

It ripped screaming from his chest, hurling from his throat and snarling, distorted mouth. An order and a battle cry, guttural and thundering as he lunged for the open gates with the rebel army at his back. He thought, for a moment, that he saw Shinomori turning away as he rushed past the wrought iron. It didn't matter. The spy had done his job; they were in and they could fight. Something Sano knew, for a change. Something he could do, a use for the pure white rage festering inside him.

Kanryu's people were good, he'd give them that. They'd poured from his ugly stone manor like bees from a hive before the echoes of the explosion had died away, armed with pikes and rifles. The pikemen went first, settling on their knees in an orderly line across the manicured lawn. Their weapons gleamed in the dawning light, braced against the hard earth. A wall of steel for the attackers to break on, and the riflemen standing behind them to finish any stragglers.

Ha. Not bloody likely.

Sano put on an extra turn of speed, pulling ahead of his people, and leapt over the pikes. He made it, barely, landing between the rifles and the pikes on the balls of his feet and lashing out with a kick as he straightened. A crack of bone and the pikeman that he'd landed behind fell into the grass, mouth opened in a startled oh!

Sano thought he saw a slave-marked carved on the soldier's face, but there was no time to regret it now. The pikemen on either side of him turned, pulling back to try and skewer him. He grabbed the wooden shafts, one in each hand, and squeezed. They shattered, splinters digging into his palms, and he shoved back to knock the wind out of their wielders with a sick, fleshy thud. The rifleman nearest him tried to brain Sano with the butt of his gun; the blow was badly-aimed and glanced off his skull, barely rattling his teeth. Sano repaid him with a punch to the jaw that laid him out cold, then dealt with his neighbors.

His allies had closed the gap by then, pouring into the break Sano had made and pushing out, scattering the pikes and rifles and ruining their pretty little line. The two armies – and the rebels were an army, now, albeit a small one; the delay had left plenty of time for recruiting – clashed in ragged knots of gunpowder, steel and screaming, pushing around and through one another and churning great muddy furrows in the carefully-tended earth. Sano looked for Kaoru's group and saw them, moving carefully through the chaos. Hiko's long white cloak swirled as he fought, obscuring his movements. It was hard to glimpse Kenshin and the missy through the scrum, short as they were, but he got a good enough look to know that they were holding their own.

No worries there, then.

Some idiot tried to knife him. Sano slammed his elbow into their face and they dropped like a stone. He ducked down as another pikeman tried to gut him, sweeping out with his foot to lay the poor fool out flat, then slammed his knee into a third man's stomach on his way up. They were swarming him, and under other circumstances he would have welcomed the brawl, but the rest of the guys had things under control and Sano had something important to do, now that the lines were broken.

So the little missy'd had a point, saying that Megumi hadn't chosen him, and that he had to respect it. And he couldn't really fault Megumi for it, all things considered. He could understand that – feeling
like you *had* to, no matter what it cost. She had more of a right to put herself on the line than any of
them, except maybe Kenshin, and he was too fucking brain-damaged to assert it.

That didn't mean that Sano didn't have the right to follow her. She'd come to him; she'd been his
woman, even if it was just for the night, and that *meant* something. He wouldn't let it not.

More of Kanryu's guards and soldiers were pouring out of the manor, now, and the barracks nearby.
Proper Tokugawa retainers, not just slaves and hired soldiers. And a few ronin in among the mix,
he'd bet, lowering their samurai dignity to serve a merchant family in exchange for their supper and a
roof over their head. Though he supposed that from their perspective it wasn't that bad a deal; the
Kanryu, at least, were honored allies of their precious fucking shōgun.

His upper lip curled back from his teeth.

The samurai came howling into the fray and Sano met them like a hurricane. He laid out every man
that came against him, flattening them like grain as he worked his way towards the high stone wall
hidden behind the hedge. Behind it would be the pens, and Megumi.

The second, larger group of rebels was trickling slowly in through the breach Megumi had made
with Katsu's explosives. It wasn't quite big enough, and a score of Kanryu's bastards were doing a
decent job holding the gap against the rebel forces. Sano leapt into them, wildcat-quick, and cleared
the way. His allies surged onto the grounds, their thank-yous muffled by the gunshots and the
screaming as they pelted towards the main action. The delay had worked to the rebels' advantage:
now all or most of Kanryu's forces looked to be on the field, and the second rebel group could come
in from behind and catch them in a pincer.

They didn't need him. Megumi did.

He vaulted over the ruined wall and started climbing down to the pens. It was high, but not so high
that he couldn't make out what was happening down there. Overseers and their assistants raced like
scared ants across the pretty little buildings, herding dazed, stumbling slaves back behind the
breaking-pen wall. The slaves were all dressed alike, and the overseers wore uniforms. He kept his
eyes peeled for Megumi.

There. She was dodging through the chaos, black hair streaming behind her like a banner. An
overseer caught her arm, started to say something to her. She pulled away. When he came after her
again she elbowed him in the ribs, leaning into the blow like Sano had taught her – a moment's pride
lit his insides when he saw it – and ran while the overseer tried to catch his breath.

*Good girl,* he thought, and dropped the rest of the way. Megumi had dropped all pretense, it seemed:
she was heading straight for the wall between the training and breaking pens, weaving through the
crowd without a care for who might see her. Sano followed, plowing through the disciplined lines of
dead-eyed victims and slamming every overseer in his way against the ground. His ears fairly rang
with silence, after the screams and smoke of the melee; the only sounds down here were the frantic
cries of the overseers and the echo of the battle up above.

The slaves said nothing, did nothing as Sano fought his way through their keepers, just kept on
walking towards the breaking pens. Doing as they'd been told, even when those who'd told them
weren't there to tell them anymore, and doing it without so much as a whimper.

He got lucky: none of these bright sparks got it into their head to order the slaves after him. It wasn't
that he wouldn't fight his way through them, if he had to, but that was more than he wanted on his
conscience.
Sano made it to the wall, finally, could just about see Megumi clearly –

Could see her crouching, striking something in her hands together with frantic calm, her fingers shaking.

"Fuck! Megumi, no!"

The fuse lit. He threw off the last of the overseers, lunging for Megumi. She scrambled back – avoiding the fuse, not him – and the hem of her dress caught in something he couldn't quite see.

Silence, and then a white roar.

~*~

Kaoru hadn't expected battle to be like this.

She had expected it to be terrible: she had expected blood and steel and smoke, the acrid smell of gunpowder and the screams of the wounded and the dying. But things moved so much faster than she had expected – short bursts of comprehension in a sea of instinct, like the still-quick images in a lightning storm, or the disjointed flashes when you blink your eyes.

And she had expected to be afraid, but she wasn't. The fear was there, oh yes, hiding behind a wall of training and no-time-for-this but it wasn't touching her. She realized, as she stepped in a pool of blood and viscera to parry a blow in the heartbeat before Kenshin sent her attacker flying, that she would not be afraid until after this was done. Which was, she supposed, a small mercy.

Kenshin was defending her, his face white-lined with effort, and Mr. Hiko was defending them both. Kenshin's teacher plunged through the melee like an avalanche, trampling down a path, and Kenshin caught most of what he missed. One or two would make it through to her, and that was all she had to deal with – but it was enough, and too much.

She had expected to protect Kenshin, not the other way around, but he hadn't let her – had pushed her into the lee of Mr. Hiko's whirlwind and refused to let her leave his chosen spot. So she stayed there, letting them take the brunt and hating herself for being so grateful that they were.

At first Kenshin used the wooden sword she'd given him; when that broke, he drew the steel one and turned it blunt-side-out. She couldn't see what Mr. Hiko was doing, but she caught glimpses as they passed and realized that he was sparing those marked with slave-brands, knocking them unconscious instead of slaying them.

The sun was rising as they fought their way across the grounds, smooth and sure and swift as it did every morning. It seemed wrong: battle belonged to night and chaos and terror, not the bright sunlight and warmth of late spring. Yet here it was, tainting the sweet morning air with coppery blood and saltpeter.

Their progress across the battlefield was slow, hindered, she thought, by Mr. Hiko's care for the slave-fighters. There were dozens of them, mixed with the knotted handfuls of freemen and samurai. Those he did not spare: they fell in wild arterial sprays, sliced to pieces by their own momentum as they leapt to meet his blade. And maybe that was wrong – no, it was wrong, when she didn't know the circumstances that had led them there or how they really felt about their employer – but she couldn't help the sick satisfaction nestling below her heart as Mr. Hiko moved through them like a judgment.

They didn't fight alone, at least. The rebels were easy to identify, being the only people on the field who wore no uniform, only a white scrap of cloth tied to the upper right arm. White for mourning –
mourning that things had come to this, Katsu had explained to them quietly, in the still hours of waiting before the storm. He was an old friend of Sano's; Sano had kept his own counsel, brooding, and so Katsu had come to wish them well in his stead.

_Sano cares_, he'd said, patience and a certain understanding written on his face. _You know that. Give him time to cool down._

Katsu had fallen early to a scrum of frantic, disarmed riflemen, and Kaoru had tried to go to him but Mr. Hiko had pulled her away by the collar, calmer than anyone had a right to be as the battle surged towards them – or them towards it – like a gathering wave.

_There's no time for that, Kamiya_, he'd just managed to say, and then the wave had broken.

The closer they got to the manor, the wilder Kenshin became, losing precision and control as they moved into the shadow of the stone giant. Its door gaped like a mouth, like an open wound, its dozen shuttered eyes averted from the slaughter even as the blood lapped invitingly at its stepped marble lips. The resistance was fiercer here, Kanryu's men spending blood with reckless abandon to keep his sanctum free. Not by choice – there were no freemen here, only men with marks like Kenshin's on their cheeks and eyes like corpses.

There was nothing save cold determination on Kenshin's face as he beat them to the ground, but she knew by now that he could weep without shedding a tear.

Kaoru slipped climbing up the stairs to the wooden maw, catching herself hard on the heels of her hands. Her teeth rattled and clicked in her skull, tangling in her brain. Kenshin hauled her up and fairly threw her to the doorstep, turning with a snarl to face the horde scrambling up after them. Mr. Hiko shoved her behind him, standing like a mountain at his former student's back.

"Get the doors open!" he shouted. His voice was nearly lost as a second explosion ripped the air, shaking the perfect blue sky.

Kaoru fumbled herself straight again, lurching towards the double doors and shaking her head to clear the buzzing in her ears. Like bees, or angry rattlesnakes…

The doors. Get them open.

They were solid wood and opened outward – she remembered that much from her first visit, her _only_ visit; she hadn't been invited this time. There was no space to try to kick them down, and she wasn't very good at hand-to-hand anyway. Sano had tried to teach her, but she'd never had the knack.

She hadn't seen Sano since he'd hurtled through the gates at the tip of the vanguard, face raw and distorted with his screams.

Deep breath. Focus.

Howls and clashes behind her, and then a bellow like an enraged bull, shaking the earth and sky with outrage. She glanced back to see Mr. Hiko vault over Kenshin and slam his blade into the earth in front of the steps. The shockwave ripped through the ground, forcing the slave-fighters back. There was a moment of stillness. Then they surged forward again, implacable.

Biting her lip until it bled, Kaoru slammed the hilt of her wooden sword into the door, just under the heavy iron locks. Again and again, until the door splintered – there. Just enough space…

She wedged the tip in, throwing her weight against the wooden blade and working the gap she'd created between the two doors until it was almost big enough to fit her fingers through. Then she
switched to prying, not with her hands – she wasn't fool enough for that – but using her sword as a
crowbar and blessing Yahiko fervently for the gift. A practice blade would have broken by now.

Kenshin joined her, sliding between the door and her sword and pushing outward as she pulled, until
finally the door gave way with a crack that shivered right down to her bones.

"Inside!" Mr. Hiko barked. Kenshin slid in first, being closest, and Kaoru followed. Then Mr. Hiko
stepped into the shattered doorway.

"I'll hold it. Go!"

"But – " Kaoru started to say, frightened for no reason at all.

"Don't argue, Kamiya! Kenshin! Do what you came to do!" he shouted at them between blows,
bodies flying through the air like ragdolls as he held the breach. The rising sun poured across the
scene in glimmering cascades, dust and blood and smoke hanging like flies in amber. "Trust your
teacher, idiot!"

She saw Kenshin nod out of the corner of her eye, felt him grab her wrist and pull.

"This way." His voice was not quite toneless.

It was the first time he'd spoken since the battle began.

Kaoru looked up, staring into his eyes: blue and clear and achingly human. Torn, battered – but
alive. There was a slash across his upper arm, fresh blood seeping slowly into his sleeve.

And she saw herself reflected in his eyes: ash smeared across one cheekbone, clothing torn, stinking
of gunpowder and blood as a thin crimson strain trickled from where she'd bloodied her lip. Her
hands ached.

"Okay," she said, throat tight. "I've got your back."

~*~

Outside, the battle raged.

Inside, the sound of men dying faded to a distant din, smothered by heavy stone walls and thick glass
windows. The sound of men fighting and dying could almost be no more than a passing storm, if one
did not know that the sky was clear and deepening to a brilliant blue as the sun inched over the
horizon.

It was going to be a beautiful day.

Aoshi looked neither right nor left as he paced silently down the polished wooden halls of Kanryu's
domain, treading the same path he had for nearly five years. Since he had turned twenty and, having
finally earned the honor, been sent to this rose-reeking place to serve as Kanryu's head of security.
He was oniwaban, after all, the shogunate's left hand in darkness, guardian of its most precious
assets. It was his duty, his purpose and his fate.

If he had not killed joy years ago, it might have seized his heart as he measured his footsteps out
along the rich Western carpet. But his heart and mind were still, betraying nothing. Long years of
work had left him free of emotion, and its accompanying dangers and distractions.

Kanryu had not stirred himself from his office yet. He was confident in his defenses. A confidence
that Aoshi had nurtured across the years, storing up the man's natural arrogance against this day. So that when the time came, Kanryu would not run. Not until it was too late.

And he had not run, only waved a languid hand in Aoshi's direction and ordered him to see to the defense and discover how the gate had been breached. He had not even raised his head from the papers he was perusing.

Aoshi might have smiled, if he had still known how.

Those oniwaban stationed at Kanryu's manor were quartered at the end of the domestic wing, just before the house-slaves' dormitories. Not quite so close as to give insult, but close enough for the message to be clear: you, also, are my tools. Perhaps a bit higher-ranked, a bit more valuable – but still mine to dispose of as I see fit, symbols of my rank and power.

Kanryu was not wrong, in that.

Aoshi glided to a halt as he turned the corner, inclining his head towards the four men who stood ready to receive his orders. Beshimi, Hyottoko, Shikijou, Hannya. They had been Kanryu's before he had come to lead them, yet he had risen above them. Never had they expressed displeasure with the arrangement – although they might very well feel it. It was not their place to disagree with the edicts of their betters.

Aoshi's fingers itched.

"Leader." Hannya stepped forward with a bow. "What are your orders?"

"I have none." Aoshi knew that his voice and face betrayed no hint of turmoil. He felt no turmoil; he no longer allowed himself such luxuries. "We will do nothing."

"But, sir…" Shikijou drew down his thick brows, his scarred skin distorting terribly under the weight of thought. "The manor is under attack."

"I am aware of the situation." A hint of strain had entered his voice. Not good. "We will do nothing."

His men stared at him. The dawn's light slanting through the windows cast them half in shadow, half in watery gold. The noise of battle was very faint, barely audible past the ringing in his ears.

He did not want to kill these men who served under him, who were – if not his friends – than his comrades-in-arms. Who were oniwaban as he was, born and raised and bred to be what others could not, to taint themselves with death and darkness so that others need not.

But if they had to die, then let them die here, in the half-light before true day. Let them die at his hands. At least he would understand the cost.

Still. He would prefer that they live.

"We will do nothing," he said again, and his hands settled too-calmly at his sides. Hannya examined him, eyes glinting cold behind his demon's mask.

"Leader." His voice was quiet, calm. Almost reprimanding. "We have a duty."

There was no possible response, so Aoshi remained silent.

"Have you forgotten?" Hannya tilted his head. The sunlight caught on his mask, filling the cracks in the bone.
Aoshi met his gaze calmly.

"Have you?" he asked.

Because Hannya had been oniwaban when it happened. He knew the story. They all did. How the son of Sir Makimachi, the former leader of the Oniwabanshu, had erred, offending the Kanryu, offending the shōgun. How his family had been stripped of status and executed, their bodies thrown to wild dogs, remembered as traitors though they were not, and all knew it. But to offend the Kanryu was to offend the Tokugawa, and if they cried treason! in their offense, who would dare to gainsay it?

He had been Sir Makimachi's only child, and had had but one child: a little girl named Misao.

The loss had driven the old man half-mad, and he had been eased into retirement soon after. He still lived, in a temple far from Edo, mourning his losses. Sir Kashiwazaki had taken over, and life had carried on. There had been whispers, of course, shadows of disagreement never quite voiced, a current of anger that eventually trickled away into nothingness. These things happened, after all, particularly to people who did not guard their tongues. A tragedy, especially for the poor girl – everyone had been so very fond of her – but there was nothing to be done.

Unless you were the new leader, and had seen your oldest, dearest friend collapsed in grief, insensate at the loss of his only family. Unless you were a young man, an orphan taken in by the oniwabanshu and given a new name and a new life and place in the world, all by grace of Sir Makimachi's son, who'd laughed and patted you on the head when he foiled your attempted thievery, who'd seen worth where no one else had. Unless you had played with their daughter, watched her grow, toddling after you with grim determination on her bright little face, teaching you how to smile long after you had come to take as an article of faith that your lips could never learn how.

Then, perhaps, that current of rage might only pool and harden in the space below your heart, growing cold and crystal as you waited for the proper moment. Because that was the first lesson, and the second, and the third: wait.

And wait.

Until the moment finally came, as it always must.

Hannya tipped his head back, perhaps examining the intricate carvings on the too-low ceilings, but probably not. It was an old trick and an easy one, to look one way while facing another. Child's play if you wore a mask.

"So." He seemed to sigh. "Even now, after all these years."

She had loved Hannya, loved his masks and ever-shifting features, loved the game of picking him out under his layers of disguises. And Hannya had grieved for her, grieved almost as much as Aoshi had.

Almost.

Hannya was loyal to the shōgunate. For the shogunate's sake he had carved his face featureless, condemned himself to freakishness and isolation. So if he did not serve the shōgunate then it had all been for nothing – all the lonely years, all the careful tending of wounds that would never fully heal were only ash. All that pain had been laid at the altar of the undeserving.

Aoshi had thought, once, that he was loyal to the shōgunate as well.
Now he knew otherwise: had known since the day he'd come home to find the old man weeping and little Misao gone forever.

"Always," Aoshi said, green eyes glowing like balefire behind his bangs. "Always."

Hannya bowed, one last time.

"Then there is nothing more to be said," he murmured. There might have been sorrow in his voice. The second explosion echoed in the distance, tearing the sky asunder. Perhaps Kanryu would run, now – but no matter. The manslayer – *Kenshin* – was with the rebels, and he knew the secret ways.

Aoshi drew his sword.

~*~

Sano's ears were ringing. The echoing whine muffled all other sound, smothering it until the world was a slow blur of movement and smoke and the ache in his head reverberating through his teeth. He hauled himself slowly to his knees, afraid to shake the cotton out – he felt vaguely like he might lose his brains, instead.

There was blood on his hands, staining the white wrappings. He looked at it dully, trying to remember where it had come from.

*Megumi.*

Dust shimmered in the air – stone and gunpowder – harsh and stinking of sulphur. His lungs contracted, forcing the foulness out, but there was only more tainted air to take in and he doubled over, hacking, as the air slowly cleared. When he could breathe again, he spat. It came out grey.

*Find her.*

She couldn't be far. She'd been right up against the wall when it blew, scrambling to get away – he'd been so fucking *close* – no, dammit, don't think like that, not yet.

*Nobody's dead until I see the body.*

Where had that come from? It wasn't something he knew: it was something he'd learned, or overheard somewhere. Or not – everything was echoes and fog, and the world kept moving a little too slowly.

Sano climbed to his feet in slow stages, swaying. Hands on the ground, first, to stabilize – one foot flat against the ground, then the next, tottering upright like an uncertain child. He stumbled, caught himself, and – alert for his body's attempts at betrayal – fumbled his way towards the looming wreckage. Bodies lay scattered like broken dolls, obscured by dust – so much fucking *dust*, where had it all come from? – and shattered stone, and there was no way to tell just by looking which of the vague human shapes had slaves, and which ones had been overseers.

Megumi hadn't gotten far. He clung to that as he half-felt his way to where the gap was biggest, where the center of the explosion had to have been. She hadn't gotten far from the fuse and he knew what side of the wall, what side of explosion she was on, so he knew where to start looking. And he would find her. And she would be alive. And he'd get her to the doctor in time. That was how it was going to be.

The rubble was piled on itself, lurking like ancient ruins in the whirling dust-clouds. Sunlight pierced the smoke, shimmering white and pure and warm. Too damn warm. The motes swirled in the
sunbeams, dancing unknown paths to uncertain destinations, caught in complex patterns of no particular invention. They careened into one another as Sano moved through them, his passage disrupting their aimless, unchosen trajectories. He kept his eyes to the ground as he moved, searching for a pale, slender hand, a rich silk hem, a strand of black hair.

There.

Megumi lay with her legs caught under shattered stone, facedown because she'd tried to run. Her arms were curled over her head, clutching at her hair, and the long locks streamed behind her like a comet's tail. Sano scrambled to her side, barking knuckles and scraping nails on rock and mortar as he went, and refused to pray because that would be admitting that he doubted. It was only seconds before he reached her, kneeling at her side to press two fingers to the vein just below her jaw.

Yes.

A pulse. Vague and fluttering and almost not there at all but a pulse, and as he bent over her fallen body he could just see her chest rise and fall in shallow, even breaths. He clenched his hand into a fist, too fiercely glad for weeping, and set about lifting the crumbling stone from her legs.

It was slow going: he wasn't sure how bad her injuries were, and the wall's remains were heavy. He lifted the rubble away piece by piece, resisting the urge to hurry, and kept having to stop to shore up more debris as the piles shifted with each lost piece, threatening to crush her again. In time, though, he could see the dark blue of her skirts and the darker patches of blood spreading through the silk, staining the pretty white patterns. Camellias, dyed red now with her blood. He didn't dare lift the cloth to assess the damage; it might be all that was keeping her heartsblood in her veins.

Megumi stirred as he lifted the final block away, pushing one final time at the stack of wreckage to keep it braced and stable long enough to lift her.

"Don't move – " He hacked into his sleeve, working his jaw to moisten his mouth and throat. "You're hurt bad, Fox. Just stay still."

Her eyes slit open, blue-black, like the sky on a moonless night. She opened her mouth to speak or sigh, and he just barely caught the question as it eased its way between her bloodless lips.

"…why?"

"Ain't no one ever told you t'be careful, playin' with gunpower?" he tried to joke, and was interrupted by another coughing fit. "That stuff's dangerous," he finished weakly, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

She started to lift herself up on her elbows and he pressed her down, gently.

"Your legs are pretty fucked up." Megumi went limp beneath his hand; he could feel each knob of her spine. "Stay still, okay? Lemme do the hard part."

"…shouldn't… have." She licked her lips, eyes falling shut again. "Go. I…"

"Hell no." It came out harder than he'd meant it. Her eyes snapped open, focused and clear and aimed at him.

Sano knelt and picked her up, cradling her as carefully as he could. She was too fragile in his arms, all stunned bird and fading breath, and the blood seeped warm from her legs to cover his arms.

"Hell no," he said again, and saw Megumi's throat working as she swallowed.
"...Sagara..." Her eyes were pleading.

"No." A third time, to make her believe it. "Not on your fucking life."

She almost smiled at that, before she turned her face away.

It was a long walk out the pits and up the switchback wooden stairs to the high, hidden wall. He walked along the edge of it – the small outcropping of land where the guards had stood, the guards who had gone to fight and fallen – until he reached the gap she'd blown in the external compound wall. The battle had moved on; it was centered in front of the manor house, now, and the cries were a distant roll of thunder under the bright blue sky.

Megumi lay still against his chest, still enough that he kept having to stop and make sure that she was really breathing. He wanted to run but didn't dare. He'd learned a thing or two, hanging around Megumi and the doctor, and knew that it might set something loose to lodge in a vein or her heart or her fragile brain and kill her.

And she wasn't going to die.

Between the rumble of battle and the ringing in his ears, he didn't hear the harsh pants behind him until they were nearly on top of him and he whirled, lashing out with one foot as he tensed his muscles to jump up and away to safety –

"Aoshi."

Shinomori was leaning heavily against what remained of the wall, clutching his side. His face was pale and expressionless, eyes hidden behind his long dark bangs.

"Sagara."

"Shouldn't you be back there?" Sano jerked his head towards the fight. Shinomori pulled his hand away from his side in response, long enough for Sano to see the blood staining his fingertips and the sodden cloth he was holding to his wound.

"I would hardly be of any use," he said dryly. "I have done all I can."

"Your people?" Sano didn't particularly want to ask – but he had to. Because if they weren't dealt with, then he'd have to make that his first priority after he got Megumi to triage.

A pause. And then, in a voice like the wind through a forest burnt to ash:

"Neutralized."

"All right, then." Sano held Megumi a little closer. "Let's go."

~*~

Kenshin led Kaoru quickly through a bewildering maze of wood-lined halls and shuttered windows. Gunfire and screaming faded in and out around them, distant as a dream. It was empty inside the manor, and too silent; all the sounds of combat were absorbed by layers of wood and stone. She thought that they might be going to the same part of the house that the dreadful parlor had been in. Then Kenshin took a sharp left, and she was no longer certain. Kenshin knew, though, and never hesitated. He moved through the dark, close corridors with the ease of long habit, even as his eyes grew fainter and wilder as they ran deeper into Kanryu's nest. The lines of bones stood out starkly against his strain-white skin.
They burst into an office, Kenshin half a step ahead of her, his sword already drawn. He paused for a moment, there on the threshold – the office was empty, a few loose papers left to scatter in the draft from the half-open window – and then he pelted towards a shadowed corner.

He pressed his hand against a patch of wall that looked no different from the rest. It sunk inward, groaning. The corner slid slowly away to reveal a long, dripping darkness, echoing with the grind of the mechanism that had opened the hidden door. A small alcove in the tunnel wall held a handful of candles and packet of Western matches. Kenshin took a candle and offered it to her.

"Miss Kaoru?"

She did not let her hand tremble as she lit it. Their fingers overlapped as he handed the light to her. His skin was fever-hot, and shaking like an autumn leaf.

His throat worked.

"Go on," she told him, voice surer than she felt. "I'm right behind you."

He nodded, once, and disappeared into the darkness. Kaoru followed close behind.

~*~

Hiko tore through the manor, riding the tide of battle. He'd forced open enough gaps in the enemy lines that the rebels had been able to surge through the broken doors, and now they spread through the manor with cries of triumph. The battle was good as won: the looting and destruction would begin as soon as they had processed their victory. Not that he blamed them for it – men were men, and it was a rare army that could keep to strictly civilized behavior in the first wild flush of victory. There were enough cool heads among them to ensure safety for Kanryu's victims.

In the meantime, he had an appointment to keep.

He didn't know the manor, but he knew his student, and he knew Kamiya. It was trivial to follow the flare of their souls to the office and down into the hidden tunnel that they'd left standing open. He didn't bother lighting a candle; his own senses were enough to show the way.

The tunnel was long, running almost the length of the estate. By the time he saw the shadows set dancing by their candles he estimated that they were near the edge of the property, perhaps under one of the external walls. Hiko slowed, then, trading speed for silence.

They lurked just before a bend in the tunnel. Light spilled from around the corner, and there was the sound of movement and… humming. Distracted, mildly cheerful humming, like a housewife bustling about her pantry.

Kenshin turned as he approached.

"Sir." Kenshin's voice was barely a whisper. His face was tight, eyes dark and impossible to read in the flickering shadows. Kamiya caught her breath, startled, and faced him as well. She didn't speak, only nodded in recognition with her lips pressed hard together.

"Kanryu?" Hiko asked, silent as his student.

Kamiya nodded. Kenshin glanced at her. She gave him a long, wordless look, fear dancing in her eyes, then squeezed his forearm briefly. Hiko inclined his head slightly, holding Kenshin's gaze until the boy took a deep breath and looked away, the fear in his face smoothed by something that wasn't quite courage. Not yet.
Kenshin stepped around the corner.

~*~

Kaoru watched with her heart in her throat as Kenshin walked slowly into the wide chamber where Kanryu was preparing to run. It was rough-carved from stone and shored-up earth, with grey, worn timber cross the roof at strange angles. Kanryu had brought a lantern, and it lit the space with more shadow than light, distorting its size and shape. There was a door in the opposite end, probably leading to the surface, and the room was filled with traveling supplies.

Kanryu looked up, and his narrow face broke into an affable grin, his eyes squinting in good cheer. But for just a moment – half a heartbeat before that happy smile – his face had been as twisted as a demon-mask, and his eyes had split with rage.

A chill seized Kaoru's veins. She held tight to her wooden sword, afraid to pray.

"Ah!" Kanryu exclaimed, straightening. His smile never wavered. "My faithful dog, returned at last."

Kenshin's hand fisted around his sword-hilt, his free hand clenching at his side. His jaw worked, his face growing even paler, his eyes brighter and more terribly blank. Kaoru felt Mr. Hiko tense. He exhaled hard, not quite snarling, and she shuddered at the rage building in him.

He's never seen, she remembered dimly. He never knew, not really.

Kenshin started towards Kanryu. Then he stopped, hesitating. He tried to speak instead, mouth opening and closing in a futile effort as his hand clenched tighter and tighter, until the skin across his knuckles was white as bone.

"What?" Kanryu raised an eyebrow, still smiling. "Did you think you had a choice in the matter? Well, I suppose I can't blame you for that – the girl's obviously led you astray, and you are so easily led. No matter. We have all the time in the world to fix what she's broken."

He paced towards Kenshin, circling like a bird of prey. Kaoru's heartbeat threatened to overwhelm her, blocking out sound and mind and vision in a tide of please god no...

He's lying, Kenshin, you know he's lying, don't listen…

But she didn't dare speak.

"Really, dog, this is why your kind needs me," Kanryu continued, shaking his head as if overwhelmed with pity. "If a person is meant to be a slave, it does them no kindness to pretend otherwise. Freedom is a dreadful burden, you know – don't you remember how gratefully you thanked me when I finally took it away?" His eyes glimmered in the flickering candleflame. "On your knees, as I recall."

Kenshin's shoulders heaved, his breath coming short and hard. Some dark liquid trickled from between his clenched fingers. Kaoru's stomach twisted. She clung to the wall, knees weak at the scene unfolding before her and the waves of molten fury slamming against her from where Mr. Hiko stood at her side.

"Which is where you should be now." Kanryu came to a stop in front of Kenshin. "It's your natural state." He flicked a hand out and down, in a simple command. "Down."

With a strangled sob, Kenshin fell to one knee. His head bowed, long bangs falling to hide his face as his fingers dug into the earthen floor. Kaoru cried out, starting forward –
Mr. Hiko's arm checked her.

"No," he rumbled. Rage still poured from him: his face was nearly white with it, his pupils pinpricks in the guttering light. He dug his fingers into the wall next to her, turning his arm into a barrier even as it shook with the effort of control. "No, Kamiya. This is his."

And she wanted to protest, to duck under and around and go to Kenshin's side – except that he was right. It tore at her heart, filled her throat with sand and fear – but gods help her, he was right. This wasn't her battle to win.

Twisting her fingers in Mr. Hiko's sleeve, she watched.

~*~

Hiko watched. Kamiya's fear beat against him, cooling the rage that coiled like a snake around his bones. He didn't dare move. One twitch and he was certain that he would find himself at Kanryu's throat, and that was not his place. No matter what the man said, no matter how much filth and rot spewed from that mealy little mouth –

The circumstances were different, but the choice was the same: on the edge of everything, in the place between life and death, the student must choose. The teacher cannot choose for him. This was the way of things, the final teaching, the only gift that mattered.

His head hurt.

Kamiya sucked in a breath.

Kanryu was still smiling, his attention fixed on Kenshin shaking at his feet. The boy's chest heaved like a bellows as his fingers groped in the hard-packed earth, desperate to find purchase. His soul guttered like candle in high wind, fighting for life and failing.

"There we go." Kanryu's voice was poisonously kind. "Isn't that better? I know you've been confused, these past months, but surely you remember now what you did. Why you deserve this. She would still be alive if you hadn't fought me." He bent down, gripping Kenshin's chin, and forced his face up. Kenshin's eyes were wild, mouth gaping open as breath panted hard between his lips. Kanryu forced his head back further, baring his throat.

"Must another young girl die for you to learn your place?"

His voice was very gentle. Kenshin's hands seized like a dying man's, curling into claws as he closed his eyes, agony written on his face. Sweat beaded on his forehead, trickling down to darken the hair at his temples.

Then he relaxed. Tears leaked from the sides of his eyes, and he grew very still. Hiko tightened his hand around his sword-hilt, waiting.

Here at the very edge, there was always some uncertainty.

Kanryu's grin deepened, corpse-like in the waver ing light. Triumph bloomed in his black eyes and his grip on Kenshin's chin was almost a caress.

Wait, Hiko told himself, forced himself to hear with every pound of his blood through his tightening veins. Wait and see. Kamiya gasped beside him, jagged with grief. Her grip on his arm nearly bruised him.
"Good dog," Kanryu said fondly, and patted Kenshin on his marked cheek. Kenshin's head fell forward, all resistance gone. Kanryu smirked, straightening up, and cast his eyes about the room as Kenshin huddled at his feet. Broken.

Kamiya whispered Kenshin's name, faint with grief.

Kenshin's fingers tensed.

"Ken… shin…"

A small, cracked sound, barely audible over the silent swell of Kanryu's triumph, and if Hiko hadn't been watching so very carefully he never would have noticed that it was Kenshin's who spoke, and not Kamiya again.

"What?" Kanryu snapped his gaze down. His eyes widened, just a touch, and the mirror surface cracked.

"…Kenshin…" Kenshin's shoulder moved, just once, as though shrugging something off. His soul began to spark.

Kamiya sucked in a careful breath, half-terrified, half-hopeful.

Kenshin's eyes slid open, bright as flowers in the shadows of the lantern light.

"My name. Is. Kenshin!"

His head snapped up and Kenshin blazed, the end up his name sliding into an inarticulate howl as he surged to his feet. Kanryu stumbled back, long limbs flailing like an overturned spider. Kenshin slammed him against the wall before he could blink, forearm pressed hard against his throat.

"Kenshin! Kenshin!" He screamed his name like a man possessed, his eyes furious and focused and utterly human. "My name is Kenshin!"

Kanryu scrabbled at Kenshin's arm, choked whimpers stuttering from his half-crushed throat like a wounded animal, features distorted in fear. Kenshin slammed his free hand into the wall next to Kanryu's face and Kanryu flinched. He leaned in close, looking hard into Kanryu's eyes.

"Say. My. Name."

Kanryu stared up at him, shriveling.

"…Kenshin…" he wheezed, fingers digging helplessly into the arm that held him pinned.

He let Kanryu fall. Kanryu crumpled to the ground in a disjointed heap, cringing back against the stone. Kenshin drew his sword, shaking, and raised it until the tip was level with Kanryu's nose. Tears streamed down his face, long years of them pouring out unchecked even as his eyes were far too clear.

"I choose," Kenshin said, voice tight and low. "I. I choose. I choose! Do you understand?"

Kanryu watched the sword with a horrified fascination, a mouse pinned under the hawk's gaze. He was weeping with terror, snot bubbling and running down his face.

"Do you understand?" Even Kamiya flinched at the fury in Kenshin's voice. Kanryu licked his lips, glancing up at Kenshin.
"Yes," he said, voice cracking. "Yes, I understand, please – please don't – please!" His voice was high and cracking, desperate. Kenshin's lips curled in a silent snarl.

He raised the blade.

Kanryu squeezed his eyes shut, cowering.

The blade fell like a star. Kanryu's glasses broke, severed neatly at the bridge across his nose. They shattered as they hit the ground with a sound like bells ringing far away, through fog and over mountains.

Kanryu didn't open his eyes: he only shook, curled tight as a pillbug pulled from under its rock. Kenshin stared down at him, standing tall.

"I choose," he said again, softly. "I choose."

~*~

Kaoru ducked under Hiko's arm and took half a step into the underground chamber. Kenshin turned away from Kanryu, searching, and something in his eyes gave way when he saw her.

"…Miss Kaoru."

She was there to catch him as he fell, curling into her like an exhausted child. He was feverish and trembling, tears falling from his face to soak her shirt. She shook a little herself, holding him.

"I choose," he muttered, clinging to her shoulders. "I. I. – "

"Yes," she murmured back, holding him as tight as she could. "Yes, yes, you were so brave…"

He shuddered in her arms, tucking his face into her neck. Kaoru brushed her hand across his hair and down his back, cradling him close as her heart finally slowed. Mr. Hiko watched them, saying nothing. There was a curious sort of light in his eyes, something that was not quite softness, not quite pity.

"Mr. Hiko." She looked up at him, uncertain. "What are you going to do?"

A small tilt of her head towards Kanryu huddled against the wall made her meaning clear. Mr. Hiko looked at the slaver for a long time, as the queer not-pity faded from his eyes.

He smiled. There was no mercy in it.

"Nothing," he said, turning back to her and Kenshin, "for the moment. Come along, Kamiya." That strange softness was back, in his eyes and his voice, and the way he swept his cloak around them. "It's time you were getting home."

~*~

They emerged from the depths of the manor into a kind of dazed half-chaos. The leaders among the rebellion had finally begun to establish some kind of order. Men with stretchers moved among the fallen, looking for those wounded who still lived; here and there more exhausted soldiers guarded captives bound to one another like sheaves of wheat.

Katsu saw them and hurried over, pushing strands of his long hair out of his face. He wasn't hurt, and Kaoru was glad, as glad as she could be with exhaustion tugging at her like sodden clothing.
"Did you find him?" His eyes were tired and eager.

Kaoru's stomach lurched. She'd forgotten – of course, of course the rebellion had expected them to kill Kanryu, not to let him go – and how to explain the importance of it, that Kanryu had broken because of Kenshin's choice and it meant so much more than his death ever could, when she herself didn't quite understand?

She opened her mouth to try –

"No." Mr. Hiko shook his head, weariness etched in his features. "We just missed him. He's gone to ground."

"Damn." Katsu bit his lower lip. "Any idea where?"

"A few." Hiko shrugged. "Where's Shinomori?"

"Triage." Katsu jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. "Do any of you need medical care?"

"Kenshin does." It was hard to keep her voice steady. Kaoru let it waver. "He got cut. On his arm."

Katsu gave them a single assessing glance and Kaoru wondered what he saw – her, of course, smoke-stained and pale, and Kenshin with his arm around her neck, pressed hard against her side. His wounded arm hung immobile, now that there was no need to ignore it, and the blood had turned his brown sleeve a mottled black.

"He can walk?"

"Yes, with help."

"Then we can't spare a stretcher," Katsu said, in that brisk way he had when he felt badly about what he was saying. "Sorry, Kamiya."

"It's all right." Kaoru adjusted her arm around Kenshin's waist. "We'll get there just fine."

They picked their way across the aftermath, blinking in the bright morning sun. It wasn't far past dawn. The night's dew was steaming off the grass, rising like ghosts in the warming air. Kaoru shuddered as they passed a cluster of trampled roses, their horrible reek blessedly drowned by the lingering scent of gunpowder.

I hope someone burns them, she thought.

"Why did you lie?" she said, instead. Mr. Hiko smirked down at her, face shadowed in the angled light of morning.

"What good would the truth do?" His voice was too solemn for his face, or maybe it was only that her light head that had things seeming out of sync. The world was too bright, too achingly real – Kenshin too warm against her side, breathing deep and even as she steered him across the green, steaming lawn.

"I…" She closed her eyes for a moment, dizzy. "I don't know…"

Mr. Hiko's hand rested, for a moment, on her shoulder.

"Have Kenshin seen to. Then go home. Rest." he told her, quietly. "You've done warrior's work, today."
And she wasn't sure, exactly, what he'd meant, but it was easier to just do as he said.

Kaoru brought Kenshin to triage, where Dr. Oguni bustled between rows of wounded. Yahiko orbiting him like a half-grown moon, if moons sometimes shot off on their own trajectories to fetch and carry. Megumi was there, too, lying on a pallet with her dark-rimmed eyes sunken and closed in her pale face. Sano hovered nearby, not quite waiting at her bedside. And Aoshi Shinomori was there, as Katsu had said; his stomach was bandaged, and he held himself like a man prepared to die. Mr. Hiko went to speak with them: they conversed only briefly, in low tones that did not carry.

She thought about being curious – but she was so tired.

Rest, he'd told her, and try as she might she couldn't see why not.

So she had Kenshin's arm seen to and then she went home, with Yahiko's assurances that he would follow before dark. She went home, half-carrying Kenshin though streets that shuddered and whispered with confusion as the rebels and their allies established what order they could – the shōgun was fled, the shōgun was dead, blessed Hachiman himself had manifest to fight for the rebels, for the shōgunate, for a lark –

And she wanted to care, she really did, but the world seemed terribly far away. Except for the eyes of the few slaves she saw out in the streets: those eyes followed her like lanterns in the fog, and she couldn't bring herself to meet their brightness.

Kenshin didn't speak, not once. He only breathed and clung to her and would not let go, not even when she made him up a futon so he could rest, as the doctor had said he should. And she had intended only to stay by his side until he slept and she could slip away to do – she didn't know what – something –

But she was so tired. A kind of dreadful, terrified glee had filled her to the brim, fizzing her blood and sharpening her senses as it carried her through blood and battle and far above fear. Now that the battle was over it was leaking from her bones like floodwaters receding, leaving only leaden exhaustion in its wake. And fear – so much fear that she could barely think. All she wanted to do was hide.

She was so tired.

When Yahiko came home, alight with news and hope and plans (because they'd won, they'd won, the shōgunate was scattered and running and it would all be over by the New Year) he found Kaoru and Kenshin curled together like children, her arms wrapped tight around him and his face buried in her shoulder.

He let them sleep.
give you back the open sky

Chapter Notes

Well, here we come to the very end at last
At least, until the sequel.

Last chapter & epilogue - enjoy.

All things considered, that could have gone worse.

Kanryu pushed the bridge of his new glasses up his nose, considering the situation. The manslayer had a new master – mistress – but that was his own fault for leaving his obsolete weapons around where anyone could pick them up. Overconfidence. In the future, he’d be careful to have them destroyed. And Megumi – dear Megumi – had betrayed him, but it was hardly the first time. No permanent harm done, although she had set him back a few years. He would find her, when all this was over, and make sure that she could never do it again.

The situation was unfortunate. But he was alive, with allies in Europe and China, and he would rebuild. The young woman, Kamiya, had made an amateur’s mistake, as he’d thought she might, choosing to send a message rather than eliminate him. Samurai arrogance. Perhaps, in the time it would take him to regroup, she would grow more discerning in her use of power. In a few years, she might make for an interesting opponent. If she survived that long. He doubted that she realized the conflagration she’d unleashed: even the manslayer wouldn't be enough to protect her from the lower orders. They would run wild, like children deprived of their parents, and lay waste to all they touched.

Then he would come, a savior, and rebuild the world as it should be. A place for everyone and everyone in their place. Calm order, serenity, and peaceful acceptance of natural law. And, finally, he would rid humanity of its primal sin: its false, foolish belief that freedom meant anything more than mindless savagery.

His stomach contracted. The candleflame flickered in a draft from the door, and he stood to close it. The safehouse was old, creaky and unused, hardly the kind of place anyone would expect to find him. That was why it had been chosen. No one outside of his innermost circle knew its location, not even his dear doctor.

Yet unease still pricked under his skin, sharp as his mother’s sewing needles. They had scattered like tiny stars, spinning across the floor as Father knocked her down the first, fifth, hundredth time…

*It was my fault*, she'd told him, smiling past the bruise that squatted in the corner of her mouth like an ugly purple toad. *I should have heard him the first time.*

*Yes*, he agreed with her across the years, *you should have.*

Kanryu swallowed down bile. He took his glasses off and cleaned them, carefully. Then he turned to go back to his papers.

There was a man sitting behind his desk, enveloped in the thick white cloak. His eyes were dark and
hard as diamonds, staring into Kanryu's with a cobra's calm regard.

Kanryu opened his mouth to scream and found that he could not. His jaw worked soundlessly, his breath panting hard in his ears.

The man stood. Muscle turned against straining bone as Kanryu fought to run and found that his body would not obey him. The man's eyes held him, turned the air to ice and stone.

Kanryu's knees gave way.

The man stepped out of the light. Shadows reached across his angular features and Kanryu recognized him, somewhere under the fear that tore across his mind like lightning. He had been there, last night. With Kamiya.

The man drew his sword, examining it for a moment. It gleamed red and orange in the reflected candlelight. The air tightened, bearing down on Kanryu as the man drew closer, his calm expression never wavering.

Kanryu's breath strangled in his lungs. Warmth trickled down his legs, the sharp reek of urine wafting up to his nostrils. He dangled over a void, helpless and dizzy. Suddenly he remembered the manslayer, curled in his own filth and shuddering as the drug tore through his system.

The tip of the man's sword came to rest just below the lump in Kanryu's throat, cool and sharp, sharp as his mother's needles. And, just for a moment, the terrible weight lifted.

"...mercy," Kanryu choked out, remembering. Red hair in the lamplight, and eyes like an outraged hawk's: his own voice, begging and babbling and no, no, he hadn't been afraid, he'd been acting, it had all been a trick, he was nothing like the lower orders who wept and screamed and pissed themselves, begging for a mercy that they did not deserve –

The man tilted his head slightly, considering.

Hot tears built behind Kanryu's eyes, unshed. The sword was too sharp to bear his lies.

He was, and had always been, so very afraid to die.

"No," the man said, finally, and slid the blade home.

~*~

Hiko wiped his blade dispassionately, careful to take off every last speck of blood. It would be unseemly for the refuse of such a creature to linger on Winter Moon; she was an old blade, rich in history and meaning, and deserved better. But one uses the tools at hand.

Kanryu's body lay limp against the floor, blood smearing like spilled paint where it had fallen against the wall. He looked mildly surprised, as dead men tended to. No one ever saw it coming.

That was done, then.

Hiko sheathed the blade, sighing, and used his foot to shove the body out of the way of the door. Damned if he was leaving the way he'd come in: his cloak had snagged and torn a little on the windowpane.

At least Shinomori had been right about the location of the safehouse. It had been a risk, letting Kanryu go, but Kenshin had needed the victory. It would have been wrong to kill Kanryu after
Kenshin had spared his life: if anyone had had the right to take it, it was his wayward student. That had been Kenshin's battle, and Kenshin had won it in his way. And there was a certain irony in it, a kind of *correctness* in allowing Kanryu to believe that he had escaped. There can be no despair without hope, after all, and those few seconds before dying were not enough to balance the scales – but they were something. A gesture of acknowledgement towards the souls he'd trapped in hell.

The night breeze curled around Hiko's face like a benediction as he stepped outside. He closed his eyes, smelling smoke and salt on the wind. It would be dawn soon. He thought, briefly, about going to Kamiya's school, checking in on her and his wayward student, but – no. Better to let them be, for now.

The promise was kept, the trash of the old era dealt with. What would come next was not for him to say.

With a sigh, Hiko shrugged his cloak back into place and walked away.

~*~

Megumi opened her eyes and, seeing white, thought *so I made it after all.* Which came as something of a surprise.

But heaven, she thought with her next breath, has no pain. And in heaven, you don't need to breathe. And her breath was laboring through her lungs in time with the tide of red pain lancing down to the marrow of her bones, so this was not, in fact, heaven, and she was still alive.

She was still alive.

She studied the clinic's white ceiling, perplexed, but it held no answers for her.

"Fox?" Sano's voice called from outside her field of vision, soft and roughened with ill-use. "…Megumi?"

Then he was beside her, looking down on her where she lay, his disreputable hair even more tangled than usual. Plaster and dust were caught in it, lending him a ghostly look, and he carried the faint smell of gunpowder and stone. His dark eyes were soft and pleading.

"Megumi?" he asked again. She nodded, wincing.

"How…?" Her throat was dry; she coughed, her chest trapped in a vise. "How… long?"

"A day and a night, near enough." Relief curled around the edge of his voice. He reached out, fingers shaking, and brushed away an errant strand of hair. "Doc thought y'might be out for longer."

"What happened?" She was croaking like a toad. "Did we…?"

"Yeah." The tips of his fingers rested at her hairline, points of warmth and contact in the pain that held her like a lover. "We've got Edo. Couple 'a other cities, too. It's on, Fox, an' we're doin' okay, so far."

"Good." She sighed it out between pulses of agony. "Kan… ryu?"

"Gone." Sano shook his head, stroking gently at her hair. He didn't seem to realize what he was doing. "Missy an' that lot tried t'take him out. He got away, but we broke his organization. We'll find 'im."
"Not good," was all she could think to say, head throbbing in time with her broken body. "Find him. Have to…"

"We will." His eyes were a promise. "We will."

There was more she wanted to say, but the words shifted and dissolved, slipping through her fingers. Her throat hurt – everything hurt – and she was so…

"Could you…?"

"Yeah?" His shoulders tensed.

"Water. Please."

"Sure thing," he said, relaxing, and stood up. The loss of his touch left a momentary void. "Don't go anywhere, now."

Sano flashed her a feeble smile to match the feeble joke, and the futility of it more than the humor made her wheeze out a single, painful laugh. Then he was gone, and she took stock.

Pain. Pain was good. Pain meant that her spine hadn't broken: pain meant she still had a functional nervous system, and some hope of recovery. If she wanted to recover.

If she wanted to.

She wished, pointlessly, that Sano had not been at her bedside. The decision was an easy one without him; with him, it was impossible.

Megumi turned her head, unable to bear the blankness of the ceiling any longer. Shinomori was propped against the wall beside her, resting his head on one bent knee. His coat was off, piled in a heap beside him, his sword resting on the cloth like a warning. There was blood seeping through his shirt, and a streak of white bandages where it lifted away from his hips. His eyes were closed.

He looked very small.

"So," she said out loud, in the vague hope that he might respond. "We're still alive."

Shinomori stirred, lifting his head. His eyes opened, green as new spring and rimmed with red as though he hadn't slept, or had been weeping.

"Yes," he said simply.

"You're hurt."

"As are you."

She exhaled, not quite a laugh.

"How bad is it?" she asked, because Dr. Oguni wasn't there and Sano would try to make it gentle.

"Your legs were crushed," he told her, dispassionate as always. She appreciated it. "But you will survive."

"I see." She coughed again, straining against her battered ribs. "And you?"

"A cut. Not deep." He shifted. "I will heal."
"What else?"

They had lived and worked together too long, now, to keep secrets. She knew his mask as he knew hers: Aoshi Shinomori did not have emotions, did not experience fatigue, or pain, or hunger. This was the lie he told himself in order to survive, to sever self from body and be the monster his duties demanded of him. As she had severed herself, and been Kanryu's perfect victim.

But his coat was off, pain written in his slumped shoulders, and his eyes were red with exhaustion or stifled tears.

"Tell me," she said, without judgment, and he looked away.

"Misao is alive."

It took her a moment to remember who Misao was.

"I see." She couldn't think of anything else to say.

Shinomori's breath hitched, once.

"Han'nya… before he died…" Another deep breath. "She was sold. Not killed."

"Where?"

He closed his eyes.

"To Hougei House."

Megumi's eyes widened, grief and horror twining dully around the overwhelming pain. Hougei House trained pleasure-slaves.

"I'm sorry," she said, after too much time had passed.

"She is alive," he said again, and his fingers clenched into a fist. The sight curdled in her like blood on a raw nerve. She was alive, and Shinomori was in pain. What more signs did she need that the world was spinning off its axis?

"She may be," Megumi agreed, unable to do otherwise. He was burning, now, bloodshot eyes like balefire in his thin, pale face.

"I will find her." His hand loosened, slowly, fingers relaxing through an effort of will that blanched his skin.

She might have said more – the words were lining up on her tongue, practical and goal-oriented as he would appreciate – but then Sano padded back into the room, carrying a cup of water.

"Sagara." Shinomori acknowledged him, standing. "Takani. We will speak later."

He left, then, taking his sword and coat with him. He would put them on in the hall and be himself again: Aoshi Shinomori, who felt nothing and did what was necessary. That was better, perhaps. It frightened her to see him so painfully human.

Sano knelt at her side.

"Can you sit up?"
"I'm not sure."

He slid an arm around her shoulders, easing her up. She flinched and gasped, pain singing through her. It was already growing familiar, almost comforting. Like an old friend, long absent, come at last to stay.

Megumi tried to take the cup from him, but only folded her fingers over his. Together they raised it to her lips and she drank. Small sips, cool and pleasant, sluicing down her cracked and aching throat. Sano was warm and solid behind her, easy to lean against.

"Better?" he asked, when she was done.

"Yes," she lied.

~*~

Kaoru woke slow and heavy, as if from long burial. For a few moments after she'd left sleep she couldn't do more than lie in bed, eyes closed, and listen to the world around her. It was quiet – but a good quiet – broken only by the curious chatter of birdsong and the occasional cry of a street peddler.

What brought her from the safety of her bed was not her sense of duty but the insistent pressing of her bladder, and the cotton taste in her mouth. She opened her eyes as she sat up, blinking in the mid-morning light. Someone had opened the external doors of her bedroom to let the fresh air in. It tasted like the smell after rain.

Kenshin wasn't in her room.

There was a cup of water at her bedside and she took a mouthful, intending only to ease the dryness. Her head hurt and she drank the whole thing down. Then she got up, still in her smoky, sweat-stained clothes, and made for the privy. Every part of her ached.

The dojo seemed empty. Yahiko wasn't about: she'd have heard him clattering. But as she emerged after seeing to her body's needs she saw a thin stream of smoke rising against the clear new sky, like the ghost of a dragon, and knew that someone must be in the kitchen.

Kenshin. Maybe. Hopefully? She didn't know, anymore, what she was supposed to feel. He had changed, down below Kanryu's manor, between the flickering shadows. He had chosen, and overcome, and –

And changed. She'd seen it in his eyes, his fierce eyes, almost too human to bear. He'd changed and chosen and things would be different, now. For better or worse. She knew the slave; she'd never met the man. Couldn't begin to think what he'd make of her.

She found herself wishing, selfishly, that he would think kindly of her.

Her hair still smelled of blood and gunpowder, so she went to clean herself and change before she went to see him. It wouldn't do to go to their first meeting trailing battle-reek behind her.

Kaoru stepped into the dining room wearing a fresh set of training clothes, because her ribs had been too sore to wear an obi. She'd scrubbed until she couldn't smell anything on herself but soap, and tied her hair back with a ribbon. A new one, clean and blue as the summer sky.

"Good morning," she said to Kenshin's back. He was standing in front of the stove, stirring the morning soup, and as she spoke he had just raised a spoonful to his lips to check the taste. He put it
"Good morning, Miss Kaoru," he said, and bowed low. His ponytail draped over his shoulder, falling in his face. His back curved downward, submissive.

Her heart lurched, and she was suddenly afraid.

"When will breakfast be ready?" She made herself ask normally, deciding to believe that she'd just misunderstood. After all, he hadn't knelt to bow, as he always had before.

"Very soon, Miss Kaoru." He straightened but kept his eyes cast down and Kaoru's stomach twisted, a terrible certainty building behind her eyes.

"Oh." Her smile came slowly, too obviously a mask. "I'll – I'll just wait, then."

She knelt at the table and he turned back to his cooking, all constrained grace and careful elegance. Pleasing to the eye.

Suddenly she wasn't very hungry.

_It's nothing_, she told herself. He was just… uncertain, as she was. It had been a terrible night for them both. He needed time, that was all, a little time to settle in, but he _had_ changed. Kanryu's power over him had dissolved like ice in the summer sun before the blaze of his conviction, in that moment when he'd surged to his feet and claimed his name. She'd _seen_ it.

The gate door slammed shut and Yahiko sauntered in a few minutes later, whistling.

"You're up!" He grinned at her. "'Bout time. I was starting to worry, but Dr. Oguni said it was okay…"

"Worry?"

"You were asleep all yesterday, both of you," Yahiko said, lacing his fingers together and stretching his arms high above his head. "The doctor said that's pretty normal, though, for people who've been under a lot of stress."

"All of yesterday?" Kaoru touched her fingers to her lips, numb with shock. "What – what happened?"

"We've got Edo." Yahiko crossed his legs and dropped down into his usual seat, elation sparkling in his eyes. It was strange, to see him so joyful when she still felt like a scraped-out jar. "And a bunch of other cities, too. The shogunate's on the run!"

He was practically crowing as he filled her in. The city had been in a panic until the rebels restored order, making sure shops and markets and theatres stayed open, and beginning the slow process of freeing every slave in the city.

"I mean, technically, they're free already." Yahiko made a so-so gesture, tilting his flattened hand quickly from one side to another. "But most of 'em don't have anywhere to go except back to their masters or to one of the free provinces down south, so there's all these caravans getting organized to take anyone who wants to leave down to Choshu and Satsuma. It should be pretty safe there: they're behind the lines. And there's lots of freedmen's villages and stuff down there, so there's people to help out, you know?"

"Yes." Kaoru knew: the settlements in the south were one of the last stops on the way out of Japan.
for escaped slaves. Sometimes they stayed there, in the free south; other times they went overseas, either because they feared their masters or knew for a fact that their masters were looking for them. The free provinces, where slavery was forbidden, were safe havens. Although masters could retrieve their slaves, they had to seek permission first, and there were – had been – enough abolitionists in the local governments down south to alert the freedmen who were in danger.

"What about those who don't want to leave?" she asked, to take her mind off Kenshin quietly loading a serving tray.

Yahiko shrugged. "No one's really sure. We're tryin' to get something set up. A lot of them ran away as soon as the news broke, set up camps here and there. Sometimes their masters tried to get them to come back." He shifted, as if uncomfortable. "Some people got hurt. But mostly it's under control."

"I see." She didn't know what else to say. There was a terrible unreality to the scene: everything was normal, except not. Everything was what she had hoped for, except the one thing she had most wanted.

Kenshin brought out breakfast – only two trays, Kaoru noticed, heart aching – and knelt with the rice bucket her side, head bowed to make himself small. Ready to serve.

Her breath caught jagged in her chest.

"The city's safe, then?" she managed to say, through numb lips and the shards piercing her heart.

"As it ever is." Yahiko's cheerful look had faltered when Kenshin knelt beside her, melting into an unspoken question. She could only look at him, helpless.

"That's good," she said, beginning to pick at her food. Whatever was going on – she couldn't let Kenshin know how frightened she was. Not until she was sure. Because if he was changed, it would insult him and if he wasn't – oh gods above, if he wasn't – it would only frighten him, make him think she disapproved. "I'd like to visit Megumi, if I can."

Megumi would know. Megumi always knew.

"Good idea," Yahiko said, too brightly, his eyes flicking to Kenshin and then away. "Let's go after breakfast, okay?"

~*~

Kenshin trotted along behind Kaoru in his accustomed place: two steps behind her, and one to the left. She kept glancing back at him, worry straining her already-strained features, and Yahiko watched them both with unease. This wasn't right. Kenshin had been getting better: the day he'd run away and then come home, he'd been different. Less sure, more scattered, but more like a person than a well-trained dog. A person in terrible pain, but still a person.

The city was quiet, holding its breath to see what would happen next. Only a few people were about, running errands that simply couldn't be put off, and they kept their heads down, moving quickly about their business. Some of them were dressed far too finely for the street, elegant silk robes dragging in the dust, and looked on the verge of tears or screaming. Former masters, he thought, deprived of slaves to run their errands for them, or drive their carriages, or carry their palanquins.

His fierce satisfaction at the sight almost overwhelmed the anxiety knotting in his gut.

Soldiers and policemen were out in force, intermingled. The soldiers were rebels: the policemen were… the police. It had come as a surprise that they accepted the change in government so quickly,
but apparently saw themselves as protectors of order and the safety of the citizenry above all else. A strange, Western thought – Katsu had muttered something about a Robert Peel – but one that the abolitionists were happy to have bent to their own ends. Of course, they were nobody's fools, and that was why the soldiers were mixed with the officers. Just in case anyone should get any clever ideas.

Kaoru stopped at the bridge just before the market. It was open, merchants throughout the city having been bribed and coaxed into continuing business as usual. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and Kenshin watched her, alert to her every mood and movement as he always was. Like his life depended on anticipating her.

"Why don't you two go on ahead?" she said finally, smiling false and cheerful. "There's a little shopping to be done, and we don't want to overwhelm Megumi, right?"

"Sure thing." Yahiko shoved his hands in his pockets, drifting over to stand near Kenshin. "Should we meet up with you?"

"Oh, just go home if I'm not done by the time you are," she said airily, though her fingers trembled. "I'll meet you there."

"Miss Kaoru…" Distress flickered in Kenshin's face. He took a step towards her, then halted.

"It's all right." She beamed at Kenshin, calm as a mask. "Go with Yahiko, okay? He won't be able to carry everything home by himself."

Yahiko watched, carefully, wondering. Kenshin's shoulders tensed; then he smoothed himself, somehow, and bowed with perfect, obedient surrender.

"Yes, Miss Kaoru."

They parted, Kaoru heading for the clinic and Kenshin walking calmly just a step behind Yahiko. Not as far and formal as he was when he followed Kaoru, and Yahiko couldn't help thinking that that might be a good sign, maybe.

The market was as subdued as the rest of the city, the shops and stalls mostly empty. There really hadn't been much shopping that needed to be done, and Yahiko could have handled most of it himself. But Kaoru hadn't wanted Kenshin there when she spoke with Megumi, probably because she was going to talk about Kenshin, about why he'd gone back to being – being her slave – as though nothing had changed when something had and they had all seen it.

Something had changed. But Kenshin didn't seem to want it to, and that didn't make any sense. The other slaves in Edo had run to freedom, nearly overwhelming the abolitionist government as it tried to get them all settled. Why was Kenshin hanging back?

Yahiko shook his head, trying not to think about it, and wandered over to the stall that Kenshin was standing at. His head was bowed as he examined a row of seedlings.

"Thinking of getting something for the garden?"

Kenshin started, hesitating. Then he nodded.

"What're you thinking of?"

He gestured to the lower rack, silently. The merchant watched, curious and a little suspicious. There was no one else in the market bearing a slave-brand.
"How much?" Yahiko asked the merchant, who told him. Kenshin seemed to stiffen, but not in a bad way. More surprised than afraid.

"We've got enough left over," Yahiko said. "Do you want to get them? It's planting season, right?"

"...yes, young sir." Kenshin knelt to gather the seedlings. He didn't say anything more. Yahiko passed some coins over.

"This'll be enough, right?"

The merchant nodded. He looked about to ask a question but Yahiko turned his back, sharply, and helped load the seedlings in with everything else. Kenshin wasn't anybody's damn business, and he didn't owe an explanation to anyone.

~*~

Megumi was sitting up when Kaoru entered the room, looking absently out at the garden through the open doors. She didn't turn her head when Kaoru closed the door behind her.

"Good morning, Kamiya."

"Good morning, Megumi," Kaoru said, a little uncertain. She'd only woken up today, Dr. Oguni had said. Her legs had been crushed in the explosion she'd set off, and it was anyone's guess whether she'd ever walk again. "How are...?"

Her voice trailed away before she could finish asking the stupid question. Megumi smirked.

"The pain is a little less, thanks to Dr. Oguni's treatment." The sun slanted bright through the open doors. Kaoru could hear the girls playing in the distance, shrieking with laughter. "What do you need?"

"What?" Kaoru blinked, taken aback. "I -"

"No one ever comes to me unless they need something," she said archly. But the smirk that played over her lips was somehow soft, and almost sad.

"That's not why - I mean - I did want to ask you something, but I was worried about you, too!" Kaoru blurted out, hot with guilt. Because she'd known Megumi that had been hurt and it had still come close second Kenshin, and her fears for him. "Really, I -"

"Calm down." The small, sad smile deepened, becoming real. "I was only teasing. I'm a doctor, after all; helping people is my job."

Then, finally, she turned to face Kaoru. The late morning light streamed in around her, casting her pale face in shadows and gleaming off the highlights in her hair. Her eyes were dark, bloodshot and exhausted, as if she had been crying.

"Besides, there was something I wanted to ask you."

"...what's that?" Kaoru's fingers worked into her collar, her skin tight and cold and tingling with it.

"You were there, weren't you?" The blanket that covered Megumi's lap and hid her broken legs from view twisted slightly as her fingers subtly clenched. "With Kanryu. At the end."

"Well... yes. Kenshin and Mr. Hiko, too..."
"Tell me." Megumi's eyes were hot, her voice direct. "Tell me what happened. And tell me the truth."

For brief, terrible moment, Kaoru thought about lying. Then she remembered who she was, and what Megumi had done – thought of her walking alone and unarmored into hell, for the sake of the uncounted suffering whom she would never know – and was ashamed.

She knelt next to Megumi's futon and told her. Megumi listened fiercely, without interrupting, even when Kaoru stumbled in the telling. Her face never once betrayed her feelings.

After Kaoru had finished, Megumi lowered her gaze and fell silent for a long while. Kaoru kept her eyes carefully away, not wanting to impose. The porch chime rang softly as a low wind blew.

"...I see," Megumi said at long last, folding her delicate hands on her lap. "And how has Kenshin been, since then?"

"That's what I came to ask you about." Kaoru fidgeted, her fingers twining around themselves and tangling in her skirts. "He's... well..."

She took a deep breath.

"He's acting exactly the same!" It came out in a jumble, the words tripping over her tongue. "He's still – calling me 'Miss Kaoru,' and bowing, and doing everything I say and – and I thought – it seemed like he would be different, after what he did. After he was so strong..."

Kaoru swallowed, heart pulsing in her throat.

"I thought... I thought he would be... better..."

Megumi only looked at her, dark and crisp across the white expanse of matting and rice paper.

"Kamiya..." Pity dawned in her face and Kaoru felt it like a blow. "Didn't I tell you, when all this started, that he might need you for the rest of his life?"

"It may be that he will never be fixed, never be whole..."

The memory echoed like a dirge. Two months – a lifetime ago – when they had knelt across from each other and the cooling pot of tea, and the world had shifted around her.

"No!" The cry ripped from her lips like a bandage left to rot in a half-healed wound. "But – he's done so much, these past few days, made so many choices – he's the one who went and got the vial. He chose that! He chose to remember – and to face Kanryu – and to let him go – he can choose, Megumi, I've seen it. He's not the same as he was!"

"Yes, he can choose." Megumi raised her hand to stave off another outburst. "But why should he? Think, Kaoru."

Her face was stern and gentle as a wooden god in its shrine, and just as unforgiving.

"He has been enslaved, mind and body, for over ten years. Almost half his life. Yes, he can choose for himself now – but why should he? Why does he need to be free, when he has you?"

"Me?" Kaoru parroted inanely, her head beginning to spin and swarm with her pounding blood.

"You are kind," Megumi said softly. "Kind, and gentle, and good. If he stays with you – if he stays yours – then those things will be in his life forever. Why would he choose freedom, with all its
"complications, when he could have that certainty?"

"But – I mean, freedom – it's…"

"Terrifying, Kamiya. You should know that by now." Megumi's eyes were the same, the same as they had been the day she'd found Kenshin, the day she'd chosen this. Chosen him. They bored into her, pinning her down and making her see what she did not wish to see. "And for Kenshin, impossible to conceive of. He's never known it, not truly, not as a grown man."

Kaoru's breath caught in her lungs, jagged and sharp.

"From what you've said, and what I've seen – yes, Kaoru, he can choose now. And he has chosen you."

There was too much pity in Megumi's eyes; it hurt, and Kaoru had to look away. Her throat was swollen, thick with tears that would not come. It took so much energy to cry.

"So… I've trapped him." The world pressed down on her like shroud. "He'll never be free."

Megumi gave her a long, measuring look.

"That," she said delicately, "remains to be seen."

~*~

Megumi lay in her bed for a long while after Kaoru left, wondering if she had done the right thing.

She hadn't lied. That was important. But she could have gentled the truth and she hadn't: instead she had laid it out as clearly as she could, as clearly as she should have done when all this had first started, when the girl had knelt across from her all snapdragon fire and insisted on the path that would lead to her ruin.

She hadn't done it then, so she'd done it now. And maybe it was right, and maybe it was wrong, but it was done and there was no undoing it.

With long sigh, she let her eyes slide shut.

Kanryu was dead. She knew that as she knew the weight of her bones. Kenshin's teacher would not have let him go, not after that; he had only spared the man in that moment to give Kenshin his victory. Kanryu was dead and had been humiliated before he died. He had known helplessness. He had been afraid.

She wanted to feel triumph. Instead she felt nothing at all.

Sagara came into the room a short while later, to sit at her bedside and fret over her. He fretted rather loudly, for all he kept his mouth shut, and his tender worry was almost too much to bear.

She had never intended to survive this. That had all been his doing, for his sake and not hers. No one ever sought her out, except when they wanted something from her. And she was so tired of giving.

But his hands when he brushed her hair back from her face were gentle, and his smile was warm, and she thought, maybe, that it could be enough that he loved her.

If she allowed it.

~*~
Kaoru's head hurt. It was heavy, aching with thoughts that chased themselves in circles, resolving nothing. She couldn't stop thinking, but what she thought made nothing clearer and gave her no comfort.

Megumi couldn't be right. But Megumi had never been wrong, not about something this important. Megumi understood what had been done to him in intimate, violent ways that Kaoru could never dream. And there was an awful, inexorable truth to what she'd said – as if she'd only put words around what Kaoru already knew, in her most secret heart.

He has chosen you.

It haunted her, nipping at her heels as she hurried home through too-silent streets, wishing the world was other than it was. And it curled around her heart, whispering poison – or truth – when she stepped through the gate to find Kenshin at work in his garden. Seedlings stood next to him, fanned out like little green soldiers, and his hands cradled them like something precious as he slid each one into its proper place and tucked soil gently around them.

"Oh!" She came to a halt, briefly, then went over to have a closer look. "What are you planting?"

He didn't stiffen as she approached. Instead he seemed to – to melt, almost, relaxing into her presence like leaf turning to follow the sun across the sky. As if his world had been incomplete without her.

She felt suddenly sick.

"Daisies, Miss Kaoru." He brushed his hands off on his thighs, beginning to stand. "Should this unworthy one begin lunch?"

"No, no." She waved her hand too lightly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as the breeze tugged at her. "Finish this, first. If you want to, I mean."

She didn't flinch at his words – this unworthy one – she didn't dare. She was the mistress, and she must never be uncertain or afraid.

Kenshin settled and resumed his planting. He leaned into her space as he worked, close enough that she could have reached out and stroked his hair. Her skin remembered – too well – how it felt, sliding soft and silk between her fingers.

He has chosen you

But not truly. He'd chosen her for the same reason that he'd come to trust her: because he knew nothing else. The way a child trusts their parents, wants to stay with them no matter what – because she was all he had, all that he could be certain of.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way. He was supposed to withdraw, not cleave closer: to leave, not stay. To grow and become. Not settle for the first kindness to come his way.

"Some flowers will be nice," she said absently, thinking of riotous flowers that bloomed each spring in her neighbor's yard. A sea of red and white blossoming among the green, petals lying thick as snowfall: so many petals that it seemed the flowers would burst. "The peonies will be blooming soon, I think."

Peonies for courage, her mother had told her, gathering flowers to arrange at the table. Courage and honor, and a generous heart. She'd tucked one behind Kaoru's ear, laughing. Fit for a lady warrior.

"When will your daisies bloom?" she asked, suddenly afraid of her own memories. Kenshin looked
up at her, blinking in the sunlight, and for a moment he seemed almost afraid.

"Not this year, Miss Kaoru," he said, a little too quickly – as if he was trying to defend himself.

"Oh." She smiled, to reassure him, though she didn't know what had made him anxious. "Well, we can still enjoy everyone else's flowers, right?"

He ducked his head, his fingers digging deep into the rich soil.

"Yes, Miss Kaoru."

"I'll see you at lunch, then." She gave him one last smile, and left.

The day passed slowly, weighed down by that which she could neither fathom nor forget. Kenshin abandoned his garden after lunch and did the chores, instead. Kaoru and Yahiko trained. Then, in the evening, she sewed. Yahiko was hitting a growth spurt, and soon he'd need a larger kimono.

She took another bath, afterwards, changing into her sleeping clothes right after. When she came into her bedroom, Kenshin was already there. He was kneeling at the side of her futon, his head bowed, and for once he was actually wearing the bedclothes that she'd set out for him every night since his arrival. His shirt gaped open at the throat, showing the ropey scars that covered his skin and the lean muscle beneath it.

"What is it, Kenshin?"

Kaoru knelt beside him. Confusion curled through her as his fingers didn't tense in his robe, and his shoulders didn't tighten. He wasn't preparing to ask something of her.

"Miss Kaoru." He looked up at her, not quite smiling. There was nothing but absolute trust in his strange, bright eyes.

Kaoru raised her hand, uncertain, and almost reached out to touch him.

"Are you…?"

His eyes slid shut, surrendering. She snatched her hand back, seared with horror, and struggled with her own nausea.

He's chosen you...

No true choice, this. Just – need, dependence, a child groping for shelter in the dark. He had never, ever been hers to keep – and this…

"Let's get your futon set up," she suggested, fighting through her sudden urge to flee. To reject him would – would make it clear that she understood what he was offering, and she didn't dare let him know that she understood. Because he would be whole, one day – he would – and he must not remember this as what it was.

For a moment he blinked at her, confused. Then he stood in one smooth movement to help her. They lay down side-by-side, on separate beds, and she wasn't surprised when his hand clutched hers in the dark.

~*~

The next afternoon, she came home from her morning errand – visiting Katsu to find out how to make herself useful in the coming days – to find that Kenshin had removed his daisies and put peony
Sano let out a long breath, staring at Kaoru. The missy was mirror-calm, sitting across from him without a hint of emotion in her face. When had she learned to hide herself so well?

"Y'want me to take Kenshin to Choshu?"

"Yes." Her fingers seemed to press a little harder into her thighs. "There are freedman settlements there, right? People who know how to help him."

"Well, yeah." He scratched at the back of his neck. "I mean, as much as anyone can. Most folk like him…"

Sano trailed off, not needing to finish the sentence. He knew how near a damn miracle it was that Kenshin had come as far as he had; hadn't Megumi said it, over and over again? No one had ever tried to free a conditioned slave before. No one had gotten the chance. They never ran of their own accord.

Megumi…

She wasn't okay. He'd known that she wouldn't be. It still hurt, though, to feel her pull away from him even as she had to depend on him. She couldn't quite do for herself anymore, not with her legs broke, and it ate at her pride. Nothing that he said or did seemed to make it better. He'd thought – hoped – that maybe…

"Will you do it?" Kaoru interrupted his train of thought, sending it off into the dark corners of his mind, to places he didn't go, especially not lately: they were full of Megumi's slender body broken like a reed, and the cool mirrors that had stilled Kaoru's once-bright eyes. "Take him there safely, and help him settle?"

"Well… if you think it's best." He frowned, forehead creasing. "I mean, y'know him better'n anyone else. So it ain't like I can say whether or not it's a good idea, y'know?"

"I don't know if it is." She took in a small, shaky breath. "But… he can't stay here. It's not – it's not helping him anymore."

"You sure about that?"

"As sure as I can be."

"Okay, then." He stood, brushing his hands idly across his pants. "First caravan's leaving tomorrow morning. Or do y'wanna send him on the next one?"

"Tomorrow is fine," she said, a little too quickly. "It'll be easier, that way. If it's quick."

*For you or for him?* Sano didn't ask.

When he told Megumi what he'd agreed to do – that he'd be gone for a while – she nodded in approval.

"You should stay with him for a few days, once you're there." Her hair fell over her shoulders like a fallen banner. "Help him get settled, and make sure the people where he settles understand his – unique situation."
"That was the missy's plan, all right. You that eager t'get rid of me?"

He'd meant it to come out light and teasing.

Megumi lowered her eyes, tracing the pattern of her blanket.

"It's not that." Her voice was very quiet. "It's only that I – I need some time, Sagara."

Not Sano, not anymore.

"Please," she said again, with a note of pleading that hurt him to hear. "I just need some time."

"…sure." Sano swallowed, hard, forcing it down around the tangled knot in his throat, around wanting to hold her or shake her or demand answers of her as she sat there like a fortune-telling doll, and he had no coin to pay her. "I can do that."

A little more time. Fine. No big deal.

He'd waited this long.

~*~

Kenshin was taking in the laundry when Kaoru came home. Her decision engulfed her like a weighted cloak, enormous and ill-fitting, dragging behind her and slowing her as if she moved underwater.

"Kenshin," she called out, her sandals scraping across the bare, packed earth. "Are you busy?"

"No, Miss Kaoru." He turned obediently, even eagerly, and she stifled the lurch of sickness in her throat.

"Could you come and sit on the porch with me, for a moment?" It was so easy to resolve, and so hard to do. Her heart raged in her breast, seeing the simple faith in his eyes and terrified of shattering it, of letting him down. But that faith was what would destroy him, smother the sparks of his spirit when they had only just begun to catch fire again.

He wanted to be hers. And in some dark, terrible place, she wanted it too – but the choice he thought he was making was no true choice. No true choice. The one thing that she had most wanted to give him was the one thing that he could never have, so long as he stayed with her.

It hurt more than she had wanted it to, and precisely as much as she'd expected.

They sat on the edge of the porch, Kenshin kneeling with his head bowed – to be smaller than her, always smaller than her, and she had never wanted that – and Kaoru with her legs draped over the side, dangling just above the dusty ground. The air was warm with the birth of summer, clean and bright and ripening. The world was tilting towards evening, and cicadas were beginning to call. The fireflies that lived along the riverbank would be waking up, calling silently to one another in flashes of warm gold.

She stared out at the whitewashed walls of her home, afraid to face Kenshin.

"Kenshin…" The words caught in her throat. She cleared it and began again. "I'm sending you away, Kenshin."

He sucked in a quick breath, as though she'd struck him. She had to look at him, then, and her heart broke at the terror flickering in his eyes. Kenshin sank down, half in a bow, mostly crouching, like a
dog anticipating a blow.

"Miss Kaoru – " he started to say, hot and frightened.

"I'm not angry," she said quickly. "I'm not angry, really. But there's something – something you need to learn, something that I don't know how to teach you, and I'm sending you to learn it from people who do know. Who can teach you what I can't. I'm not angry, Kenshin, really. I swear I'm not."

Her voice was tangled, tearing at the seams of her composure with cracked nails and bloody teeth. Kenshin risked a glance up at her, the lines of his face still white with fear.

"Please, believe me. I can't – I can't quite explain it, not yet, but please trust me. You won't be alone – Sano will be with you, and he'll look after you until you're on your feet. And I'm not casting you out. You can come back, afterwards, if you still want to. This is your home, for as long as you want it to be."

His throat worked as he swallowed, his eyes fixed on hers. His bright, beautiful eyes, like whirling flowers, those eyes that fixed on her and followed her as if she was the north star and he was a lodestone.

"I'm not casting you out," she said again. "I just – this is something you need, and I can't give it to you. But you can come back, once you've learned it. I promise. I promise that you can always come back."

"Miss Kaoru…"

His voice had changed, subtly. Still frightened – but the heat was gone, replaced by something – something else. Something she had no name for. He held her gaze for a moment longer, searching her face for – she didn't know what for. Her vision blurred around the edges, heat building into a headache behind her eyes.

Finally – slowly, deliberately, and without fear – he bowed to her.

"As you wish, Miss Kaoru." He seemed to breathe, then, a deep breath like a pearl-diver preparing to go below. When he raised himself up again, his eyes were clear and trusting.

~*~

Kaoru didn't sleep that night. Kenshin did, curled like a cat across their futons lying side-by-side. She had made him sleep, because he and Sano would be leaving in the morning. But she checked in on him throughout the night, when she got up to stretch her legs or have a drink of water, and every time she asked herself if she was sure that this was the right thing to do.

She wasn't. Maybe she never would be. But she was sure that he couldn't stay here. If he did, he would only drown.

Instead of sleeping, Kaoru sewed. She'd set aside some clothing for Kenshin to take with him, just a few outfits and other, little things, so that he wouldn't set off with nothing. Sano would have a purse – as much as she could afford to give – and he would help Kenshin get the rest. But there was something that Sano couldn't do, so she did it: on each garment she was giving him she sewed a little green frog, the same charm she'd stitched on Yahiko's clothing. For a safe return.

Yahiko had understood, when she'd told him. It should have surprised her, but it hadn't.
He wouldn't be a little boy much longer.

The sun rose slowly, and still too quickly, and just after breakfast – a quiet affair – Sano arrived to take her charge from her. She and Yahiko saw Kenshin to the gate, the clothes and other odds and ends she'd given him – flint and tinder, bedroll and blanket, a few candles and a spare pair of sandals, extra hair-ties, various other potentially useful miscellany – bundled on his back. Sano lingered just outside, and did not come in.

"Remember, Sano's going to stay with you. He'll help you, so trust him, all right?" Her stomach tightened, heart beating fast and furious in her throat. "And remember that you can come back, once – once you've learned what you need to. If you still want to, you can come back."

"Yes, Miss Kaoru." There was a terrible longing in his eyes. She took his wrist lightly, hating herself. He trembled under her fingers.

"See?" She folded the sleeve back, showing him the little green frog nestled on the inside of the hem. "A charm. So you'll get home safely." She swallowed. "Wherever you want home to be."

It wouldn't be here, not once he was fully himself again, once he remembered. Which would be fine. That was what she'd wanted, all that she'd wanted. For him to choose, really and truly choose – not merely cling to her, afraid of the consequences if he let go.

"Yeah." Yahiko chimed in, small hands braced at his hips. "You're gonna be fine, Kenshin. Write to us once you're settled in, all right? Let us know how you're doing and all."

Kenshin ducked his head obediently. Yahiko slapped him companionably on the small of his back, the highest he could reach.

"You're gonna be fine," he said again, and stepped back.

Kenshin looked at her, trusting her. Waiting.

"Yes," she told him, smiling even as her heart broke. "Everything's going to be fine."

He bowed to her, one last time, and walked away. Sano fell in beside him, saying nothing as they set off down the path by the river to where the caravan was assembling. They would join it, traveling together to Choshu, and – and who knew what would happen, then. Sano would see him settled, she knew that much. He'd promised that he would, and you could always depend on Sano to keep his word.

After a little while, Yahiko went back inside. Kaoru stayed, watching them fade into the distance as the sun rose bright and warm over the new world.

Kenshin never looked back.
November, 1878

Dear Miss Kaoru,

It has been some time now and I am beginning to understand why you sent me away. Freedom is very strange to me still and sometimes it hurts, but there are many other people here like me, in one way or another, and being together makes it less strange. Most of the people here are kind but some of them are still very confused, and others think that freedom means that they should be masters now, and hurt other people. I have met some of them but I have made friends, too.

It is difficult and confusing and I didn't like it at first. I wondered why you didn't want to keep me. But the other day I was fishing with my friend Makoto and as we sat together he said something and I laughed. I realized that I was happy. I was happy when I was with you but this was a different kind of happiness, and I don't think I could have felt it if you had kept me. I decided to find paper and write to you then. Ms. Yuriko at the freedman's school helped me. I want you to know that I am alive and well and I have received the gift you wanted to give me when you set me free.

I hope that you and Yahiko are well. I hope that this letter reaches you. You don't have to respond but it would be nice to hear from you.

Thank you,

Kenshin

~*~

February, 1879

He woke up, and, for a split second, couldn't remember his name. Then it floated to hand, easy as breathing.

Kenshin. My name is Kenshin.

Yes.

Kenshin opened his eyes, shivering in the cold air. The fire had died down in the night, leaving only cooling embers. He pushed the blanket back reluctantly; then he remembered that it was his blanket, and he could do what he wanted with it. So he wrapped it around his shoulders and padded over to the fireplace, crouching to build the remaining cinders back into a flame. It was nice to watch the fire crackling greedily along the dry winter wood as it flickered back to life. He watched it for a few minutes, fighting the unease in his belly that demanded he do something.

He didn't have to do anything. It was winter, and there were no more crops to harvest. He'd already done his turn hunting this week, and added to the common woodpile, and Makoto wouldn't want to go fishing until after noon. There was the little school to go to, if he wanted to, but he didn't have to. He could stay here and watch the fire all morning, if he wanted.

No one would be angry if he did. Nothing bad would happen. He wouldn't get hurt.
Kenshin kept remembering that, watching the fire until his gut knotted so tightly that he couldn't stay
still any longer.

Then he stood, folding his blanket neatly on the cot, and bundled up to go outside. But before he left
he unfolded his blanket and let it crumple along the bedding, taking up space.

It had snowed in the night. The air was crisp and cold, biting at the tip of his noise, and the hard
white crust crunched and crackled underfoot. He was up before almost everyone else, again. The
mess hall was empty, no smoke rising from the kitchen chimney. He didn't mind. It was nice, being
alone in the white, piney silence. Quiet made it easier to remember who he was.

*My name is Kenshin.*

Kenshin slid into the mess hall and went to build the fire. No one had thought to leave wood inside,
so he had to go out to the pile. It hadn't been covered, and the wood was damp. It would take a long
time to get the fire going. For a moment, he was irritated. The knot in his gut lurched forward and his
limbs shook. His breath came hard, panting out white smoke into the winter air.

He sat down, leaning against the woodpile, and breathed slow and careful like he'd learned to. The
slow seep of damp against his skin pinned him, held him steady as he very deliberately thought what
he wanted to think, silently mouthing the words.

People were sometimes careless, because the mess belonged to everyone, so they felt that someone
else would take care of it. And that was wrong, because it made other people have to do more work
than they should, which wasn't fair, and that made him –

Made him –

It was all *right* to be annoyed. The mess hall was his, too.

He swallowed hard against the strain building behind his eyes. Then he stood up, still aching, and
gathered wood for the fire.

Kenshin was stirring a pot of soup when the door to the mess hall opened and shut again. He turned
to see Soujiro limping in, rubbing at his legs. The cold made them hurt. Makoto was right behind
him, unwinding his long wool scarf.

"Morning, Kenshin." Makoto blinked. The unscarred half of his face creased into a frown. "Isn't it
Sousuke's turn to cook?"

"I don't mind," Kenshin said. Then he replayed what he'd just said, and brightened. The 'I' had come
out cleanly, without caveat, and hadn't tangled his tongue as it sometimes did. "I like cooking."

Makoto looked at him for a moment, approval glinting in his single coal-black eye. He'd noticed it,
too.

"You're sure?"

Kenshin took a moment to examine what he'd said, turning inward. Cooking was – was Sir Hiko's
strong hands shaping his small fingers around the knife-handle, showing him how to cut against the
grain. It was Yahiko telling stories as he chopped haphazardly at vegetables, laughing, but not at
him. And it was Miss Kaoru standing nearby, steady as the north star.

"Yes," Kenshin said finally. "I like cooking."
"All right, then." Makoto settled into one of the chairs. "Sousuke should pay you back, though, the lazy sod. Tell me if he makes a fuss."

The rest of the camp – those who didn't want to stay at home to cook, anyway, which weren't many on a cold morning like this – trickled in slowly, including Sousuke. He'd overslept. He apologized once, and that was all right, but then he kept doing it and Kenshin had to pretend that he needed more firewood and go outside until his heart stopped beating in his throat. When he came back in, Makoto had involved Sousuke in a conversation, and no one bothered Kenshin again. Soujiro did the dishes, because it was his turn.

Kenshin stepped out of the mess hall just as the supply cart was pulling up. It came by once a week or so, with mail and things that they couldn't make themselves, though less often now that it was so cold and snowy.

"I'll bring the mail in," Soujiro said. Kenshin let him, because he and Makoto were supposed to go fishing. He went back to his little cabin – just one room, very small, but he knew it was his because he'd built it himself, with some help – and gathered up his gear. When he passed by the mess again, on the way to the lake, Soujiro flagged him down.

"There was a letter for you." Soujiro handed it over, trying not to look too curious.

Kenshin held it delicately. The seal on the back had the same crest as his armguards, so he knew right away who it was from. His heart was racing again, and his head felt light and strange, but it didn't hurt.

"Thank you," he remembered to say, and tucked the letter inside his coat.

Makoto was waiting at the lake, fishing rod over his shoulder. They didn't talk as they set out across the ice. The sun gleamed across the uneven surface, shimmering in random, distorted patterns, and sometimes they had to shield their eyes. The forest around the lake was sleeping, its barren branches yawning towards the sky.

It was Kenshin's turn to pick the fishing spot. He tried to focus on that, and not the letter sitting snug inside his coat. But he probably didn't pick a very good one.

"I got a letter," he said, after they'd dropped their lines. The water in the hole they'd made was still, smooth as glass and very dark. Things were alive in it, he knew: silver fish and insects and water plants, all alive and thriving deep below the ice.

Makoto raised his eyebrows, or tried to. He only had the one: the other half of his face was all tight, gnarled skin, thick with scars and half-burying his clouded, dead left eye.

"Who from?"

Kenshin hesitated, uncertain. Makoto didn't like Miss Kaoru. Makoto didn't like any of the masters, which made sense; but Miss Kaoru wasn't one of them, not really, and sometimes the way Makoto reacted to Kenshin talking about her made Kenshin uneasy. But he wanted to tell someone, and he didn't have anyone else to tell.

"Miss Kaoru."

"Really?" Makoto shifted, jangling his line. "Are you going to read it?"

"...I want to." Kenshin said it very small, but that was all right, because he'd said something that he wanted. Makoto glanced up, giving a slight nod.
"If you want to," he said simply, "then you should."

When they were done fishing he went to the school and asked to borrow the big dictionary, the one that Ms. Yuriko kept locked safe her desk because it was the only dictionary in the camp and they couldn't afford another if it got ruined. She let him borrow it – she always let people borrow it, which was how you knew she was only locking up the dictionary and not the words inside it. He took it to a desk and opened the letter, reading very slowly and looking up any words he didn't understand, because he wanted to get it right.

Dear Kenshin,

I'm glad that you're well. Yahiko and I are as healthy and as safe as anyone in Edo is. I'm sorry that it took so long to write, but we have been very busy. I've been helping Dr. Oguni at the clinic and with the freedman's camps that have been established here, and things are so frantic that most days I fall asleep as soon as work is done. There are thousands of refugees coming to the city, and there is some fighting on the outskirts between the imperialists and the shogun's forces, but by and large we aren't important since the shogun fled the city so it's nothing too serious.

We have a few families living here now: Mr. and Mrs. Nakamoto and their grandchildren, Akiko and Yoshi; Mr. Tanaka, a widower, and his young daughter Mariko; and Yutaro, Mayumi, and Daisuke, who have all lost their parents. Ayame and Suzume have pretty much moved in, too, since the clinic is so busy that Dr. Oguni has no time to take care of them. They're very happy to have so many new friends. Yahiko is progressing well in his studies and has asked me to pass on his regards and well-wishes.

I am writing because I want you to know that I didn't give you anything. I returned something that was always yours, that had been stolen from you and was never mine to hold in the first place. Please don't feel that you're indebted to me. I am so very, very happy to hear that you are healthy and that you have a friend who makes you laugh. I hope that you will laugh again, often, with friends always beside you.

I was glad to hear from you. Thank you.

Kaoru

~*~

March 1880

Kenshin bit down on his lower lip, thoughtfully rather than hard, and twirled the calligraphy brush absently between his fingers. Unfortunately, he'd put ink on it – something he'd forgotten in his intense contemplation of the blank page before him – and it splattered across his face, propelled by the inexorable laws of the physical universe. He sputtered, wiping at his cheek, and succeeded only in leaving a smear of ink across his cheekbone.

"…oro…" he muttered, blotting the pen clean and re-inking it. He took a deep breath, centering himself.

Then he started to write.

Dear Miss Kaoru,

Almost a year has passed since I received your letter. I apologize for taking so long to write, but I wanted to write this letter myself, without help, and it took some time to recover the skills that I once
had. I hope that everything is still as well as you described it, though I hope you are not working yourself so very hard now. I have carried your letter with me through days filled with dangers and new challenges, but each their measure of gladness too. I did share it with my friend. I hope that's all right? Makoto didn't believe what you'd said until he saw it for himself. When other freed people get letters, they're from family or friends searching for each other. Those who receive word from a former master in a freed province unerringly report it is an offer that they return to their former position – not in name, but in conditions little improved except for a nominal wage. I'm sorry to say that there are those who do return, though many more who tear the letters up or have someone transcribe for them a response containing all the words they would never have survived speaking to their master before the war began.

Kenshin paused, uncertain. Makoto still hadn't exactly believed, even after he'd seen it written in plain language: he'd only frowned, his scars tugging at his skin, and said that she shouldn't expect people to praise her for common decency. Kenshin hadn't thought that Miss Kaoru had been trying to say that at all, but it was hard to talk to Makoto when he got into one of his black moods, and by the time Makoto had come out of it there was no point bringing the matter up again.

Should he tell all that to Miss Kaoru?

He thought about it, chewing on the wooden end of the brush, and decided not to. Makoto had probably figured out on his own that Miss Kaoru wasn't doing anything like that, and anyway he didn't want to worry her by carrying tales. He'd talk about something else, instead.

Those who return – would you be disappointed to know I do not blame them? It is difficult to find work, even for those of us who are strong. And there are many here who have no surviving friends or family. Not all were subjected to the same cruelties as I was, and no few of them seem to feel some real affection for their former masters and their kin. I do not blame them for that, either. I have come to understand that people are not meant to live as I was made to, without friends or family or common feeling, and in the absence of such extremities as I was subjected to they will find kinship with one another even under conditions of slavery. In some ways it is frightening to consider – if I had been ruled with kindness, and not cruelty, would I be free today? – but it also gives me hope to know that the bonds of human fellowship are not so easily extinguished. Is that strange?

I'm lucky. I have my freedom and the knowledge of your friendship, too. And young Yahiko's as well! Please thank him for sending his regards. I'm glad to know of his progress. He is truly a student after your own heart: you cannot be aware of the full extent of his kindness to me when I lived there, for he did not do it for your eyes or your benefit. Perhaps one day I can acquaint you with more on that account. He did much for me, from whom he could expect nothing in return. Please tell him the memory of his friendship has been received and grown within me as I have grown more able to be a friend. I would ask also to be remembered to Ayame and Suzume, who are doubtless growing to be fine young women.

Kenshin read the last paragraph again, wondering if it was too much. It was true, though. He had Miss Kaoru, when so many people in the camp didn't have anyone. Miss Kaoru, and the little green frogs hidden in the hems of his clothing. He'd never told Makoto about the frogs. It didn't seem right. That was something secret, a promise made just to him, and sometimes when he went to bed with his head still aching and his hands trembling, he would twist his shaking fingers around the embroidered cloth as he closed his eyes and dream of gentle hands stroking his hair.

He ducked his head, although there was no one to see the blush heating his face, and tried to remember what else he'd wanted to talk about.

This is a very long letter and perhaps very unbeautiful; I have scrounged together paper from
wherever I could find it. Mostly from the ladies at the freedmen's school (why do they call everything
that, when there are freedwomen too?) where I have been taking classes at night. They tell us that
we must be educated in order to maintain our freedom, and I do believe them. There are so many
questions about what the world should become, and none of us feel equipped to answer them! Most
of us were taught little more than the most basic tasks. Some of the men are educated, though,
having been secretaries or assistants, and they know things I am only just beginning to understand.
You should hear Makoto talk with them about an Englishman named Marx! It is very confusing.

For example, it seems to me from listening to the others talk that some redress is necessary for all
our years of unpaid service. If we are given nothing but our freedom, how can we maintain it? We
have no savings to draw on as we establish ourselves. We have been taken from our kin and the
material care they can provide. The freeborn have their families, their possessions, their conviction
of their freedom and the conviction of people around them.

And yet I worry – will it hurt someone like you, who has done so much already? Makoto shakes his
head when the subject arises and says that the worst of the masters will escape fair punishment, and
that most of the burden will fall on those like you, who never held more than one or two slaves and
might lose much of what they have to pay the wages owed by those wealthier than they. I am not
sure how this can be, but he is a much quicker study at this than I and I believe his words. So even
though it strikes me as just, how can I ask such a thing, knowing that those least guilty will bear the
greatest burden? Especially in your case, when you never asked for the position you were put in.
You, of all people, do not deserve to be punished for the choices you had to make. Although perhaps
I am overly biased in that respect; Makoto certainly seems to think so.

There. Now she would know that he was learning things, too, learning more every day. He hadn't
quite gotten to the point where he did more than listen to the talk in the mess hall at dinner, but that
was more than he'd been able to do a few months ago. He could listen, and understand. Most of it,
anyway. Most of the time.

But he wasn't ignorant any longer, and it seemed important that she know that. He thought about
things, and tried to figure them out – he didn't let other people do it for him. She would be happy
about that, and the thought of her happiness made him warm inside.

Only…

Kenshin frowned, re-reading what he'd written. Maybe it wasn't quite right, to talk about money so
much, even though this was an important, topical issue and he wanted her to know that he'd thought
it over carefully, like a man would. But he didn't have enough paper to redo it on.

He dipped the brush in ink again and kept writing, hoping that she would understand.

I suppose this all weighs heavy on my mind because there is talk in the camp of some of the men
going to join the fighting, and I think my friend Makoto will be one of them. He is encouraging me to
go with him, and in some ways I want to, except that I have had my fill of killing. Perhaps it is
selfish, but I do not wish to take even one more human life, even for the best of reasons, even if that
life deserves to be taken. I think that some part of my heart would break beyond repair if I did.
Maybe it is a kind of cowardice, too. But I truly feel that I could not bear it.

Please don't be concerned by all my nattering here, Miss Kaoru! I do not expect you to tell me what
to make of all of it. I know that these are things I have to work out for myself. I feel a burden lifted in
writing to you, though. I hope you do not mind receiving my ill-written words – my calligraphy
remains quite rudimentary, very much to the displeasure of the ladies at the freedmen's school! – it
gives me a sense of peace to be able to write them to you. I am lucky in so many ways, and you are
large part of that.
Kenshin hesitated again, not sure if he should keep going. Maybe he'd already said enough – but really, all he'd done was thank her, so far, not said how very much deeper than thanks it went. How much he hoped for her safety; how much he looked to the day that he could come home to her a man, and show her everything he'd accomplished.

He kept writing.

*I send these words to you in the spirit of all my prayers for you, that you be always happy and in good health.*

Warmly,

*Kenshin*

Maybe he shouldn't have closed with ‘warmly’ – maybe it was too casual, but – well, he had, and there was no space left to undo it. So Kenshin folded the letter up, all three ragged pages of it, sealed it, and went out to set it in the box with all the other letters in the mess hall, waiting to be picked up the next time the cart came by. Mayu the cat was curled up nearby her calico tail tucked over her bright pink nose. He spared a moment to pet her and she uncurled with a long stretch, acknowledging him, before settling back down.

Then he went out to the fields. The frost had finally broken, and the ground needed to be churned and softened for the planting to come. It was hard work, but not bad, and even kind of fun with everyone working together. Sometimes it made his chest hurt to be around so many people, but sometimes he could stay the whole day out in the field and walk home with everyone, smiling as they laughed and looked forward to dinner.

Today was one of those days, a good day, and Kenshin couldn't help thinking that there had been more good days than bad in the past month or two. That was a nice thing to think, and it buoyed him up so that during dinner, he made a joke. A few people even laughed.

People didn't always leave the mess hall after they ate. Sometimes they stayed, talking and playing games and making music, and today had been a good day so Kenshin stayed, too, tucking himself into a corner just on the edge of the fuss. After a little while Soujiro came to sit next to him. He liked Soujiro; Soujiro was quiet and calm, and understood things. They sat together, not needing to talk, and watched the rest having fun. The air was warm, laden with good cooking scents and bright pine burning in the hearth.

That was why Kenshin was there when the hall door opened and Sir Hiko came in, carried on the moist spring air. He froze as Sir Hiko looked around, caught and torn with the impulse to hide, or stand up, or run, and mostly wanting to do all three at once. His heart hammered in his throat, blood rushing thick and dizzy through his too-tight veins.

Makoto stood up. There was a cold, sardonic look in his eyes, and Kenshin should have been reassured by it but he wasn't. It only made him feel sick. Makoto worried too much about people, and the last thing he wanted was him and Sir Hiko fighting.

"Can I help you?" Makoto asked, crossing his arms.

"I'm sorry to intrude." Sir Hiko's voice rumbled like the echoes in the mountain, and his eyes swept the room again. "I'm looking for someone – a member of my family. A student. I was told I might find him here."

*My family.* It hurt to hear, more so because it was so unexpected. He'd wondered, sometimes, what
he would say to Sir Hiko if they ever met again. And what Sir Hiko would say to him.

"What's their name, and what do you want with them?" The challenge hadn't gone out of Makoto's stance. Kenshin started to get up, pausing with one foot flat on the floor and trembling with uncertainty. Soujiro gave him a curious look.

"His name is Kenshin." Sir Hiko gave Makoto a single, assessing glance. His lip quirked upwards in amusement, which didn't mean anything, but Makoto didn't know that and it was only making him angry. "And the rest is his business and mine, not yours."

Makoto started to say something, and Kenshin stood up.

"I'm here, sir," he said, and knew by the look in Sir Hiko's eyes that he'd known perfectly well where Kenshin was. "Um. Hello."

"Kenshin." Sir Hiko nodded. "You look well." There was a question in his eyes, half-formed and all unspoken. Kenshin kept his breathing even, trying not to shake under all the eyes watching him, Makoto's hardest of all.

"It's been a long year, sir."

"Is there somewhere we can talk privately?" It was a soft question, and Kenshin's heart fell from his throat to pound against his ribs instead, a little more slowly now.

"My cabin." He planted his feet firm against the wooden floor, keeping his back straight even as his stomach knotted hard against his spine. "Um. Though it's a little small…"

"That's all right." Sir Hiko almost seemed to smile. "It will do."

~*~

July 1880

Dear Kenshin,

If reports of what they are now calling the Second Battle of Edo haven't reached you yet, they will soon, so I will preface my letter with this: Yahiko and I are fine, as are all our boarders, and the dojo is a bit battered but not too seriously worse for the wear. Yahiko was cut, but it's not serious and is healing well; soon he will have a very impressive scar to show off to Tsubame. I suffered a broken wrist and a few bruises, but the break was on my left hand, so I have been able to resume most of my work without serious inconvenience. None of the children were hurt or too badly frightened and they are all making much of Yahiko, who is the hero of the hour. Yahiko was glad to hear that you remember him fondly, and I have enclosed a letter from him.

I suppose I should tell you about the children. Because we have the space and ready caregivers, the dojo has taken in so many lost children that I'm beginning to think I should change the sign to 'Kamiya Orphanage' and be done with it! On top of that, many of the neighborhood children come here while their parents are occupied, to play and for what schooling we can give them in the midst of this war, and so we are full to bursting almost every day. It is wonderful to see the children running and playing together, freed and freeborn alike. It makes me think, perhaps, that even if the older generation cannot fully overcome their prejudices, there is still some hope for the new one.

Yahiko and I take turns looking after the children and helping at the clinic, so I don't work entirely alone. He is really becoming a man now, and I know that his parents are smiling down on him. I couldn't be prouder of him.
Ayame and Suzume do remember you, and speak of you fondly. Though it seems they mostly remember your red hair; it took me a moment to realize who 'Big Brother Strawberry' was when I remembered you to them. They are indeed growing well, and rather like weeds. I only need to turn my back for a moment and they've shot up another inch! Ayame has reached the age where she can help with the younger children, and does so cheerfully. Suzume, of course, wants to do everything that her big sister does and it's very sweet to watch them herding the littlest ones around like mother hens with chicks, full of self-importance and deep concentration.

I don't think it's selfish of you to wish never to take another life. Nor, I think, is it cowardice, for you have faced far deeper darkness and overcome it. Of course, the teachings of my school color my feelings on the matter and so I am not without prejudice. It's your decision, and whatever choice you make will be the right one, because it will be yours. Still, I'm certain that your decision, whatever it is, will not be made out of fear or selfishness.

The question of reparations is a subject of some debate here in Edo as well, and I personally support the idea. Circumstances aside, the cold truth is that I held you as my chattel and benefited from your labor, and you are owed recompense for it, and for what you suffered at Kanryu's hands. And truthfully, a reparation tax would reduce the burden on me by sharing it out proportionately, for as you know most of my family's wealth is in the land we hold, not income. But whatever happens, you must not fear on my account. I will make do; you should believe and act as your conscience dictates.

I don't mind that you shared this correspondence with your friend. I'm glad that you have a friend whom you hold dear and who cares for your well-being. I am saddened, though not surprised, to hear that some former masters seek to coax freedmen back into their service, for even here in Edo I hear former masters grumbling about ingratitude and treachery. It seems that old habits die hard and badly. But then I think of the children, and how easily they accept one another, and I cannot but have faith that the future will be a little brighter. We're all human, after all, and without the brands there's no way to tell freeborn from freedman. In a generation or two, perhaps we will be only Japanese.

I am honored that you remember me so kindly – though I do hope you know that I need not be 'Miss' to you now, or ever again.

I wish you every happiness,

Kaoru

Kenshin read the letter once more, his eyes lingering on her last sentence – *I need not be 'Miss' to you now, or ever again* – and smiled. Makoto watched silently as Kenshin folded the letters up and slid them into his sleeve, leaving Yahiko's letter for later.

"You're not going to read the other one?"

"Not now." Kenshin tucked crossed his arms, tucking his hands in their opposite sleeves. "Didn't you say it was best to get in line early? I can read the rest while we wait."

It was hard to keep the grin off his face, although he knew that he must look a bit of an idiot. Knowing that Miss Kaoru – that *Kaoru* – was safe was good; knowing that she saw him as a man and an equal – *her name, she wants me to use her name* – made him feel warm and bright, like a small child. Makoto snorted, somewhat amused.

"Was it good news, then?"

Kenshin nodded. "They came through the battle safely. Miss – Kaoru is well, and so are Yahiko and
all the rest. Thank you," he said, as they stepped out of the inn to the frantic bustle of Kyoto's streets. "For making sure the letters found me."

Makoto shrugged. "I know it's important to you."

They were staying near the military headquarters, for convenience's sake. Crowds hurried back and forth, some in uniform and many not, while the bright summer sun beat down overhead. The air was rich with incense rising from the temples and Kenshin focused on that, seeking calm in the middle of all the bustle. It was easier if he paid attention on just one thing at a time, especially when there was a lot going on.

Sir Hiko had left last night, citing a general disinterest that Kenshin knew to be a lie. It was more that they both knew it was time for Kenshin to walk somewhere on his own, and Sir Hiko was ever an enemy of sentiment. Still – and Kenshin briefly touched the blade resting on his hip – Sir Hiko had his own ways of saying the things that mattered, and he'd said them quite clearly.

The headquarters were emptier than Kenshin had expected. He gave Makoto a quizzical look.

"It's not the line," Makoto said, taking up a resigned slouch, "it's the time. Hurry up and wait."

"Oh." One of the secretaries noticed them and hurried over to find out their business; Kenshin told him, and he scurried away and back again, bearing paperwork. Kenshin filled it out as quickly as he could, stumbling only once or twice. The secretary reclaimed the paperwork and rushed off again, leaving Kenshin and Makoto to wait.

"You're sure you don't want to join a combat unit?" Makoto glanced significantly down at the sword at Kenshin's side. "We could use you."

"That would be why." Kenshin heart beat a little faster as he held his ground, but this was Makoto and he wasn't really afraid, just remembering being afraid. "I'm a little tired of being useful in combat."

"…right." Makoto looked away. "Sorry."

"It's all right." Kenshin's heart slowed down to something almost normal, and he decided to claim it as a victory. It was getting easier. One day, maybe, he wouldn't worry about it at all –

*Even if you don't*, he heard Sir Hiko rumbling, *there is no shame in having limits, only in believing that those limits define you.*

"But you're still going to carry a sword?" Makoto had that look on his face again, narrow and creased and slightly perturbed at the world's failure to act according to his beliefs. Kenshin nodded.

"This sword isn't meant for killing," he said simply, and unsheathed the first few inches. "See?"

The light filtering through the windows gleamed along the reverse-forged blade, showing it to be blunted where the cutting edge should be. Makoto eyed it for a moment, then shrugged again.

"Suit yourself."

*I will*, Kenshin couldn't quite bring himself to say, although he knew that Makoto wouldn't mind and it would have been a bit clever if he did, and he liked being clever. Instead he smiled, and took out Yahiko's letter.

*Dear Kenshin,*
To Kaoru and Yahiko,

You jerk! I’m the one who told you to write us, why didn’t you write me when you did Kaoru? Honestly.

Kaoru probably already told you that I got a little hurt during the battle. It was a stupid mistake; I forgot to watch his other arm and he had a hidden knife. I'm more embarrassed than hurt, but you know how Kaoru gets about this stuff. So I'm stuck in my room getting fussed over while Kaoru works herself too hard. Although things are a little easier with all the people we've got living here, even if most of them are kids. Extra hands and all.

Anyway, the whole thing got me thinking. You saved my life, that time I fell off the cliff, and I never really thanked you for it. So thanks for that, and for earlier, when you dealt with those thugs, and before that when you pulled that police officer off me. I guess there’s a lot that I should be thanking you for. You really looked out for me. I haven’t forgotten.

I've tried to keep the garden going, although I kinda lost the peonies and had to replace them with daisies, like you originally wanted. I want to try replanting them, but I'm not sure what to do differently this time. Can you tell me? The rest of the plants are doing okay, and it's been really nice not to have to buy all our own herbs. If I have time, I want to get another plot cleared and grow a few more vegetables. All we've got is that squash plant right now, which I'm pretty sure wouldn't die even if you killed it. Kaoru says it's been around ever since she can remember. Squash gets kind of boring after a while, though, and it's been hard with wartime prices and all these kids to look after. The neighbors help out, but I don't like relying on them too much. I should be able to look after my family, you know? I mean, I'm going to be fifteen in a few years. I'm almost a man.

Anyway, aside from the same stuff everyone's dealing with because of the war, things are pretty good here. How about you?

Write back soon,

Yahiko

Kenshin’s smile had deepened by the end of it, and it stayed on his face as he went through the rest of the military rigmarole. That night, before bed, he wrote them both back.

Dear Kaoru,

I had heard about the battle, and I was worried, even though I know that you and Yahiko can take care of each other. I’m very glad to hear that no one was seriously hurt, and that the house and school are still intact. It is a balm to my heart to know that you are all safe.

It made Kenshin blush a little to write it, but that didn't make it any less true.

A great deal has changed since the last time I wrote to you. The day I wrote my previous letter, Sir Hiko arrived in at the freeman's camp to visit me. We spoke long into the night and forgive me, for I do not think I can fully explain what passed between us; suffice to say that we understand each other a little better now, and while perhaps I should feel more bitterness than I do, my heart tells me that to forgive or not is my choice, and I choose to forgive.

Sir Hiko also brought with him a gift for me. A sword, forged in reverse, so that the back is sharpened and what should be the cutting edge is blunted. It was forged specially; there are no others like it in Japan. For all his faults, he is still my teacher and my nearest kin save yourself, if you will permit the liberty, and he still knows me as few others do.

Sir Hiko also brought with him an invitation from Tomoe’s father, Mr. Yukishiro. Mr. Yukishiro
wanted to meet with me, if I was willing to travel to him, for his health is very bad and he is largely confined to his bed. I decided, after some thought, to see him, and Sir Hiko and I left the camp together. It wasn't that I wanted to see Mr. Yukishiro so much as that I felt that I had to. Tomoe died trying to help me. Perhaps, had I been a little quicker, a little more clever, she might not have had to pay that price.

Kenshin had to stop there, for a little while, and stared out the window at the gathering dark. Lanterns were lighting one-by-one, like distant fireflies. The sun had already sunk below the horizon, and its pale copper light was fading fast over the mountains. He lit a candle, and kept writing.

It is very strange to go half your life believing you have wronged someone beyond bearing, only to discover that it is they who feel they have wronged you. I had thought that he would resent me, at least a little, but his grief was as for me as much as for his daughter. It helped us both, that meeting, and he allowed me to read Tomoe's diary, which answered several questions I had not known to ask.

He paused again, wondering how much to tell. Maybe this was enough. The memory was still tender, like a half-healed wound finally free of infection: to know, finally, what had happened and more importantly why.

He wanted to tell Kaoru about it, one day. But – not in a letter. A letter was too cold. One day, after this was over, when they would sit side-by-side on the porch drinking tea, and he could tell her all the things he wanted to tell her. How much he missed her. How much he thought of her. How much she meant to him – and how much he wanted to mean to her.

His son, Tomoe's younger brother, was not there. Did I ever tell you that she had a younger brother? After her death, he blamed Kanryu and ran away to join the abolitionist cause. He has kept in touch with his father only sparingly, but apparently he's a member of the intelligence division. I suppose it's unlikely that we'll meet, since I'll be at the front.

After meeting Mr. Yukishiro, I tried to see Mr. and Mrs. Kiyosato. I'm not sure why – it wasn't anger, exactly, although I think I would have the right to be very angry. Truly, I only wished to ask them why. I wondered, selfishly, if they had ever felt even a little guilty about what they did, and felt somewhat entitled to that selfishness. Which I suppose is very demanding of me, but I do not feel that I was wrong in presuming that I had the right to know.

It doesn't matter. They wouldn't see me. Sir Hiko wanted to force the issue, but I asked him not to. I don't think that any answer that they might give me would count for anything unless they choose to give it, and they didn't. So there didn't seem to be much point. Maybe that was wrong – maybe I should have pressed them, but... that would be acting a bully, I think. And perhaps I have the right to that, in their case, yet I do not think that is the kind of person I am – the kind of person I wish to be. I don't like being angry. It makes me tired.

I did find out, though, that despite all they'd done to gain his cure, their son died anyway. So I suppose, in a way, that their refusal to answer was an answer in itself.

All these travels helped me come to a decision. I want to help in this war. I want to see slavery destroyed and its legacy purged from our country. But I don't want to kill. I don't want to replace violence with more violence. And I'm still not sure that isn't a cowardly way to look at things, but it's my way. I did not come to the decision lightly; I made my choice after long thought, and not out of fear. Which seems to me to be more important than what other people might think of me for that choice.

I don't oppose the war. I was a farmer's son before I was ever a swordsman or a slave, and the only
way to pull up a noxious weed is by the roots. But the work of a nurse or a doctor is as important as a soldier's, maybe even more so, because they are the ones who will ensure this war is no more bloody than it needs to be. And that's what I want to do. I don't want to hurt anyone; but if I have to, I do not wish it to be greater than it needs to be. So I decided to join the medical corps.

I joined up today. It's the first official form I've ever filled out. I'm now enrolled under the new government as a free citizen, owned by no one – and I have a family name. It took me a while to choose it; I hope you like it. It uses the characters for 'red' and 'village,' because the village where I was born made scarlet dye.

The next time I write to you, I will be at the front.

You are ever in my thoughts,

Kenshin Himura, freedman.

P.S Yahiko, peonies like full sun and shelter from the wind. You should plant them in fall, before the first frost; spring-planted peonies are usually weaker than fall-planted, and need a lot of skill to nurture. As for vegetables, it's difficult because we're already in summer, but greens, radishes, leeks and peas can all be planted in summer and grow into the fall without suffering too much.

~*~

January, 1880

Dear Mr. Himura,

I'm so happy to be able to address you that way. Your new name is lovely; may you wear it in good health and happiness.

I don't have much time to write these days. With things intensifying at the front – as you must know – wounded men and refugees are pouring in, and we are swamped. I've never been gladder for Yahiko's help; I don't think I could keep caring for the orphans and families we've taken in and continue my work at the clinic without him. But between the two of us, we manage.

It's good to hear that you've come to your own decision about the war and acted on it. I know how difficult it can be to stand for what you think is right, especially when the people close to you aren't sure you're doing the right thing. And medical work is important, more important than I ever dreamed before this war began. Every life that you save is one less grieving mother or widowed bride, and one more pair of strong hands to build the future with. After all, there is little point in winning this war if there is no one left afterwards.

The reversed-blade, also, is a clever solution. I'm not sure how Mr. Hiko found you, but I'm glad he did. It seems that his visit helped you in many ways; I'm glad for it. As I am glad that you and Mr. Yukishiro reached a reconciliation. I cannot say that I am surprised by how the Kiyosatos responded to you. It is hard, desperately hard, to admit to having been wrong, and they were about as wrong as two human beings can be. And to lose their son anyway, despite it all... I can't tell you if you've made the right decision, about that or anything else, but I am glad that you've made them, and that they are yours.

Be well,

Kaoru

Kenshin dipped his hands the basin and watched the blood stream from his skin. It swirled in the still
water like ink, but quite the wrong color. His shoulders slumped; he sighed, heavy right down to his bones, and raised a dripping hand to touch his aching scar.

"You did everything you could." Yumi touched his shoulder lightly, handing him a towel. "It's not your fault."

"I know." He took it from her and dried his hands, leaving streaks of soap and blood on the rough cloth. "It's just… when they come to us so far gone… why can't they get the wounded out sooner? A few minutes earlier, and he might have lived."

Yumi shrugged, letting her hair down for a moment and retying it higher on her head. "They do their best, Himura, just like us. It's a war out there; we don't always have a choice."

They stepped back into the main hospital tent, sliding into the controlled chaos with the ease of long practice. It was a large space, made small by the sheer number of beds and bedrolls, each with a wounded man. The air was muzzy with low moans of pain and the incense burned to ward off disease, nurses and doctors ticking along their rounds. There were too many patients. There always were.

Yumi patted Kenshin on the shoulder again, then headed off on the rest of her round. Kenshin went to the now-empty cot where the soldier they'd failed to save had rested and began stripping the soiled bedclothes. They'd go to be cleaned, and he'd fetch a new set. In a few minutes, the cot would be ready to hold another wounded man.

"Himura." One of the doctors hailed him, stopping for a moment in his rounds. "When you're done with that, I have a few new patients who'd like letters written, if you have the time."

"Of course." Kenshin balled up the sheets, smiling politely at the doctor. "I may not have the time until this evening, though… is it urgent?"

Are they dying? was what he meant, and the doctor knew it. He shook his head.

"No. It can wait for the evening."

They lost two more men before the end of the day, and pulled three back from the brink. Three for three. Not good, but not bad either.

Dear Kaoru,

As you can see, my calligraphy is much improved, though under the darkest of circumstances. I've been writing many letters these past few months. Not for myself, but for the wounded and dying. Those who are aware enough to speak ask us to take down words for their loved ones. Sometimes they seem to be reaching for anyone to write to and I feel that they must want simply to leave some mark in the world, some proof that they were a person who existed, an individual with a name and concerns of their own. Among them I have found my corner of this nightmare – for this war is a nightmare, although the cause is just – where I can work and feel, if not peace (there is no peace here, I am sorry to say), then certainty in my choices. I am with those who care for the injured and aid the dying. I provide protection for them when needed, as one of the few people here able to fight, and do my part in the labor of caring.

I've found in this work a satisfaction I cannot completely explain. I feel, though, that you might understand it anyway, for the Kasshin's philosophy of protecting life is about a battle of love – there is no other word for it – toward others that lives in every moment, beyond the limits of a single fight. It is uncomfortable, dirty, sweaty, unsanitary work. Our supplies are few and the injured seem to
double again every day. But I feel blessed to lend my hands to changing their bandages, feeding them what little food we have, giving them water, even changing their bedpans. I have never felt so clean as I do now. That must sound very strange. Yet somehow I think you will understand?

My constant thought through it all is that we have developed the art of destroying bodies far beyond our knowledge of how to heal them. I wonder sometimes at Kanryu's art – if he had cared for relieving suffering, might not there be herbs and regimens that heal minds rather than break them? And yet brilliant men turn their minds toward destruction. I cannot tell you what the sight of a man torn apart by a Gatling gun does to one's heart; perhaps I could manage it, but I refuse to try. I find myself wanting to share everything with you and at the same time wanting to protect you. I pray that your corner of this nightmare our country is living does not contain so many horrors.

But we do what we can, yes? Sometimes I write so long into the night that my hand cramps up. But it is somehow a – not a good but a right feeling, looking into men's eyes and letting them know that they are heard and remembered. Most of those who die go to unmarked graves and it seems oftentimes that the thought of going unnamed and unremembered is a greater torment to them then their death, which I suppose I can understand. We do what we can to relieve their pain. It is often difficult; those doctors we do have sometimes come with callous ideas. One man, a foreigner, lectured me that the lower sort of soldiers did not feel pain the same way higher born men did and thus should not have their share of our precious morphine.

I am afraid that I frightened him very much in my response. I didn't touch him! But I spoke to him of pain as I have known it and told him that if he truly believed that then he was no supporter of abolition but a true friend of our enemies. I say again: I did not touch him. Yet I found in my heart that I wanted to, and it frightened me perhaps more than I frightened him.

...this has been a very gloomy letter. I'm sorry. There is hope in my heart too, I promise you. When I write letters for the men, I can comfort and reassure them and in the moment that I am speaking to them I truly do believe what I say. But when I sit down to write to you, somehow the truths I cannot speak to anyone else emerge. Please take that for trust and know that it is not all I feel and... please, tell me your truth, if you will. Let me share in your burdens. Let me know anything you wish to say and cannot say to anyone else. But only if you wish it. I hope that you will wish it.

And please – if you wish it – I want to be Kenshin to you, now and always. Not Mr. Himura.

Warmly,

Kenshin Himura

~ w~

May, 1881

Dear Kenshin,

My father told once that there would come a time when all my sword-art, all my courage, all my strength would not be enough, and I would be unable to prevent the evil unfolding in front of my eyes or to protect those caught in its path. It would not be a question of failure, any more than a latticed screen could be said to fail to shelter a man from a typhoon. It would simply be that nothing I had could possibly turn the tide.

When that time comes, he told me, there is only one thing a person can do, and that is remember. Stand with the suffering and remember their names, look into their eyes and let them know that you see them, that you will hold fast to the memory of them and tell the world what happened here.
You learn their names, Kenshin. You take down their last words and stories, and speak to them kindly, and they do not go alone and afraid into that final darkness. All anyone wants in this world – so my father said, and so I have found to be true – is to know that they are not alone. And because of you, these men are not alone in their last hours. To accompany the dying on their journey is dreadful work, but to abandon a human soul in its most vulnerable and anguished moments is the sin of sins.

I have come to understand over the course of the last few years what it truly means to carry the sword that protects. You’re right to say that it’s more than merely sword-play. I lived its teachings without understanding them for a long time; now I know exactly how harsh a man my father was, and how much he demanded from his disciples. Yet once one sets out on this path, there is no turning back. Once you know the difference between right and wrong, doing wrong is no longer an option. No matter the cost.

Which is all a very silly way of saying that I think I know the feeling you can’t describe. Even if all the world is engulfed in flames, there are pockets of goodness, places where there is healing and compassion, and it isn’t enough, but somehow it is. If this world is all that we have, then what we do matters – then it’s important that we choose to be kind when we could be cruel, to help when we could walk away, to bear witness when we could close our eyes.

And you’re right – it is clean work, the cleanest there is.

I can’t speak for Kanryu’s art, since I only know some basic nursing skills. Megumi talks, sometimes, of such things; but she does not have the time to explain anything in depth, given the sheer number of wounded she must tend to. For now, nothing comes of her previous association with Kanryu, since all skilled hands are needed. However, there are rumours... but I’m sure it’s nothing. She’s helped too many to leave even the most trenchant idiot anything but convinced that she is not his creature.

I’m sure that you didn’t touch that foreign doctor. I’m equally sure that you scared him witless. And I don’t blame you. That was pure foolishness he was spewing! Megumi has Western training, as do some of the other doctors, and there are a few foreign nurses here. I’ve never heard any of them speak that way. It must be some odd quirk of his, for the Western nurses are nothing but kind, even though they do not speak Japanese very well and things are sometimes difficult because of it.

Your trust honors me, Kenshin, and I don’t mind a little gloom. This is a gloomy time. Only please remember that it is not all there is; there is laughter here, despite it all. The children are healthy and grow to love one another as family. They run and play together, and there is no difference, among them, between freeborn and freed. That is the future of the nation, I think – I hope – I pray. These children of the war, who nonetheless remember how to smile.

You are in my prayers,

Kaoru

Kenshin let the letter fall from his hands, barely noticing as it hit the ground. His fingers were numb; his heart was numb; everything was numb, and that was good. He’d read her letters so many times, but even Kaoru’s words couldn’t break the ice around his heart, not anymore, and he felt obscurely that it was better that way.

She didn’t need to know. Even though he’d written her that letter, the one he hadn’t sent – she didn’t need to know. Not this. Not how badly he’d failed. He couldn’t bear for her to know, couldn’t stand the thought of her understanding how little he’d accomplished, in the end. How unworthy he was of her name, and her kindness.
He stood with a sigh, and left his tent.

Makoto was waiting for him outside. Kenshin spared him a nod, then set off towards the hospital tent. There was work to be done. There was always work to be done, and as long as he was doing it the ground wouldn't crack open and swallow him.

Makoto's hand on his elbow stopped him.

"Kenshin."

"What?" The word came hard and slow, dropping from his tongue like a hot coal.

"I need to talk to you."

"It can wait." Kenshin shrugged off Makoto's hand and continued towards the tent. It could always wait. It could wait until he died, for all he cared.

His head started to hurt, tight as paper before it tears.

Makoto stepped around in front of him. "No, it can't. Yumi's worried; everyone is. I know – I can't imagine what it was like for you, seeing that. But you can't keep going on like this."

Who's going to stop me? he didn't say. Instead he stepped around Makoto. The older man turned, falling into step beside him, and Kenshin took a sharp breath. Hot, black nothingness knotted under his heart, digging rancid fingers into his veins.

"I don't want to talk about, Makoto." It was clawing up his throat now, blocking speech, and Kenshin had to force the words around it. "Leave it be."

"Do you think you're the only one?" Makoto demanded. "We're all having nightmares. It was a goddamned horrorshow. The least you can do – "

"Shut up." It snapped out unbidden, all hard sibilants bursting on his tongue like foreign candies, exploding behind his eyes. "Leave me alone!"

"No, dammit." Makoto grabbed his shoulders. "You're not eating, you barely sleep – "

Kenshin punched him. It felt good: hard bone under his knuckles, bruising force singing up his nerves as the black hot thing howled, surging through his infected veins. For a moment the world was purely, blindingly simple, and nothing hurt anymore.

Makoto touched his jaw, lightly. His eyes widened for a moment.

"Good," he said, and Kenshin would have been surprised if the rage hadn't carried him far beyond all that. He pulled his fist back again.

"What do you know about it – "

This time, Makoto caught his hand.

"Be angry, dammit." His hand was warm around Kenshin's fist, too warm for the cool spring weather. "You should be. They're monsters. And it wasn't your fault."

"You can't know that!" Speech came easy now that the violence had unstopped his throat to thunder through his veins. He ripped his hand from Makoto's, falling back. "How can you possibly know that?"
"Because I was there! Or have you forgotten? We were all there. We all saw! If there was anything we could have done, don't you think we'd have done it? Do you think we didn't care – "

"I should have saved them!" Anguish tore the truth from where it had been hidden the past two months, smothered under work and work and more work, until he drowned in it. "I should have – I should have guessed, I should have known they'd do something like that, I'm the only one who could have – "

Kenshin spun around, suddenly ashamed, and clutched his shoulders hard enough to bruise.

"...fuck."

It wasn't aimed at anyone or anything: it came out of the hollow place the rage had left behind, crackling like a cicada shell in his throat. Kenshin started shaking, heat pounding behind his eyes in time with his aching head. He gasped in quick breaths, holding the air in his lungs as long as he could, afraid of what would happen if he let himself breathe.

"Kenshin."

Makoto's arm came around his shoulder, and Kenshin didn't pull away.

"Like I said," he murmured, "I can't imagine what it felt, for you, seeing what they'd done." His voice was calm, as it always was, and it was frankly irritating. "But I know what it's like to lose people you wanted to protect. Let me help you."

Something trembled in the undertones, something as raw and honest as his scars.

"Please."

And Kenshin wanted, very badly, to say no.

He nodded.

They talked for a long while, where no one else could hear, and afterwards Kenshin didn't remember half of it: only a long, slow ebbing as the world came back into focus. He hurt when it was done, hurt like a cleaned-out wound. Hurt more than he'd wanted to. Hurt the way he'd needed to.

That night, he took out the letter he'd written to Kaoru and read it again.

**Dear Kaoru,**

*I feel as if I've seen most of the country by now, more than I ever expected to see, but I can't say that I know any of it. We see it at its very worst, torn and shattered. The land itself is murdered by our efforts. Green and living things are crushed, ancient trees torn up by the roots as we rip wounds in the earth with wrought iron and shaped stone. I have stood in fields where I know that nothing is familiar anymore to the people who lived and worked them except the sky, always above us. It's a mercy that there are still things in the world beyond human reach. We may wish to fly like the birds or touch the stars, but we can't, and I am glad for it.*

*I feel that we're at the deepest dark of this long night now. It must be so, for I cannot see how it could get any darker. I must have some hope, and the only hope I can see is that this cannot go on forever, that it must end. Our opposition endures great losses and shares the same world as we do; how can they continue, with so much blood already spilled? They're human, as we are. They must grieve, as we do. They must shrink from the horrors we've created. They must.*
I've never believed that those we fight are demons, or monsters, or anything other than ordinary men caught up in something far beyond them. There are those among us who do think that way, who must think them monsters in order to be soldiers and fight without going mad. But I do not face that challenge and therefore do not allow myself that luxury. Yet I have seen things done, now, which shock me to my core, which make me realize there are some who truly believe that people like me are not people at all – that the addition of slave-mark has some vile power to rob a person of their human mind and soul in truth, and not only in the eyes of unjust law.

I've thought over what to tell you of recent events and I've questioned whether it's fair to put them into words at all, since they will hurt you. But I take strength from your reply to my last letter: I see in your words that you truly understand beyond my capacity to explain and that you have much wisdom that can help you do as I wish to do and transform the painful things into something better within my own heart. So I will tell you and let you help me – is it enough of a comfort to you if I say that telling you these things comforts me? That you've made my life better by your willingness to listen to me as an equal? Is it not clean work, to hear someone's pain and, in hearing it, lessen it? Or am I still too selfish, asking you to take more of my burdens on your shoulders when you have already carried so much?

But I am delaying here. I am saying everything but what I must say: I have been to a place like the one where I died once, where a man killed me, and I don't know what to do. Can we really be like the land itself, which I know will heal? The green will return, covering over the wounds in the earth. Can it really be the same for us?

I will say what I must now. The last facility which used Kanryu's obscene methods has been liberated. I know in my mind that this is a good thing and shows how much we have accomplished. But when I try to believe what I know...

I was there, when it was freed. We came prepared to care for very injured people; I came prepared to see people with eyes like mine once were, and I hoped that I could see them heal. But instead I saw what was left of the light in their eyes go out, one by one. After their defeat was assured, the men guarding the facility decided to kill all those souls who remained suffering at their hands. I cannot understand it; I refuse to try. If I did, I do not think that I could ever again see those we fight as human.

I am sorry to speak of such things, but I have no else to tell save those who were already there and I feel that I must tell someone or go mad. They lasted long enough that we could take them from the cells; they died, at least, breathing free air, with the sun on their faces and cool water on their lips and I know as none of my comrades can what a mercy that was. I know that we did all we could, moved as quickly as was humanly possible, were not negligent in any way. And yet I cannot help reliving that day, thinking if only, if only.

I sleep out under the stars every night. Many of the men complain about our lack of supplies, but I'm glad for it. I sleep outside and I look up and I see a world above us so clean and pure and good and I think that we must never, ever grow wings and fly. There must be something that we cannot touch.

I'm so sorry, but we can't be trusted. We must be ever hoped for and believed in and cared for, but I cannot bring myself to trust us. Not when there are such people to be found in the world, people who would have done the same to me, who would have put a cup of poison in my hands and ordered me to drink out of sheer spite, simply to deny me even the possibility of ever being more than their creature.

Oh, Kaoru. Tell me I have not pained you too much by recounting this. Do not feel that you must comfort me; I have the stars. I have the people I know and care for here. I have my work, which I
am proud of and which I believe matters. I have much. The only thing I know myself to lack is you, and so I reach out, selfishly, from no impulse other than the hope that you might hear me. I am not so different from the soldiers I write letters for, in that way; I too I long to be known. I saw in the men and women who died that day what might have become of me if you had not taken me in and shared your life and your home with me. I have so much. I have been so lucky.

Kaoru, I couldn't even get their names to write down! They were still too trapped in the drugs and the conditioning to tell me, and we couldn't find the records. They're buried now, in marked and nameless graves. I helped dig those graves. I wish I could have done more.

I don't know what else to say.

Kenshin

Kenshin read it once more, and thought about it for a long time. Then he wrote another letter, smaller, and folded it inside the first. He would send them both in the morning: send them, and then – and then he would wait and see.

Dear Kaoru,

I wrote the previous letter two months ago and decided to wait before sending it. I'm glad that I did. At the time I wrote it I was tangled in things I've carried inside me since I began to heal, things I've been facing in small ways every day since you set me free. I didn't notice at first, I thought I was acting normally, but my friends here have been very concerned. Their kindness, and my own desire to keep doing our good work, has helped me come out of the dark place I found myself in. I promise you that I am well and whole. Now that the infection of Kanryu's evil art is burned from our country, there will be healing. I know it, I have known it all along, but now I can tell you that I have begun to believe it.

I've doubted whether I should send the original letter at all. Writing it helped me, but maybe you don't ever need to see it. Maybe I should protect you from it. But then I remember that you were there when I was like the men and women who died here, voiceless and trapped in my own mind. You were there when Kanryu opened the door to the place where he destroyed me. And you were there when I faced him for the last time. You alone know everything, and you alone have been the one to see and accept me through it all. You have always been beside me; even during this time that we have been apart I have felt you with me. You are the reason I have my name and my life. If I want you with me now, at the end of the story, it is only because I know that you are strong and brave and good enough to bear it, and because I want to show you that it is ended. He's gone. What he did is gone. But the people I met, the people I helped... they can live inside me without hurting me, as do all the memories of the people I have known and written letters for, both those who survived their injuries and those who did not.

I visited the graves we dug today. I brought incense to burn, and flowers. I told their spirits that I would remember them as my brothers and sisters. They were more than evil men made them; I don't need to have heard their names to know that. I can stand with them as you stood with me, asking nothing, certain of nothing save that I was someone who needed you.

You are ever a bright and good thought to me. And always in my prayers.

Ever yours,

Kenshin

~*~
September, 1881

Dear Kenshin,

I don't know how to respond to your last two letters. There is too much to say, and not enough, and all of it mixes together until I don't know where to start, or even if there is a place to start, except perhaps the very beginning.

How much do you remember of the day we met? I should have told you – I want you to know that I never meant to do what I did. I only meant to help a wounded man. But when I asked your name, and Megumi told it to me – when I tried to get you to respond to it, and you flinched away, and she explained to me what had been done to you – I was so angry, in the moment, that I didn't think at all. I only acted, because everything Megumi had just told me was so abhorrent to me that I didn't know what else to do.

I think that what I mean to say by this is that they knew their names. As you knew yours, but didn't dare speak it. I know you know this, but perhaps you need to hear it – perhaps I need to say it. They knew what you asked, even though they couldn't respond. Kanryu locked so many names and souls away, but he never destroyed them. Could not destroy them. Nothing ever can or will. And it is not enough, will never be enough that at least in the end they knew relief from pain and a kind voice asking their name – but it's all that I have to offer.

I'm sorry, all I have is platitudes. I don't know what to say.

I am glad that you saw the end of Kanryu's horror. I am glad that you had friends to hold you safe through that storm. And I am glad – forgive me, I cannot make the words sound right so I must say them as they come to me – I am glad that you were there for those last victims, and that you asked their names. Because I don't think it would have occurred to anyone else to ask – I don't think anyone else would have understood the importance of their names. I am glad that they had you to bear witness, at the end; that it was their brother at their deathbeds, and not a stranger.

I am also glad that you remember me as one who helped you, and that you have honored me by asking me to witness the end of this part of your story – because it is not the end of your story. There is so much waiting for you, now, even with all the healing yet to be done.

Please, never ever think that I am the reason for anything you have now. You owe me nothing and you never will. I am only a foolish girl who gave a foolish order to a wounded man, who acted in a thoughtless, selfish fury and through some lucky miracle managed not to make things worse. What you've done is yours alone. If I did anything, it was only provide you with a little time and space to heal the worst of your hurts. Your own strength did the rest. And you are strong. You are the strongest man I know.

There's talk that the shōgunate will surrender soon. There are plans, also, to build a park where Kanryu's manor once stood. They're planning to flood the lowered portion where the pens once stood to make a lake, and plant trees and flowers – not roses – and raise a memorial for the dead. It should be beautiful. I hope it will be. I hope you'll come and see it, some day.

Thank you.

Kaoru

Kenshin raked his fingers through his hair, puzzling over Kaoru's letter. It was the fifth time that he'd
read it, and it still didn't seem quite right. There was a terrible air of finality to it, as if she thought they'd never speak again, and that wasn't right. Couldn't be right. He'd made things clear – at least, he thought he had – how else could she have understood his letters?

He read the letter again, wondering.

*Please, never ever think that I am the reason for anything you have now. You owe me nothing and you never will.*

The line drew him, hooked itself into his thoughts. He turned it over, trying to understand.

*You owe me nothing and you never will.*

Kenshin sighed and stood up, folding the letter and tucking it into his sleeve with all the others. He always kept her letters with him; the others, the letters from the dying that he'd written but never been able to send – because the men had died before giving him an address, or had no one to send them to – he kept bundled with his things, wrapped in oilskin to keep them dry. Only Kaoru's letters were always near his skin.

It was a bright, hot day – summer was lingering, this year – and the air smelled of smoke. The sky above was painfully blue, blue enough that it nearly hurt to look at. Kenshin shaded his eyes and looked anyway, following the faint wisps of clouds as they floated across the endless expanse, blown by the even fainter winds.

*Never ever think that I am the reason for anything you have now,*

But she was, he wanted to argue with her, except that she wasn't here to argue with. Or at least, he liked to think so; without her faith in him, he couldn't have come as far as he had. The journey had been his, but she'd outfitted him for it. She'd believed in him. How could she not know that?

*You owe me nothing and you never will.*

It wasn't a question of what was owed…

Hoofbeats broke his reverie; hoofbeats and a voice shouting joyful and wild above the din. He blinked, starting towards the noise. Frantic messengers on horseback were nothing new, but this fellow sounded happy to be delivering his news.

The rest of the field hospital started to trickle out, picking their way across the churned, muddy ground as the messenger skidded to a halt in the center of the camp. His horse was lathered, sides heaving, and he wore Choshu colors.

"Surrender!" he managed to gasp out. "It's a surrender! It's over! The shōgunate surrendered! We've won!"

For a moment, no one seemed quite able to understand what the messenger had said. Then one of the nurses – Itsuko, Kenshin knew without looking, recognizing her throaty voice – let out a war whoop. One of the doctors picked it up, and it spread in half a heartbeat until the entire camp was cheering, faces that had been worn to a sliver with care suddenly lightened.

The war was over. Soon, everyone would be going home.

They could only spare a few moments for celebration. The wounded still needed to be cared for, the dead buried as honorably as they could be under the circumstances. But with the end in sight, everyone worked with a lighter heart than ever before and Kenshin, still not very good at living
inside his skin, could not keep the grin off his face. Even Kaoru's strange letter – and all that it might mean – couldn't touch that joy.

They found time to celebrate that night, passing around a store of sake one of the doctors had hauled with them from Kyoto in anticipation of eventual victory. He'd been ribbed for it, called Bad-Luck Ashigara for the presumption inherent in the act, and the potential to offend the gods. Now he was magnanimous in victory, validated in his long faith, and the camp was all the more grateful for it. And drunker. But not too drunk; there would still be work to do in the morning. Those patients who could safely be moved joined the celebration, looked after by the nurses and each other as the bonfire flickered against the night sky, sending sparks into heaven to merge with the stars.

Kenshin leaned back, muzzily satisfied. An empty sake cup dangled from his fingers. After a little while, Yumi came and sat down beside him.

"So it's finally over…" she mused, turning her cup in her hands. Her face was a little flushed. "It feels so strange."

"Well, it's a good thing, isn't it?" He smiled up at her. "You and Makoto can finally have the wedding."

She blushed a little deeper. "That's true. It's – well. I feel like we've waited forever."

"You didn't have to," he pointed out. She stared off towards the fire, sipping her half-filled cup.

"We made the right decision," she said finally. "It was hard to wait, but… this way, everyone can be there. You'll be there, right?"

"I plan to." Kenshin was a little surprised that Makoto hadn't already shown up to carry off his bride; presumably something was holding him up. He'd be there first thing in the morning, Kenshin was sure – or possibly even later that night. "Hey, Yumi?"

"What is it?"

Kenshin toyed with his empty cup, the warmth in his veins giving him uncommon courage.

"Well…" He bit his lower lip, not entirely sure where to begin. "Um. Say, someone – a man – really cared about a woman, but…"

"But what?" Yumi sipped her sake again, eyeing him with a knowing glint. He probably wasn't fooling her; yet he forged ahead, too nervous to say what it was really about.

"Well. It seemed that maybe, she doesn't understand his feelings? Or doesn't return them? And he's not sure which it is…"

Yumi hummed contemplatively, setting her cup aside.

"Well, I suppose the most important question is what he's been saying to her. Men aren't nearly as clever as they think they are, you know; this man might think he's been perfectly clear about things, but that doesn't mean that she's understood any of it."

"She talks a lot about how he shouldn't be so grateful to her," Kenshin muttered.

Yumi laughed, ringing out clear as a bell. Kenshin bolted upright, stung.

"But I – he is grateful!" he protested, not sure why Yumi was laughing so hard. "For knowing her –"
for having her in his life, for having had the chance to meet her and – "

"Oh, Kenshin." She giggled one last time, wiping a tear from her eyes. "No one worth loving wants to be loved only out of gratitude! Have you told her that it's more than that? That you're grateful because you love her, and not the other way around?"

"Er…" He thought, quickly, over all the letters he'd written. "Um."

"How on earth is she to know, if you haven't told her?"

"I… thought I was being clear…" he muttered, abashed. Because he hadn't actually said it, not once – had always assumed that Kaoru understood.

Which had actually been rather stupid of him.

"Well, you are a man," Yumi said merrily. "Although you're normally quicker than this. Probably because you're so short," she said, her solemn tone belied by the glint in her eyes. "The blood actually makes it all the way to your brain."

"There's no need to rub it in," he said sourly. She poked his forehead, teasing.

"Don't worry about it," Yumi said, smiling gently. "Just be honest. She'll understand."

He waited a few days, thinking hard. And then, five days after the shogunate's surrender, he wrote Kaoru one final letter.

_Dearest Kaoru,

I fear I have misled you by not laying out matters more directly sooner. Let me be clear, then: I do not love you because I owe my life to you; rather, I choose to say that I owe my life to you because I love you.

I love you.

I love you!

Forgive me – having written it once, I find myself dizzy with the joy of it, wanting to shape the words over and over! This is the first time in my life that I have had cause to write those words. The very first. And they are for you, as are all my joys. With great gladness and hope I dream of you always by my side, in the past as well as the future – when I tell the story of my life, you are there because I want you there. I could imagine my life without you, but I don't want to – I want us to be together, always.

Though it would take a callous soul indeed to ignore the many kindesses you have done me, it is not from any sense of obligation or gratitude that I have continued to seek your words and company. My memories are colored by what I was when we first met, but I am not in thrall to some dream version of events. I remember it all clearly. There were times when I was frightened; from my very first moment with you I doubted your good will so absolutely that it was an article of my deepest faith that you would turn on me.

But your voice. Oh, Kaoru! I remember my fears, but I remember your voice as well, always calling me. Calling my name! I resented it, horribly. I wanted to sink into the oblivion of obedience, to protect myself from whatever evils would come next by denying that I was a thinking, feeling being. Yet you would not let me rest, would not stop calling my name and reaching out with soft hands and gentle words. I was lost in the darkness and glad to stay there, save that your voice would not let me
be, and I followed it from that labyrinth into the sunlight. You did save me, Kaoru, but that is not why I love you.

Never think that my feelings are born only of gratitude! It was only when I stood in the sun again that I came to understand what you had done. I shudder, now, to think of how deeply I doubted you, but if it will ease your fears to hear then I will admit it: I was certain that you would hurt me. I knew in my bones that every kindness was a trap designed solely to make my ruin that much more complete when it finally came. I knew that you would use me or sell me or find some way to extract from me whatever was left to be taken. It was all I knew to expect; it was my world. It would surprise you, I think, to know how long I thought this way. I remember sometimes the things that I believed and I weep for the man that I was, so lost to pain that he could not conceive of gentleness.

It was not a warm place to sleep and kind words that made me love you, Kaoru. It was coming to know myself, and to know you – it was that journey from the darkness that made me see your actions for what they were, as proof that you are brave and kind and good beyond the telling of it, and that is why I love you. With all that I am, I love you.

It pains me to think that I have led you to believe that my feelings for you are born of mere obligation. Forgive me, my love, for my reluctance to speak freely. But surely you can understand how I, with my limited prospects and uncertain life, felt it best to make no promises I was not certain I could keep or, indeed, to ask a promise of you that might tax your heart?

It has been a long winter for us, Kaoru. Like trees in the deep snow, we've pulled in all our life's blood, saving our best from the cold. I couldn't give wholly of myself until this war was over, nor could I ask you to open your heart to me. Not while my life was still at risk here on the front lines and you had so many depending on your strength. And now... Kaoru, soon the leaves will be turning gold and red with autumn, but it is spring inside my heart. I am full of courage, able to sprout forth with leaves, brave and green and bright. All of the sweetness and life I have kept safe inside, afraid of what the world would do to it, all of it is rising up in my heart now. Might it not be the same with you?

I love you. (Oh, to say it out loud! I long to say it out loud for the first time, and then over and over, for the rest of my life, if you wish to hear it. I hope that you do). I know that you care about me, at least as a friend. I hope that you might feel more. You met me when almost everything had been taken from me; in these past few years we've survived some of the worst that humans can endure. If we can care for each other through that, what might we feel now that the war is over, now that the world is born anew?

Every day men leave the camp and our field hospital. More and more of them leave alive and well, though there are days when we must yet dig graves. Soon I will be leaving, too; soon there will be no work left for me here, and I might turn my weary feet homewards. Before the snow falls I will come to see you and we will talk, really talk, as equals, of the things that letters alone cannot contain. Oh, Kaoru... if you wish it, if you will allow it, I will end this journey gladly in your arms and begin a new one beside you. And we will know each other as we never have, in peace and joy and happiness.

With all my heart – with all my love! – yours, always,

Kenshin

November, 1881
The warm wooden gates of the Kamiya home stood before him, propped open in welcome. Kenshin had thought that he might need to ask directions, given how much time had passed, but he'd remembered every step of the way home.

He took a deep breath. Cookfires and autumn leaves, and the crisp coolness of the coming winter. Summer had come late and lingered long, but the world was finally tilting towards winter. *Before the snow falls,* he'd told her, and he'd kept his promise.

Now, as he stood at the top of the wide stone steps, he hesitated. Shouts from the training hall split the air, interspersed with the crack of wooden swords. Kaoru was giving a lesson, then. She'd be in the hall, among her students, shaping small hands around bamboo hilts, her hair streaked with sweat, her eyes lit with joy and patience…

Kenshin brushed his fingers against the lintel as he stepped across the threshold. *Hello,* he meant to say. *I'm back.* And he thought, for a moment, that the gate sighed happily in response.

Something eased in him as soon as he took that first step into the courtyard. Here was safety, hearth and warmth and *home,* and he'd thought sometimes on the way back from the disbanded front that he might have misremembered the nature of the place, but he hadn't. It was all brightness here, and gentle welcome. Even the golden cast his memories had given the air of the place was real, some special trick of the light or maybe just his own addled senses rejoicing to be home.

He found that he didn't particularly care.

A contented sigh curled its way up from the deepest part of his soul and, smiling, he made his way towards the training hall. As he rounded the corner he nearly bumped into Yahiko coming the other way.

"Kenshin!" Yahiko stared at him, nearly dropping his basket of squash. "Holy shit!"

"I said I would come back, didn't I?" Kenshin asked, amused. Yahiko blinked at him, eyes round with shock. He'd grown a fair bit, his bones a little faster than the rest of him; he was just barely taller than Kenshin now, and gangly with it.

"Well, yeah, but that was years ago," he said, propping the basket awkwardly on his hip. "Kaoru – I mean, we – well, we kinda thought that maybe you'd changed your mind, since we hadn't heard from you…"

It was Kenshin's turn to blink in surprise.

"I sent a letter."

"You must have beaten it back." Yahiko shrugged. "Anyway, it's good to see you. Are you in town long?" His voice was scratchy and uneven, in the throes of breaking.

"I – well, I thought I might stay, actually…" Kenshin trailed off, dismayed. Kaoru hadn't gotten the letter; Kaoru still didn't know. And, more importantly, now he'd have to *tell* her. Face to face. He felt, suddenly, a bit nauseous.

Yahiko must have noticed him paling, because he grinned reassuringly. "Hey, don't worry about it. Kaoru promised that this'd be your home as long as you wanted, remember? She doesn't break her promises. Besides," and Yahiko's grin softened. "We kinda missed you. At least, I did."

Kenshin smiled back, light again at the sincerity in Yahiko's face. He toyed briefly with the string of the bag slung over his shoulder, wondering.
"How is she, by the way? Kaoru, I mean." He said it carefully, not quite certain what he was asking.

"She's healthy." Yahiko shifted. Uncertainty flashed in his eyes, and his smile faltered. "But, you know… the war was pretty hard for everyone. I mean – she hasn't changed or anything, she just might not be like you remember. It's been a while since you saw each other." Then he grinned again. "I mean, hell, look at how much you've changed."

"And you," Kenshin said mildly. "What have you been doing, stretching yourself on a rack?"

"Dangling from the ceiling beams with the kids hanging on my ankles, actually." Yahiko retorted cheerfully. "Every night after dinner."

It was a terrible joke. They laughed anyway, and something comfortable and easy settled in the space between them.

"Listen, the lesson's going to be over soon." Yahiko hoisted his squash up. "I gotta get this into the kitchen and start pickling for dinner, and dish out lunch – you should head over to the training hall."

"All right." Kenshin shifted his bag again, almost sighing. "Do you think – ? Well. That is…"

He couldn't quite get the words out.

"It'll surprise the hell out of her," Yahiko said, answering his unspoken question. His eyes were suddenly very solemn. "And – she might be different from what you remember, but she does care about you, an awful lot. Just – you know, give her a little time. A lot's changed."

There was a message there, behind Yahiko's eyes. Kenshin smiled gently, certain that he understood.

"I know it has."

~*~

Kenshin settled himself outside the training hall, just to the side of the door, and listened. He could hear Kaoru's voice above the sounds of the lesson, calling the count in a steady beat. Now and again it would break off to correct someone, softly; then she would give another order and begin the count again. He leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes.

He'd missed her voice. He'd missed her – and of course she would have changed, of course things would be different but – she was still Kaoru. She had to be. All brightness and warm certainty, and the will to protect…

He pulled his knees up, wrapping his arms around them, and waited with fierce, fizzing joy to see her again.

The students came out mostly in a rush when the lesson was over, chattering to each other as they headed for the gates or for the dining room, and Kaoru didn't come with them. He waited a few moments, wondering if she would come outside, but she didn't. After a time, he bolstered his courage and got to his feet, leaving his bag to rest on the veranda.

Kaoru was standing in the middle of the hall, her back to the door, with her wooden sword poised to strike. Her long, shining hair fell down her back from its high ponytail, and her gi was streaked with sweat, plastered to her body to reveal the strong lines of muscle and bone. Sunlight poured from the high windows, pooling golden on the fine-grained wooden floor and shimmering in the air around her. She held her pose for a long time, long enough that Kenshin wasn't sure that she planned to actually do anything with it – and then she struck. Her movements were quick, precise, and
powerful; she ran through her forms with easy grace, and bowed to the altar when she was finished. He watched her the entire time, heart in his throat.

"Kaoru..." he whispered, and didn't realize he'd spoken aloud. She turned, gasping in surprise.

Her blue eyes widened, dark as midnight. She clutched at her collar, lean fingers twisted in the heavy canvas. Her lips parted, breath rushing hard between them from exertion or surprise, or both.

He took a step forward.

"I'm home," he said quietly.

"...Kenshin," she finally managed to say. "I – I didn't know you were coming. Here. Again."

"I'm sorry," he said, not coming any closer. There was something strange in her eyes, in the weary lines of her face – she looked so tired. "I sent a letter, but I guess I must have gotten home before it did."

"Oh." Her throat worked. "Well. I – how are you?" she blurted out. "The last letter you wrote me..."

Then she turned away, abruptly, and went to hang her sword on the rack. The room seemed a little darker; he felt strangely bereft, as if she was pulling away. He reached out to her, uncertain.

"I'm sorry," she said, wiping the wooden blade clean before she hung it. "That's none of my business. I didn't mean to intrude. Will you be in town very long?"

Kenshin let his hand drop to his side, exhaling sharply with a hurt he wasn't sure he was allowed to feel.


His throat closed around the words, aching. Her hand paused as it lifted from the rack, just for a moment.

"It's not an imposition," she said brightly. When she turned to face him again she was smiling: but her smile was hollow, shielding her and shutting him out, and it hurt enough to make him breathless. "After all, I did promise that you could. Lunch should be ready – have you seen Yahiko?"

He nodded, trying to swallow down the lump in his throat.

"You should meet the children, too," she said, walking briskly past him. "I'm going to change. I'll see you at lunch."

Then she was gone and he was left standing in the doorway of the training hall, his heart aching.

~*~

Kenshin lay awake that night in the small room he was sharing with Yahiko, since every other bedroom was full. The door was cracked to let in the cool night air. He watched the moon floating in the clear night sky through the gap, his hands laced behind his head. The house mumbling gently to itself, settling. Everything was peaceful. And everything was wrong.

Kaoru had acted as though they were mostly strangers. As if she didn't feel – anything, for him. But that couldn't be right. Were his feelings for her – and maybe she hadn't gotten that final letter but she had to know, even if she thought, wrongly, that it was only gratitude – were his feelings a nuisance for her? Did she not return them at all?
But her letters…

He couldn't have read them wrong. She had cared for him when she wrote them, if only as a friend. So why, now, did she act like there was nothing at all between them?

Why…?

He turned on his side, digging his fingers into the sheets, and sighed heavily. Something had changed – something had happened, something that he didn't know about, something that had changed everything. Something was wrong. He hadn't understood at all.

A night-bird called in the distance. Kenshin burrowed a little deeper in the blankets, searching for sleep. His stomach knotted in on itself, tight and hard and frightened.

He'd find out. Somehow. Find out and – and fix it, if it could be fixed, and if not –

No. The war was over. There was time, plenty of it, and he could wait. Would wait.

There was time.

After a long while he slept, and dreamed of chasing Kaoru through endless corridors, always a few too many steps away.

~*~

February, 1882

Uzushou sat uncomfortably in the western-style chair, waiting for the foreigner. The riotous sounds of the New Year barely penetrated the office, nestled deep in the heart of the foreigner's compound. He knew that the foreigner was keeping him waiting to make a point, and the point was not lost on him.

The newspaper on the foreigners desk seemed to mock him. Surrender. Cowards – vile, cringing cowards, throwing away centuries of peace and order at the craven whining of a handful of bleeding hearts. No matter. They would understand soon enough how badly they had erred.

Finally, the door opened and the foreigner sauntered in, trailing his rank scent behind him. He settled down behind his desk and Uzushou kept a tight lock on his face. It was important that the foreigner not know how foul he smelled, or how much Uzushou despised him. He still needed this stinking barbarian – needed his money, the money that had come with him when he'd fled his own country's cowardly surrender to the gods-cursed bleeding-heart abolitionists.

"I presume you've heard the news, Mr. Chuzin?" the foreigner said.

"Yes." Uzushou flattened his hands against his thighs, heart raging in his breast. "What are we going to do?"

"There isn't much we can do." The foreigner shrugged. "It isn't as though we didn't expect this. Our own plans are not disrupted; they must only be broadened in scope."

"So it would seem." It was the answer he'd expected, although not the one he'd wanted. He wanted to attack now, today, yesterday – to rage through Japan and take vengeance for his master. To hunt down that rabid, red-headed dog and his traitor-bitch mistress, and that cunt of a doctor, and make them pay –
His hands clenched. He knew, though, that the foreigner did not see. Blind, idiot, arrogant – but useful. For now.

"In any case," the foreigner said, writing something. "This should allow you to draw further funds from my account. I've included an estimation of how much we need to expand in order to meet the new circumstances. And our allies in the new government have pledged to help us find the doctor – so we should be able to work out the kinks in the formula in short order."

Uzushou bowed, accepting the papers.

And when it was all over – when Japan was sane again, brought to heel under Kanryu's banner once more – then the foreigner would be of no further use.

As he left the foreigner's office, Uzushou allowed himself a small, cold smile.

He had always wondered how long it would take a stinking barbarian to die.

Chapter End Notes

And that's all she wrote. Full debriefing at my tumblr - thefullmooninautumn.tumblr.com. See you in the sequel, slated to begin publication in July 2014!

Also, many thanks to Angel/Ms. Wyrr for assisting with the letters in this chapter. She played Kenshin!

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