Like Stones, Like Flowers

by tact_and_impulse

Summary

They are all women, but their lives are different. Whether blood-stained or fiery with willpower or full of good intention, their stories deserve to be told. A collection of character studies. Written for Women of Ruroken Week 2016.

Notes

Prompt: Independence
Kaoru does not cry at her father’s funeral. It is not that she did not love him, but she must keep a brave face for the ten students who also attended. The youngest ones idly shuffle their feet; they barely remember her father’s face. The older ones are worried, furrowing brows and whispering.

“Who’s going to teach us?”

“Maybe, there’s a different dojo?”

“Idiot! This was the only place where Kamiya Kasshin can be taught!”

That’s right. Her father founded Kamiya Kasshin, this new art for this new era of peace. And with him gone, it is likely that the discipline will die with him.

She clenches her fists. It isn’t fair, that he had to die and that everyone thinks his work will share his fate. If she were his son, there would be no question that Kamiya Kasshin would go to her. But she’s not, and she has practiced and poured her soul into her heritage, just as a son would. Even her father had recognized that.

*He was always practicing in the dojo. Her mother, sick but still determined to recover, told her to go to him. He had been away for so long, fighting in the war, but he was home now and she should not be a stranger to him.*

*Grandfather had taught her kenjutsu. Stances. How to shuffle her feet in the right way. How to hold her bokken. How to strike and cry out. But her father was only practicing the same thing over and over. The same moves, against an invisible opponent. Then, he bowed to the air and looked right at her.*

Startled, she gasped and dove back behind the door. But he called out her name and she guiltily stepped into the dojo. She had lowered her head, preparing for a lecture on not bothering him, but it never came.

*“Kaoru. Look at me, I’m not angry, I’m only going to say this.” Her father took her fingers in his and gripped them tightly. “Our family’s produced kenjutsu for generations. But from this day on, I’m going to teach a new style. One that protects life. You are going to be my first student, and that means when we get more students, you’ll have to help me. Can you do that for your father?”* 

She nodded, suddenly thrilled by the prospect. *Okaa-san had never liked her affinity towards kenjutsu, but Otou-san was supporting her. “Yes!”*

*“In the future, if I get too busy, you might have to teach too.” He warned.*

*“That’s okay. Because I love kenjutsu!”*

She does. She loves kenjutsu. While the girls from her childhood learned sewing, she learned how to perform kata. While they talked of sweets and cooking, she instructed the newcomers under her father’s watch. While they have been married off, her life belongs to her dojo and her pride in Kamiya Kasshin. Even now, the rumors of her living alone and being unladylike do not bother her at all. She will follow her own path, as she has since her father handed this responsibility to her. And even though he is no longer in this world, she can stand on her own.

She raises her voice over the murmurs. “I’m going to teach.”
One of the younger boys scoffs. “You will?”

“Are you saying that I can’t? Who was the one who trained you while my father was away?” She grinds her teeth together, tapping the boy’s head with her fist.

“Ack! I’m sorry!” He yelps.

“Listen up, everyone! Practice begins tomorrow, as we always have!” They grumble, but she knows they’ll show up at the dojo.

These are her students. Hers to protect, hers to reprimand, hers to guide. And she doesn’t care who says otherwise. She will teach Kamiya Kasshin.

She will.
Atonement

Chapter Notes

Prompt: Atonement

The smell of opium is on her. It’s deceptively sweet and rich, but underneath, it’s sickening, promising of rot. It’s crept into her clothes, and she has sworn to burn them once she can afford new ones. It’s beneath her fingernails and her hair, a perfume that refuses to wash away.

She promised herself to save lives and pay for making opium. She had resolved to do that, hadn’t she? But it’s harder than she imagined, since Dr. Gensai’s patients are wary of her new face. And she can’t approach them; the last time she offered her services, she found herself under Kanryuu’s thumb.

Dr. Gensai is tending to a patient on the outskirts of town, and he’s entrusted her with overseeing the clinic. She flips idly through his medical texts. They’re rather yellowed and old-fashioned, so maybe she could edit-

“Hello? Dr. Gensai?!” The voice is panicked. “It’s Itsuki! My wife! She’s gone into labor! Are you home?”

She hurries to the front, blinking at the sunset. Itsuki is apparently a man in his thirties, and he’s clutching his knees for support. She hopes that he hasn’t run too far. “Dr. Gensai isn’t here right now, but I’m Takani. I can help your wife.”

“Thank you, thank you!”

Itsuki’s house is small, and there are three boys waiting at the front steps. They’re young, and she inquires. “So this isn’t your first child?”

“They’re my wife’s siblings. The baby will be our first child.”

She presses her lips together and clutches the bag she brought with her. First births are rarely easy.

The wife is crying, and there’s a girl, perhaps her sister, trying to calm her. Megumi introduces herself with a smile and a saccharine voice, before asking to check her condition.

She’s almost fully dilated, so it can’t be long now. Megumi had helped her mother deliver babies years ago, but now that knowledge is blazing through her mind. She shouts orders at Itsuki and the boys, for water and clean cloths. She deems the girl her assistant and goes to wash her hands.

Then, she loses track of time, easing the wife through the contractions and monitoring everything she can see. It’s a war, but she is winning. “Alright, here it comes. One last push, do you hear me?”

The woman doesn’t have the strength to nod, but with a clench of her jaw, the baby slides out.

From then on, it’s methodical. The cord is cut, and with a flick of Megumi’s wrist, the newborn wails. “Congratulations. It’s a girl.” She declares. The baby’s swaddled and passed to the father,
as she handles the post-delivery care.

After she ensures that both mother and child will be fine and promises to return for a follow-up, she leaves. She’s exhausted but she’s saved them. She has.

Dr. Gensai doesn’t return until the next morning, but he’s grinning. “More people are asking for you, so I’ll have you meet them on your own now. It'll be more work, but I know you can do it.”

She will never admit it, but she appreciates his trust in her.

“Then, you had better increase my pay.” She says cheekily and enjoys watching him sputter. As she lifts her hand to her mouth and laughs, she thinks that the smell of opium is a little weaker. Just a little.
“You don’t have to do that, Tsubame.” Yahiko grumbles, reaching for her extra bag of groceries. “Here, let me take one, at least.” But she shies away, moving out of his reach.

“Yahiko-chan, I want to.” She readjusts her hold and keeps walking, her pace slowed by the weight straining her hands. “It’s my job too.”

“Yeah, but…” He trails off and his mouth twists. She can read it in his eyes that she isn’t strong enough, and that he’s trying to figure out the best way to say it. “You…”

“You said that your arm was sore from yesterday.” She gently reminds him. “Kaoru-san won’t be happy if you hurt yourself more than that.”

“Tch. That hag can stuff it. And you’re too nice for your own good.” He gives her an exasperated look, but his face is turning red and so is hers.

“You don’t have to do that, Tsubame.” Tae scolds, guiding her away from the grill. “It might be a little busy today, but I can still do it.” But she stays close, the heat washing over her.

“Tae-san, I want to.” She reaches for the clean plates, inspecting the top one for dust, before setting it down. “It’s very busy, and the grill is full.”

“It’s hot.” She warns. “And I don’t want you to get splattered or burned.” Tae’s gaze turns ruefully to Tsubame’s hands, which are already showing signs of work.

“I’m here to help. I know I can’t do much, but I want to do as much as I can.” Her soft hands are a thing of the past, like her family background. This era demands that she work as hard as anyone else.

Tae’s expression softens, and she sighs in defeat. “Alright then. How about you start washing the vegetables?”

“You don’t have to do that, Tsubame.” Kaoru protests, taking the mattress from her. “Here, I can lay down your futon. Do you want a bath?” But she takes one side, anyway.

“Kaoru-san, I want to.” She unfolds her blanket and makes sure the fabric is taut over the futon. “I’m the one intruding.”

“Not at all! You’re welcome here any time. And we’ll find out who did this to the Akabeko. But first, let me do this for you.” She’s always admired Kaoru, but this time, Tsubame won’t budge.

“I do this all the time in my room.” Or, rather, she used to. She hiccups, despite herself. Her family is gone now, and just when she thought she had found where she belonged, that was taken away too.
“Oh, Tsubame, come here.” Kaoru embraces her, and she smells sweet. “Don’t worry. No matter what happens, I’ll be here, okay?”

“You don’t have to do that, Tsubame.” Kenshin says, trying to tug the robe in her lap away. “This one can fix it.” But she holds up a hand to stop him, then nervously lowers it.

“Kenshin-san, I want to.” She finishes her stitch and knots the thread. The last minute tear had occurred when the owner tripped over himself, leaving his own room. “I can’t let you sew on your wedding day.”

“Oro…” He runs a hand through his bangs, looking rather sheepish. “This one is sorry for troubling you so with his clumsiness.”

“It’s alright. The bride will need some more time too. She’ll look very pretty, won’t she?” She’s wished for the two of them to be happy together, and this day is the realization of that hope.

“Yes.” There’s a giddy smile on his face, and it only widens with his next quip, which makes her flush. “And this one and Kaoru-dono will surely return this favor when the time comes for you and Yahiko.”
Her first memory is clinging to her grandfather’s leg as he addressed the Oniwabanshuu at a meeting. She does not remember what he spoke of, only that she was determined not to let go. It was a childish notion, born of her warped logic at the time.

Perhaps, it was because she had recently lost her parents and thought that Jii-chan would disappear too if she didn’t hang onto him.

This did not please a few of the ninja in attendance. They kept looking at her, and they didn’t look very happy. One of the kunoichi was trying to coax her away, as if she were a stray cat, but that only made her more determined. She swiveled around, her movement causing the floorboards to squeak.

A snappish voice had asked for permission to speak, before proposing. “Can we have this room only limited to those necessary?”

Misao had gripped her grandfather’s calf and frowned. A pair of hands reached for her, but she hopped to the other leg and defiantly glared at the audience.

“Leave her be.” Her grandfather said.

“She’s a distraction.” Someone muttered.

“Hey!” She knew that ‘distraction’ was the grown-up word for ‘annoying’.

“If you’re distracted, that indicates a weakness on your part.” Jii-chan retorted, and that started a ripple of stifled laughter.

“She’s my granddaughter.” His voice was brimming with pride as he lifted her to settle her on his shoulders. “The future of the Makimachi clan, and maybe your future leader.”

“That’s right!” She stuck out her tongue. “And you better not forget it!”

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“Aoshi-sama, Aoshi-sama!” Misao leapt into the air, landing squarely at the teenager’s back and clutching his neck. He buckled under her weight but didn’t fall. “Give me your knives; I want to practice throwing them.”

“No.”

“Why not?” She cried out, tugging at his hair. “I’m not so little anymore, and I hit the target last week! I’m part of the Oniwabanshuu too, so why can’t I do the same things as you?”

“It’s too dangerous. You’ll slice off your fingers. Then, your grandfather will rise up from his grave and wave them at me, asking why I let you hurt yourself.”
“No, he won’t.” But her stomach lurch a bit. “That’s a lie, and you’re mean! Now, hand them over.” She had tried her best to sound imperious, but at first, she thought that wasn’t enough.

He had set her down, glancing around. Then, he sighed and reached into his pocket, pulling out a set of miniscule kunai.

“Don’t cut yourself.” He warned. “And I’ll have my eyes on you the whole time.”

She couldn’t reply to that, she was too thrilled.

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Misao couldn’t move, as Aoshi’s footsteps faded away.

She felt something break within her, in the space where her heart was. What was it all for? The boasts about bringing him back to Kyoto. Living on barley and a canteen of water as she hiked through forests. Listening through floorboards and walls for any information. What was it all for, if he’s changed into this…this monster?

What was it all for, if what she clung to was only a memory? In that moment, she had wavered, unsure of what to do. Her willpower had been shattered by that empty gaze and Jiiya’s blood on his kodachi.

But just as quickly, her despair ignited, into a blaze of righteous anger. He was no longer one of them. The Oniwabanshuu needed a new leader, and she was going to take that position with her own hands.

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She’s still Okashira, she realizes. It’s autumn, and Aoshi is on the porch, in a trance. The Aoiya is busy, serving tourists who journeyed to Kyoto, for the beauty of the vivid foliage. Jiiya would have definitely heard of her declaration, but if he had any objection, he would have said so. He always asks for her input too, and it might just be submission. Everyone else does as well, and the only one who hasn’t subtly shown this recognition never stays close to her.

“I’ve brought tea.” She announces. “I’ll set it beside you, is that fine?”

He inclines his head in a slight nod. It’s all he does. He’s home, but only in body. And for her, that isn’t enough.

“Aoshi-san. That’s right, I’m calling you that now. After all, it wouldn’t do to have the Okashira refer to a subordinate as a master. I am the Okashira, by the way, I have been since summer.” She’s rambling, but she has to, to shock him back into reality.

His voice is low. “So you are.”

“You’re not going to demand I step down?” Not that she would if he asked, she’s only baiting him.

“After what I’ve done, I don’t believe that I’m worthy of that position.”

“Oh.” It’s the answer that she expected, but it’s still painful.

He’s sliding back into his meditative state. It’s painful too, to watch like this; she can’t let him slip further away from her. And suddenly, an idea strikes her.
“Then, I have an order for you.”

“You do?”

“Yes. And you’ll have to obey your Okashira.” She manages to say it sternly, despite the growing smile on her face.

“What is it?”

“Come look at the maple leaves with me. I’ll buy you lunch too, because that’s how generous I am.”

He blinks, confused, and she takes her chance. Dragging him off the floor and onto his feet, she grins as she steers him along.
Across the floor of the teahouse, her boss is sitting at a table, and his presence is unnecessarily weighing down her every move. The wig on her head is heavy, and so is the padding around her chest. She doesn’t mind the wide neckline of her kimono, but she dislikes the weak, pale pink color.

The mission is straightforward: loosen the tongue of that mobster with sake and flattery and attention. Then, she’ll report any and all information pertaining to the possible uprising, where it’d be put to use by the government.

She fawns over the target, letting her fingertips linger over the back of his hand and fluttering a paper fan coquettishly to draw attention to her lips. And as he leers at her, she refills his cup of _shochu_, waiting for his thoughts to numb.

Unfortunately, he’s the rowdy kind of drunk. He avoids her queries, stroking her hip, and she’s forced to swat his fingers away and pray he didn’t notice the lack of curve.

“C’mon, don’t be like that.” He wheedles. “You were the one all over me, you might as well show me what’s under your robe.”

She recklessly considers flashing him, just as she did to that girl a while back, but she counts to eleven and forces a smile. “Sorry, but I’m not that kind of woman.”

It isn’t the answer he wants.

He lunges at her, pinning her to the floor. She screams and claws at him, hoping to make a scene. Then, he grabs her fake breasts, and the puzzlement that crosses his face fills her with shame. “Wha-?”

But he’s pulled off of her, and she makes the mistake of seeing who did so.

That ridiculous hair. The cocky smile. What she hadn’t expected was the uniform and badge, but that was a minor detail. After all, Cho was Cho, no matter what clothes he wore. She holds her fan to her cheek, determined not to look at her former comrade. But she catches the flash of recognition in his eyes and her stomach drops.

There are other policemen, shedding their undercover positions and helping Cho subdue the man. Her boss clearly had known the police would be here, since he seems completely unsurprised from his perch and isn’t signaling for her to leave. A joint operation then? She wouldn’t have been told, she’s only given enough information to do her job.

An officer with a katana in his belt and a cigarette between his teeth marches over. “Get him to the back room. Keep him there until the carriage comes.” His narrow eyes narrow even further at her, and she shrinks a little. “You alright?”

“Yes.” She whispers.

“Thanks for giving us a reason to arrest him.” He turns on his heel and gives more orders, directing people. To her disappointment, Cho is one of those staying behind. He heads for her, and she attempts to be standoffish, cleaning the spilled liquor on the table.

“Well, I didn’t expect to see you here. Then again, I bet you didn’t expect to see me either, did you, Kamatari?”
“Not at all, Cho.” She clips.

“By the way, I’m workin’ for the police now. And I heard about your role in all of this. So the question is, what’s your work like?”

“None of your business.” She huffs and stands. “Now, if you excuse me-” But his hand gently pulls at her sleeve.

“Sit down.” Cho pats the cushion beside him and lifts a bottle of sake. “I need someone to rant to. Earlier today, this bastard thought he could escape custody by trying to stab me.”

Her eyes dart toward her boss, who’s speaking with the smoking officer. Slowly, her legs fold under her.

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Some cups later, Cho’s run out of breath. “I hope that asshole rots in prison. Okay, I’ll shut up now. Your turn. How’ve you been holdin’ up?”

She purses her lips and turns her cup like she’s screwing it into the table. She doesn’t like to get drunk often; she’s an emotional drunk and all her insecurities become amplified to her. It is certainly the case now.

“It’s not a bad job you’ve got. At least you can be yourself here.”

That bursts the dam and she grips the cup so hard it shatters.

“I can’t. I can’t forgive myself. I can’t forgive myself at all, for doing that. For what? For nothing at all, he’s dead and now I’m broken.” She says in a rush, before sobbing. She cries quietly into her palms, shaking and gasping, and continues to talk in a ragged voice.

“I couldn’t be a woman for him, so I thought I could solve that by being a warrior. By being masculine. All I did was imitate some of the samurai I saw back home, and somehow, I enjoyed that. I liked being that character, someone who could earn his respect through battle, and somehow, it became a part of me.

“I could no longer tell whether it was acting or it was me, and I couldn’t forgive myself for that. I hate that male self I played, I hate myself for betraying my true self, and I hate myself for suddenly questioning what my true self was.

“There isn’t a place for me in this world, not as a woman and not as a man. I should have died in the Kyoto fire; I can’t forgive myself for living.”

It’s unforgivable. She had spent her whole life trying to prove that she was a girl, only to throw it away on the battlefield for a man. And all she has left are a broken heart and incinerated self-worth.

To her surprise, Cho lays a hand on her shoulder. It’s a familiar gesture, one of camaraderie. “Remember when you first joined us? Houji was bitchin’ about your scythe and your speech pattern, and then you almost severed his balls. And that night, you drunk us under the table. The next morning, you patched up our ragged clothes.”

“So filthy.” She hiccups at the memory.

“Well, even after we learned about your situation, we all thought ‘Kamatari is Kamatari’. Don’t
matter whether you’re a man or a woman or somethin’ else. You’re our comrade. So, forgive yourself and move on. That’s what I’ve done. Don’t look back, either. Got it, Kamatari?”

She sniffs but her lips tremble and curve in a smile. “You’re a good man, Cho. Too bad you’re not my type.”

“Don’t worry about that. The feeling’s mutual.”

She stands and her fingers bend forward in a shaky wave. “Thank you. For listening. Let’s hang out together again, alright?”

“Whenever I can get off work.” But he waves back.

After she’s escorted to her inn and her head clears a little, she changes into a bright green kimono. Green for renewal, for starting again.

*I am a woman. I might play as a man and have this body, but I know that this is me. I’ve done what I can to survive and I’ve made so many mistakes, but I can live with myself now. And I will live for myself.*

Alone in her room, she whirls around and laughs.
Support

The once-feared assassin of the Bakumatsu, Hitokiri Battousai, was kneeling in front of her. “Please help this one, Tae-dono.”

“What’s the matter?” She tried to keep her voice calm, despite the worry building within her. “Is Kaoru alright?”

He lifted his head, alarmed. “Oro? Ah, Kaoru-dono is fine. Rather, this one needs your help.”

“In what, exactly?”

“…asking Kaoru-dono…to…” The poor man was so nervous.

“Oh! Are you proposing?”

Even a nod proved to be too much for him. He fell backward onto the ground, eyes rolling helplessly, and Tae winced.

When he recovered, she sat him down and poured them both tea. Because of the attack last year, she took the opportunity to redesign and rebuild the Akabeko from the ground up. They were still operating mostly out of a cart, but she had a small space to live in and cook. “Normally, you ask for permission to court first.”

“Haven’t we been courting since we returned from the island?”

Oh, dear. “Does Kaoru know this?”

“She did say that she wanted to be with this one.”

“But did you actually ask her?”

“Oro, this one thought it didn’t need to be said…”

“What have you been doing until now?”

“Little things.” He was embarrassed again. “This one puts flowers in the bathhouse. And in her room and on the table. We went to the shrine together for New Year’s, and this one said that she looked beautiful in her new kimono.”

“Is that it?”

“Oro, there was one time we held each other after this one had a nightmare.”

“What!” She had never heard that before.

“That was definitely all that happened, this one never touched her after that!”

“Maybe that’s the problem, you didn’t do enough touching.”

He didn’t reply to that, his head falling to the table.

“Well, let’s see. If you are going to propose, you’ll have to make up all the romance before you do. Let’s plan an outing for the two of you, the weather’s been so nice. How about this? We start
with…”

Tae was a bit of a romantic at heart, but while planning out a couple’s excursion was fun, the actual event made her more worried than excited.

“Tae-san? Is this really alright?” Tsubame whispered beside her. Both were huddled behind a few trees, overlooking the river.

Without drawing her attention away from the couple picnicking by the banks, she answered. “Absolutely. After all, you’ve been cheering them on with me since the beginning. It’s only fair that we see this through.”

“No, not that. I meant, is it okay for us to be spying on them?”

“Tsubame-chan. If Kenshin-san messes this up somehow, which he likely will, it’ll be up to us to try and mend things. And it isn’t spying, it’s supervising.” Kenshin seemed to have noticed their presences anyway, glancing at them once.

“So what did you plan for them?”

“First, this lunch by the river. Then, they’ll go for a walk under the cherry trees. Finally, they’ll circle around to the dojo, where he’ll give a little speech and pop the question.”

“What if the hag says no?”

Tae had to clamp her hand over Tsubame’s mouth and bite at her own cheek, before looking behind her and glaring at Yahiko. “What are you doing here?”

“I got bored with self-study.” He shrugged. “So what if Kaoru says no?”

“But aren’t they in love?” Tsubame’s eyes were wide.

“Well, yeah, they’re crazy about each other. But who knows what girls are thinking?”

Tae was silent. It was true that a marriage was more complex than merely mutual feelings. And while Kenshin would be more than ready, Kaoru was still young. It was clear how she felt, but in all her discussions with Tae, she had never mentioned marriage. Perhaps, she hadn’t considered it, but it was just as likely that Kaoru was not ready. It had only been a few months since she returned home, and it was only a little over a year since she had met Kenshin.

Tsubame’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “Tae-san, look.”

The two of them had finished eating and moved to sit by the river, and the noise masked their conversation. But Kaoru was gently tugging at her hair ribbon and Kenshin seemed rather sheepish.

Ah, yes, that’s why we picked this place as the first stop. It was where she gave him her hair ribbon and, in his own words, where he first realized how important she was to him.

Kaoru was fiddling with her hair, winding a lock around her fingers. Then, Kenshin reached over, catching her hand in his own. He stood, helping her up and smiling fondly at her. Kaoru was taken aback, enough to lose her balance. She fell forward, toppling them both onto the grass.

Kaoru was completely still, as if not quite registering that she was draped over him. Kenshin’s expression was something between pleased and flustered. Then, reality struck and they quickly
disentangled, red-faced and nervously laughing.

“At least they didn’t fall in the river.” Yahiko dryly noted.

They were still holding hands as they left for the cherry orchard. Kaoru appeared to be distracting herself, by looking at the water and chatting. Kenshin was amiably nodding, and when she turned her head, his expectant gaze caught on the three of them, as if to ask how he did.

*Good. More, like that.* Tae nodded and silently tapped her fingertips together.

There were other couples and families strolling through the orchard, admiring the blossoms, so tailing them was easier at first.

Tae kept her gaze fixed on the pair. Kaoru seemed to be more comfortable, and Kenshin was too enchanted by her to look back. They made a lovely picture, amidst the pink and white petals.

“They look very happy, don’t they, Tae-san?” Tsubame remarked.

“Yes, they do.” This path was secluded as well, she had made sure of that while planning it out. And with Yahiko and Tsubame, they could block it further for more privacy. If she strained her sight, she could read their lips as well.

A blossom settled in Kaoru’s ponytail, and Kenshin must have told her. She reached for it, embarrassed, but he leaned forward to pluck it off. He showed her the flower and smiled as he placed it behind her ear. But his hand lingered, and Kaoru’s eyelashes lowered. Two syllables, that might have been his name, escaped from her. He didn’t answer, too focused on her mouth.

*If he could tilt his head a little, he could go for a kiss.* Tae grinned. Despite her own embarrassment, she did feel elated.

“Is he gonna kiss her?” Yahiko deadpanned. Tsubame was covering her face with her hands, but peeking through her fingers.

“Shh!” Tae hushed him. The mood was right for a kiss, and she was itching for any blatant sign of affection. She would be happy even if it was on the forehead.

But at the last second, he drew back, his fingers falling to his side. Kaoru looked dismayed, biting on her lip as he coaxed her ahead of him.

Tae desperately wanted to run over and give the redhead a good shake. As he walked behind Kaoru, he glanced at the three of them and apologetically smiled.

*Don’t smile at us, just kiss her!* She tried to gesture, hoping he’d understand, but he had already turned around.

“Maybe, it’s because we were here.” Tsubame murmured.

Yahiko shrugged. “Didn’t look like he was thinking about us.”

“In any case, we couldn’t have helped here. He’s just as nervous as she is.” Tae propped up her chin with her fist. After they had finished planning, she had teased him about the wedding night. He had nearly passed out again, and now that she was thinking about it, she wondered if *he* was ready.
It was a quiet afternoon, and although Tae made sure they’d be out of sight by the road, they could still hear the voices from the dojo.

“Last year, Kaoru-dono accepted this one here.”

“That’s true, but it feels like a very long time ago.”

“Yes, although this one can remember well when it first felt like home.” A pause. “However, after Enishi’s actions, this one realized that this place is not home. This one’s home is not this building or this plot of land. Where this one belongs is where you are, Kaoru-dono.”

So far, so good. Tae thought. Tsubame was blushing, and Yahiko’s ears were red.

“Kaoru-dono, would you let this one be your husband?”

Tae didn’t quite know what she was expecting, but silence definitely wasn’t it.

After a few unbearable seconds, Kaoru’s shaky voice filled the air. “Oh. S-sorry, Kenshin, but this is…very sudden.”

“It’s alright. This one didn’t do a very good job of courting.”

“Courting? Us?” Something in her tone made Tae nervous, and apparently, it had the same effect on Kenshin.

“This one apologizes, Kaoru-dono, for-”

“That’s exactly it!” Her voice was distressed, and Tae held back a groan. “It’s been five months since we returned from Kyoto, and you still call me Kaoru-dono! Even when there’s no one here but us. I use your name freely enough, and it makes me feel bad that you keep up the formality around me. I know that we might not be traditional, but I still want to be your equal.”

“This one understands.” He said quietly.

“And I didn’t realize we were courting. I’m sorry for that. But I didn’t know what to think. It was confusing, and we weren’t getting closer, even after I told you that I wanted to stay by your side forever.”

“This one feels that way as well. When we were apart, this one did not have any strength left.”

“I know, I did too. But…couldn’t you at least have told me that you loved me?”

“…that is not an easy thing for this one to say.”

“I see. That’s how it is.” She sounded so resigned, and she must have turned away, for Kenshin repeated her name and there was no answer.

“Oh, for crying out loud!” Tae snapped and marched to the dojo. Throwing the door aside and ignoring Kaoru’s yelp, she gave her best smile and announced. “Excuse me!”

“I’m so sorry.” She began. “But I couldn’t help it. You two need a mediator.”

She took a deep breath and leveled her gaze at them. “Marriage is not an easy thing. It is a commitment, one that must be upheld every day. Not everyone can do that. But that is what marriage is. You have to open your hearts to each other, to trust each other, to lean on each other for support. And you have to talk to each other, even when it’s hard.”
Tae paused. “But I believe that the two of you can do it. If not starting this year, maybe the next or the year after. But I know you can, and so do Tsubame-chan and Yahiko-kun. Now, first, you have to be honest with each other.”

She turned to Kaoru. “Kaoru, I’ve known you for years. You’re a dear friend, and this is a big step. Are you ready for it?”

Kaoru spoke slowly. “Even though Kenshin did try and I appreciate that, I still need time. I think, three or four months? That would be enough time to do things properly. But I do want to marry you, Kenshin. And hopefully, by the end of this year…I’m not sure I can wait more than that.”

He was about to answer to that, but Tae held up a finger. “Kenshin-san, your turn. I know you love Kaoru, but is it so difficult for you to express that?”

He focused on his feet. “This one has never said that to anyone. Not since this one’s family died of cholera. They died suddenly, and perhaps, this one was scared by that. But this one will amend it now.” He stepped towards Kaoru and took both of her hands in his. “This one loves you. And this one is sorry for not saying it earlier.”

Kaoru blinked hard and her reply was choked. “I love you too. I love you.” She gingerly held her arms up and he embraced her.

Thank goodness. Tae breathed. It’s all ended well.

“Guess it’s over.” Yahiko drawled from the threshold, Tsubame watching from behind him. At the edge of her sight, the couple broke free from each other, but still stood close.

“Thank you, Tae.” Kaoru said. “For intervening and helping us.”

Kenshin nodded. “Yes, thank you, Tae-dono. How could we repay you?”

She was about to refuse, but thinking it over, she declared. “I want to cater the wedding.”

“Oro?”

“Tae, we can’t let you do that!” Kaoru protested.

“But I’m offering. I’ll give you a discount, half off.” It wasn’t really the money she was after, anyway. But if Kaoru was going to be in charge of the guest list, it would include not only her students, but hers and Kenshin’s friends and acquaintances. The publicity would be just as good as full payment, almost as good as planning the wedding menu and the actual day itself. “Just give me a date and I’ll be on it.”

“Then, it’s a deal.” Kenshin quickly said. “We’ll look forward to it. Tsubame-chan, do you want anything as well?”

She shook her head, bashful. “I’ll help Tae-san with the catering.”

“Well, alright then.” Kaoru sighed and turned to Yahiko. “What about you?”

He stuck out his tongue. “Like I’d want anything from you, hag! And just kiss already, I bet you’ve been dying for it since the cherry orchard!”

She cracked her knuckles. “How about I make you kiss the floor, Yahiko-chan?”

But Tsubame and Kenshin stood between the angry teacher and student, and Tae moved to shoo
the children out. “We’re glad that everything’s worked out now, so we’ll leave and give you two some privacy. But, don’t do anything too naughty.”

“Tae-san!” Tsubame was mortified and Yahiko had a disgusted expression. But Tae reveled in the newly engaged couple’s simultaneous blush.

*Oh, dear. It looks like we still have things to work on.* And she laughed until she could barely breathe.
Selflessness

Chapter Notes

There was no prompt for this, but I decided to tie this into the rest of the theme of 'character traits', and 'selflessness' suited these three best.

In a clearing some distance away from Kyoto, a man and a woman walk with hands joined.

“Kenshin? Why are we here?” She asks, glancing around. There are a multitude of decaying wooden crosses, but it is where her companion stops that has her attention.

He stands solemnly before a trio of round rocks. Then, he turns to her and smiles. “Let this one tell you a story, Kaoru-dono. These three stones were once women.”

Akane is the daughter of a drunk. Her mother is dead. Her father has neglected his work for a love affair with sake.

There is never enough money in her family. Her siblings are always hungry, and lately, soldiers have come to reinforce the ridiculous three-day laws.

“No one buys new clothes when they’re trying to feed themselves.” She grumbles and wipes away sweat from her forehead. Boiling dye is unforgiving work, and her face and arms are red from the steam.

When the debtor arrives during her lunch break, she grits her teeth at the sum he mentions. Even if she sold the house, it would not be enough.

“Then, take me. I’m young, I’m unmarried.” Better her than any of her siblings. They are children, small enough to forget her and move on with happier lives. “I work hard too.”

The debtor scrutinizes her. “Very well. When the slavers come, I’ll give your father the money.”

That night, she takes her siblings to an orphanage and kisses them one by one. The second oldest, Ao. Her only sister, Midori. The baby, Kin. Only Ao seems to understand that this is goodbye, and she feels his glare. Once they enter the building, she turns on her heel and leaves. They can curse her name, but they will live and that is all that matters.

The slavers come with two carts, horse-drawn and worn down. As soon as the money lands in her father’s limp hand, she spits on the ground in disgust. Those coins will turn to sake by evening. Whatever end he comes to, there will be no one to mourn him.

There are only men in the carts, and that unnerves her. She may be plain and too old for marriage at nineteen, but age does not matter to miscreants.

“We can get more money for you if you’re a maiden.” The slave driver seems to read her mind.

“Hey, you bastards! Touch her, and I’ll slice off your testicles. She’s worth more than all of you put together.”

She sits on the edge, keeping her legs together under a blanket her colleagues have given her.
After all, that is where her worth lies.

Kasumi is the daughter of a ghost. Her mother is quarantined outside of the village. Her father has been dust since the day she was born.

It is an open secret that her family is Christian, descended from the survivors of the purge over a century ago. She’s memorized prayers and keeps a wooden rosary under her collar.

“How much is it for the medicine?” She inquires to the apothecary, already fingering her last few coins. The farmers had paid her barely anything, because she refused to marry into a family.

That evening, the villagers approach her. The recent drought has ruined half of the fields, and they will starve if they do not sell her.

“At the very least, give my mother a decent burial.” She says, and despite her tight throat, her voice is calm. “I would like for her to be beside my father.”

“What a cold daughter!” That voice belonged to the woman who would have been her mother-in-law.

No, she is not cold. When she visited the quarantined hut earlier, she had felt no presence of life. The next day, they find her mother dead. She is sixteen and alone, for she has a reputation for being odd. She was born in the caul, and that alone was enough taboo. But she is always distracted, as if seeing through things, according to the whispers of the people around her.

The medicine she bought was taken from her, but she has the bag left and she tucks her rosary inside. She prays in silence, for strength and for mercy to those who have sold her to survive. She already forgives them; there is no shame in wanting to live.

There is one other woman in the slavers’ carts. She has a sour expression, but it softens when her eyes lock with Kasumi’s.

“My name’s Akane.” She says in a low whisper as she makes room beside her. “We’re in the same situation, so let’s support each other from now on. And you are?”

“I’m Kasumi.” She answers softly.

She only looks back once. The village chief is counting the coins with eager hands, and her worth weighs less than a bag of rice.

Sakura is the daughter of a geisha. Her mother is as beautiful as a fallen star. Her father is nonexistent in her life, but supposedly old and rich.

The house is in financial trouble, she hears, but when she asks, the other women tell her not to worry. Because she is thirteen and still a child at heart, she does not press for answers.

“Mother, I’m looking for my toy bird.” She bounces into their room and heads for the drawers. “I bought it at the New Year’s festival, and I want to play with it now.”

After she finds it nestled in a box, her mother invites her to sit in front of the cracked mirror and dresses her up. Her hair is combed, her lips are rubbed with rouge, and her best kimono is fitted on her.

“Thank you for making me look so pretty!” She’s brimming with excitement and pleased at how
much she looks like her mother. “Are we going somewhere nice?”

“Darling.” Her mother slides her fingertips over hers, trapping the wooden bird between their hands.

She is told that the aunts need her, and that she will be presented as a representative of their establishment. It is important, and she’s going to show people how elegant and cultured their women are. She will be showcased as the pride of Osaka’s Ninth Street, traveling out of the city and across the region for some time. But she will return, for sure.

Only the owner sees her off. The kamuro never speak to her, and she hears that her mother is too inconsolable to leave her room and bid her farewell. She can’t help but feel a little disappointed, before shaking it off. She must be strong, after all. And it isn’t as if this is goodbye.

The carts are dirty and crowded with people, and she plasters on her best smile. There are two girls, and one smiles back at her.

“I’m Kasumi. This is Akane.”

“My name’s Sakura. Nice to meet you!”

They’re dressed in such plain clothes, and she touches the little toy bird in her sleeve. She’ll prove to them the worth of a girl from the flower world.

Akane is the first to wake when they stop at the ruined farming town. She isn’t sure where they are, they’ve traveled for so long and the sun has not yet left the horizon. But when the villagers speak to the slavers, she hears Kansai accent and isn’t sure whether to be relieved at the familiar sounds.

And then she sees the boy. His hair is red, lighter than the dye she worked with, but startlingly vivid. He’s about Midori’s age, around six years old. Perhaps it’s because of her siblings, that she beckons him with a lifted chin and a curve of her hand.

“You must be cold.” She says and wraps the blanket around him. He is very small, probably undernourished. “What’s your name?”

His voice is a light whisper. “Shinta.” His eyes are violet, she notices, like wisteria blossoms.

“Akane.” She replies in kind, as Kasumi begins to stir. The other girl turns her gaze onto the newcomer, careful not to disrupt Sakura’s head on her shoulder. “That’s Kasumi. Sakura is still sleeping. Our families sold us too, because of debt. Is that the case with you?”

“My family didn’t sell me. I was sent to this village because mine had cholera. I’m the only one left.”

“Sorry to hear that.” Kasumi murmurs and yawns. “My mother had cholera.”

“You’re not sick, are you, Shinta?” Akane inquires.

He shakes his head. “No.”

“Good.”

“Miss Akane, Miss Kasumi, where are we going?”
She exchanges a glance with Kasumi before admitting. “We’re not sure. I haven’t heard anything, have you?”

“Not at all. Maybe, Edo?” The other girl suggests and Sakura’s eyes fly open.

“Edo? I’d love to go there. I’ve always wanted to see Yoshiwara.” She notices Shinta and beams. “I’m Sakura, nice to meet you!”

“This is Shinta.”

“Shinta-chan! I like your hair, it’s such a pretty color.” This makes him hide under his bangs. Akane wonders, briefly, which of his parents gave him such odd coloring.

Breakfast is a handful of barley and cold water. Sakura pouts and Kasumi chews slowly, but Akane and Shinta eat in a way that is fast and focused. He must have grown up in a poor family, like hers, to cherish meager food. But he is also unnervingly polite.

“You don’t have to call me ‘Miss Akane’. It sounds very formal, coming from you. How old are you anyway?”

“Nine.”

“Nine?!” That makes him closer to Ao’s age, but he’s so small.

“Or, maybe ten?” He doesn’t sound too sure.

“That doesn’t help.”

He shrugs. His shoulders are bony and fragile. “Oh. You can have your blanket back.” He lifts the edges but she shakes her head.

“Keep it.” She says. “I don’t need it anymore.”

Kasumi is lost in thought, enough so that when the cart hits a bump, she feels herself slipping.

“Careful!” Sakura reaches for her and grabs her arm. “Please don’t fall off.”

“I won’t.” She smiles, a little sheepishly, and rights herself. Akane is scowling, bracing herself against the cart’s side to shield Shinta.

Sometime around noon, they stop to let the horses drink. Akane and Sakura are dragged off the carts and Kasumi is stricken with dread until they’re given buckets and orders to give water to everyone else. Akane’s eyes are filled with rage and Sakura is bewildered, but they can only do as they’re told.

Kasumi and Shinta are given water first, but only a mouthful each. As the other girls move on to the rest, she fingers her cross under her collar, praying they won’t be hurt. Noticing Shinta’s curious gaze, she discretely pulls out the medicine bag and slides the tiny loop in his hand.

He studies it in his palm, and she whispers. “It’s a secret. Not many people practice this religion. The shogun did not like what it taught.”

“And that was?”

“All life is precious.” She says. “Yours, mine, Akane’s, and Sakura’s. Even the men, the slavers and those like us. To God, we are all equal.”
“Oh.” He’s thinking it over. “Then are all lives worth the same?”

“That’s right. Every person has a life, so everyone matters.”

“It’s not a bad idea.” He admits.

Akane and Sakura soon rejoin them, looking sullen and drained, respectively. “Thank you.” Kasumi tells them both and Shinta echoes her.

It is late afternoon when they make camp, and Shinta tries to return her relic. She refuses, tying the rosary in its drawstring bag under his collar. “There, so it can give you strength.”

“But…”

“It’s alright.” She smiles and taps her finger to her lips.

Akane, who always takes charge as they prepare for the evening, lays out her blanket on the cart. While they do not have to sleep on the ground like the men, they are still vulnerable. “We can take shifts at night again. We have only ourselves to protect. And now, we have Shinta too.”

“I can help.” Shinta says quietly.

“It’s not easy.” She warns. “Even though we’ll get more sleep, we have to look out for you as well as ourselves.”

“Then I’ll do it alone.” He says it so seriously. “I’ll protect all three of you.”

Akane’s mouth pulls down in a grimace. “Thanks for the offer.”

Sakura twists a lock of hair around her finger and teases. “Really?”

As for Kasumi, she laughs. “What a good boy.” Her voice is not condescending, and she pats his head. “Then, we’ll be in your care.”

Sakura repeats a single phrase in her head. Girls must be like stones, like flowers. It is what her mother always said. Strong as rock, appealing as nectar.

She swallows the last of her barley and glances over at Kasumi and Akane. They were forced to serve dinner and clean the pot. But Kasumi never complains and even though Akane looks like she will, she doesn’t. If they are stones, she must be the only flower. She can’t do much, her arms still ache from carrying water.

Shinta has finished eating, but he’s trembling. Well, even if she can’t work as hard as them, she grew up with the best conversers. She moves closer to him. “Hey, Shinta-chan. Are you cold?”

He shakes his head.

“Then, tell me what’s wrong. I won’t judge.”

He grips his upper arms and mutters. “I miss my parents. And my brothers.”

Sakura bites her lip, before reaching into her sleeve for the toy bird. “Here, you can play with this.”

“Why?”
“Because you need to smile. Look, the wings fold back. Isn’t that neat? You can make it fly.”

“I see.” He turns it in his hands for a minute, before offering it to her.

“You can have it, at least until you smile from your heart. See, like this!” She demonstrates, hoping it reflects on his face.

It doesn’t, but he fiddles with the bird wings and that satisfies her.

As the moon begins to rise and Shinta’s watch begins, the three of them stay awake as long as they can with him. They whisper to him about their lives in turn.

Akane goes first. “I have a brother around your age, Shinta. His name’s Ao, and I abandoned him with our other siblings. I had to, so they’d be safe and away from our father and more debt.”

Kasumi speaks next. “I don’t have any siblings, just my mother. But after she died, the village paid their debts through me. That’s why I’m here.”

“Debt? That’s sad.” Sakura says. “I was sent here, for…” Why is she here? They’re all here because they were sold for money. But she wasn’t. Or, was she? The brothel had been in trouble. Money trouble. “I guess…that’s the same for me.”

“Me too.” Shinta nods.

She falls asleep in misery. When she wakes in the middle of the night, Akane isn’t in the cart, but walking back to it.

“Akane? Is something wrong?” Sakura asks. The older girl climbs back in, pressing her obi against her stomach.

“No, it’s nothing.” She smiles, but it’s fake. She can tell. “Go back to sleep, you’ve already done your shift.”

Her last thought is that the stars aren’t as beautiful as they were back home.

Akane can’t sleep. She’s stolen a knife, in a leather sheath, from one of the slavers as he dreamt.

When she wakes, the knife is still under her obi, and her mind is buzzing with half-formed plans.

Kasumi sleeps well enough. She dreams of blood in the air, blood on a torn cheek, and blood on a thin blade.

When she wakes, there are tears on her face, and she doesn’t know quite why.

Sakura sleeps and doesn’t dream at all. She’s worn herself out, not only because of travel, but also being homesick.

When she wakes, the sun is up, and they’re already deep within a lush and silent forest.

The bandits come from out of nowhere. One moment, the cart is moving along. In the next, the horses are rearing and the slavers are shouting.
Akane reaches into her obi for the knife, but does not pull it out. The cart is still moving, forced further down the path. They’re being herded into a clearing, she realizes, like animals to be penned before slaughter. When they jolt to a stop, she stands in front of Shinta. Sakura is hiding behind Kasumi, who’s trembling.

The bandits demand for money, but they aren’t satisfied with what’s given to them. By the way they reach for their weapons and their eyes fill with bloodlust, they want more than just coin.

“You three, stay by me.” She orders, moving the stolen knife to her sleeve.

Then, a slaver is stabbed in the gut, and it erupts into madness. The other slavers fight back, and while the men are jumping off the carts, they are forced to battle for their lives as well. Akane unsheathes the knife and holds it in front of her. “Look out for each other. I’ll go first.”

A bandit is headed for them, but she lands on the ground and catches him by surprise. The knife sinks into his thigh, and he goes down.

“Akane, this way!” Kasumi calls out. They’ve found an opening, avoiding the fray. She hurries after them.

“Miss Akane, can we hide over there?” Shinta points to the forest.

“Yes, go, go!” Anything is better than waiting to die. She looks behind her and swears. There’s a burly, unfamiliar man about to overtake her, and she pivots to stop him with a lunge of her knife.

He parries her attack and while his dagger is smaller, he’s pushing back against her. She’s holding him off, and looking at her halted companions, she realizes what must be done. “Go, run!”

“But, Akane!” Sakura protests.

“You have to live! You three, at least, have to live!” Akane screams and doesn’t tear her eyes away from them. It is Kasumi who takes Shinta and Sakura deeper within the forest, and Akane is grateful for that.

She manages to cut this bandit, aiming for his ribs. But another is already taking his place, while a third is running towards her, his gaze through her. On the forest. If he’s seen them, they won’t be safe. She can’t let him through, and she breaks off, nearly catching him, when-

Damn.

There’s a sword through her stomach. The last of her strength goes into her arm, and the knife is in the runner’s skull. Good, at least she’s taken him with her, she thinks as the sword is pulled out of her.

Her vision is flooded with green. The green of the leaves, full of life. Life that will move on without her. But she’s fine with that. This pain is nothing, because it means that Kasumi, Sakura, and Shinta will escape.

*They’ll survive. They have to go far away, and survive.*

She gasps, and feels so certain.

They run blindly. There are branches snagging at their hair and clothes, and roots and pebbles beneath their feet.
Kasumi lands awkwardly on an overgrown root, and her ankle gives. She shakes it off, limping through the pain. Shinta notices her lagging and he slows down, but she motions for him to keep going. He doesn’t, taking her arm and settling it on his shoulders. Sakura then stops, panting for breath and doubling over.

“We have to go back for her!” She’s on the verge of tears.

“I know. But she risked her safety, no, her life, to stay behind. She has a knife, and it’d be easier to protect herself without us there.” She says, despite the anxiety building within her.

“Someone’s coming.” Shinta whispers, and she doesn’t bother to look back. Instead, she forces herself to move, pulling them behind a cluster of bushes. Her ankle throbs as she crouches, but she’s focused on the path from where they came. There’s only one bandit, searching around. For them. If he comes too close, he’ll see them through the leaves.

She makes her decision and speaks in a low voice. “We’ll split up. I’ll go left, you two go right. Be sure to keep an eye out for each other.” She will definitely be in the man’s sight, but that is exactly the point of being a decoy. They realize this too.

“Kasumi!”

“Miss Kasumi, don’t.”

“It’s fine, I’ll catch up with you later.” She smiles to reassure them. “And promise me, don’t wait. Don’t turn back either. So, on three. One. Two. Three.”

She takes off, hearing from their fading footsteps that they’re fleeing in the opposite direction. Good, they’re going deeper within the forest. She would only have slowed them down, with her bad foot. This was the right choice and the man is following her, as planned.

But she doesn’t want to collapse and wait for death to come to her. There’s still someone who needs her help. She’ll circle around back to the clearing, to Akane. If she’s lucky, there’ll be a fallen weapon somewhere. And even if she can’t fight, she can’t run for that much longer either. What’s important is that she has to buy time.

The clearing is just up ahead, she can already see the carts. There are still men fighting, and many dead or dying. And the crowd shifts so she can see the trees and rivulets of blood at their roots. On the ground, Akane…isn’t moving.

No.

Then, she can’t breathe. It’s painful to do so, and she realizes that her lung’s been pierced. Someone is crowing that he got her, and he’s waving a bow. She falls on her back, to the hard ground.

The sky is so blue. So beautiful. It’s an open color, a kind color. A color that says welcome home. And even though Sakura and Shinta are still out there, she’s already accepted that she will never see them again.

*God, please protect them. Please.*

She sighs, and feels so hopeful.

They are both so tired. It saves them actually, since they stop short of a deep ravine that would have gladly welcomed them.
Sakura swallows the tightness in her throat. She’s the only one left to protect Shinta, and if she can’t, they’ll both die.

“Miss Sakura?”

There’s no time to spare. “We have to go. Akane and Kasumi…we can’t waste their sacrifices. And if it comes to that, you should leave me behind too.”

“I won’t do that!” He’s angry, but it doesn’t last. He wilts and looks so much smaller. “We’ll find a way out of here. And Miss Akane and Miss Kasumi will come back.”

She slowly nods and takes his elbow. “Let’s get away from here first. I never liked double suicides, anyway.” It’s a morbid joke, but it scares her enough to lead him back into the trees.

She doesn’t know where to go. Are they running any further or are they somehow retracing their steps?

“Found you!” A voice howls and she screams. There’s a bandit sprinting behind them, and he’s so fast, it’s scary. Her heart is about to run off on its own, and she is dizzy from exhaustion. They don’t make it that much farther. The bandit descends on them, with terrible breath and a gleeful chortle.

They are dragged back to the clearing, Shinta by his wrists and her by her hair. She kicks and beats at the man, but he keeps walking. She feels sick when they land on familiar but blood-soaked ground.

“Look, leader, I found a couple more. They’d make for good money, and the girl can at least give us some fun.” She shudders but freezes at his next words. “Not like the other two.”

There’s a pile of bodies near the carts, and she looks, afraid of what she’ll find. She catches a glimpse of Kasumi’s long hair and Akane’s plain kimono. She covers Shinta’s eyes with her hand and begins to sob.

“Help! Please! Anyone!” She cries out.

“What a noisy girl. Cut out her tongue to shut her up. Let’s take the boy. His looks might be popular on the black market.” The leader motions to another man, who approaches them with a wicked dagger.

He can’t. He can’t come any closer. She won’t let him come closer! “Get back, Shinta-chan!” She moves before him and shoves the man back. But she isn’t strong enough and he lunges forward. Then, there’s pain blooming in her abdomen. The man’s dagger has blood on it, and her kimono suddenly feels wet.

Ouch.

She collapses and Shinta’s shouting her name, but it hurts. It hurts so much. She has to get up, she has to help Shinta…but…wait…

There’s someone fighting the bandits. Someone she can’t quite see properly, but blood is flying from his sword and his coat has a red lining. She’s never been fond of red, but now she’s never been so glad to see it.

*Ah, thank goodness. Shinta-chan will be safe. Thank goodness.*

She exhales, and feels so relieved.
Shinta wipes away the last of his tears. The man with the sword is gone, and he’s the only one left. He picks up his feet and starts to move.

After he’s laid the slavers and bandits under wooden crosses, he turns to the last three corpses. Akane. Kasumi. Sakura.

He couldn’t protect them. He could only do what they said and he was useless.

He buries Akane first, draping her blanket over her shoulders.

*For as long as I live…*

He buries Kasumi next, placing her cross bracelet under her hands.

*I never, I never…*

He buries Sakura last, slipping her toy bird into her sleeve.

*Want to feel so useless again!*

He can’t find flowers; he must have torn up the forest searching for anything to make their resting places a little nicer. The best he can do are three identical stones. They are solid and heavy, but his mind is numb to the weight. After he places one over each of their graves, he hears footsteps behind him and then the voice from the other day, the voice that belonged the man with the sword…

“Kaoru-dono, please don’t cry.” Kenshin brushes away her tears with his thumb.

“But, I never knew that this happened to you. That these three gave their lives to protect you.”

“This one can barely remember their faces, it was that long ago.” He turns back towards the stones and regretfully says. “This one couldn’t give you flowers. And this one has made many mistakes and stained the life you wanted to protect. But this one wants to thank you. Miss Akane. Miss Kasumi. Miss Sakura.”

“Thank you.” She echoes and adds. “For giving him to me.”

As they leave the clearing, Kaoru asks. “If they were alive, what would you think they’d say?”

He contemplates for a moment. “Mm, perhaps that they are glad that this one has lived.”

That he found a home full of warmth.

That he swore an oath to protect life.

That he loves someone who could make him smile.

And maybe, that Akane, Kasumi, and Sakura are lovely names for daughters.

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