

Frozen Time

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When the weather unexpectedly changes for the worst and it is linked to the mysterious collapse of Kenshin's master, can Kenshin and his allies find out what is going on before it's too late?

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1. Chapter One

Frozen Time

“By now, other generations of time have already frozen over.”
Kikyo from Inu-Yasha: Affections Touching Across Time

Chapter One

“Kenshin, are you sure this is such a good idea? I mean, your master may not appreciate our being here with you to check on him.” Kaoru said, as she and Yahiko trudged after the bright-haired form of the ex-hitokiri. Kenshin turned and nodded; giving them a grave look as he did so.

“Sessha knows, Kaoru-dono; but something is wrong. Sessha also knows Shishou isn't one for answering letters, but he does answer some from time to time....Not answering at all is a sign that something isn't right.” Kenshin murmured, with worry very evident on his boyish features. Kaoru sighed and gave him a slight smile. Even though Kenshin had denounced the inheritance of the Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu, he still regarded the white-mantled hermit as his master and father-figure. And every good son worries about his father, right?

“Don't worry, Kenshin! If anything, he probably already knows we're here, and he's heading this way to tell us to get off of his mountain. He's a tough guy, remember?” Yahiko said, as they continued on down the path; his eager brown eyes showing that he wanted to talk to the swordmaster again. Kenshin managed a wan smile.

“True.” Kenshin replied, but didn't sound at all convinced. Even from where they had been standing, he'd been reaching out; trying to pick up on his master's ken-ki.

“It's usually strong enough that sessha can feel it from a great distance away.....And yet, now, even this close to his home, sessha can barely sense it.....What has happened, Shishou?” Kenshin wondered, as he led the remainder of the way to the hut in silence.

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They got to the glen where the potter's kiln and Hiko's hut stood just as the sun was beginning its' descent into the west. At first, Kenshin, Kaoru, and Yahiko could see nothing amiss; no signs of struggle of foul play. Just undisturbed snow as far as the eye could.....Kaoru jumped when Kenshin suddenly bolted off, his eyes showing a faint trace of dread and fear as he did so. “Kenshin! Wait!” Kaoru shouted, as she took off after him. Yahiko wasn't too far behind her. They arrived at the bank of a small mountain stream just moments after Kenshin, and gasped when they saw the sight that he had come upon. There lay Hiko, lying almost as still as death on the ground. He had several inches of freshly-fallen snow on top of him, and he appeared soaked to the bone.

“Shishou! Shishou!” Kenshin called, desperately, as he turned the man onto his back and

checked for any signs of life. He got no response.

“Kenshin.....is he....?” Kaoru asked, afraid of what the answer would be.

“No....not yet.....but he's so cold, Kaoru-dono....” Kenshin whispered, as Kaoru carefully approached, and placed a hand on the older man's face. His skin was cold to the touch, and had a slight bluish tinge to it.

“Let's try and get him back to his hut. From there, we'll decide what to do next, okay?” Kaoru suggested. Kenshin nodded.

“Hai.....” Kenshin agreed, then silently added, “Please hang on, Shishou!”

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After an intense struggle to get the taller man into the hut, Kaoru and Kenshin both went about searching for dry clothing and anything that resembled medicine. Yahiko, in the meantime, had been sent back to town to get some help from Aoshi and some of the other Oniwabanshu to carry Hiko to the Aoiya, and to get a doctor there.

“Even his mantle is soaked.....How long was he in that snowdrift, anyway?” Kaoru murmured, when she'd returned to Hiko's side after an unsuccessful search for some medicine.

“There's no way of knowing, Kaoru-dono. All that matters is getting his temperature back up.” Kenshin said, as he handed a kettle and jug of sake to her.

“I know. But I wonder why he collapsed? He seemed healthy enough the last time we saw him.....” Kaoru mused, as she poured some of the sake into the kettle, then started a small fire in the hearth so it could warm.

“Sessha is wondering the same thing.” Kenshin murmured, looking up when he noticed a very slight movement outside, and saw that it was snowing.

“It's snowing again.....” Kaoru said, softly. Kenshin nodded, thoughtfully, as he watched the flakes slowly drift down.

“So unusual, for this time of the year....” Kenshin again murmured, then added, with a slight smile, “The sake is going to have a strange taste to it this year.”

“Why do you say that?” Kaoru asked, as she glanced up at the ex-rurouni with confusion in her blue-grey eyes.

“There was a saying that Shishou always seemed to bring up, whenever he was in a thoughtful mood.....that the sakura in the spring, the stars in summer, the full moon in autumn and the snow in the winter were enough to make sake taste good. Sessha has no doubt that this out-of-season snow is going to add a rather unique flavor to the sake made this year.” Kenshin said, getting a soft laugh from Kaoru as a response.

“Count on him to be poetic about sake, ne?” Kaoru asked. Kenshin chuckled softly and nodded in agreement.

“Indeed. But right now sessha is wondering if he'll even live to taste it, considering how long he may have been out there before we found him.” Kenshin stated, as worry again clouded his purple-hued eyes. He knew, as well as Kaoru did, how deadly it would be if Hiko developed pneumonia as a result of the prolonged exposure to the elements, or if hypothermia set in first.

“He'll survive. It wouldn't be like him to just give up without a fight.” Kaoru said, with certainty, as she poured some of the warmed sake into a cup, propped the swordmaster's head up onto her lap, and put the cup to his lips. To her relief (as well as Kenshin's) the downed man reacted to the sake in his mouth by swallowing; his eyebrows furrowing slightly when the taste of the

warmed drink hit his tongue. But he didn't show any signs of waking.

“He's going to live.....I just know it.” Kaoru whispered, as she continued pouring small amounts of the sake into Hiko's mouth; hoping that the warmth of the drink would spread through him and bring his temperature back up.

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A little while later, Kenshin and Kaoru found themselves trudging back to Kyoto, dragging the unconscious swordmaster between them as they did so. Hiko had not awakened, and, despite their efforts, his temperature had not risen in the slightest. If anything, he felt a little bit colder than before.

“Well, now. If this isn't something unusual?” a calm male voice asked, in a bored tone, as its' tall owner appeared on the path in front of them.

“Saito.....” Kenshin muttered, his eyes narrowing as he said that. The ex-Shinsengumi was really the last person he wanted to see at this point.

“Saito-san, do you think you could help us? Hiko-san is really too heavy for us to carry, and, at this rate, he'll freeze before we can get him to the Aoiya.” Kaoru said, appealing to the cop for help. Kenshin gave her a look of alarm, while Saito merely arched an eyebrow.

“What happened?” Saito asked; sounding mildly curious, compared to before.

“We're really not sure. Yahiko and I came with Kenshin because he was concerned that Hiko-san had not answered any letters sent to him. When we got there, we found him collapsed in the snow.” Kaoru replied, as Saito slowly approached; ignoring the very slight growl that came from Kenshin in response to that move.

“I see.....” Saito muttered, his amber eyes taking on a strange look as he felt for a pulse in the downed man.

“There's more to this than what they are able or willing to tell me.” Saito mused, his eyes narrowing when he sensed the life ebbing from the mantled swordsman.

“Will you help, Saito?” Kenshin asked, tensely.

“For now, yes.” Saito replied, surprising both Kenshin and Kaoru by lightly pushing them aside, and lifting Hiko onto his own shoulders.

“To the Aoiya?” Kaoru questioned.

“Probably. But the answer to this may lie in Edo.” Saito murmured, then added, when Kaoru gave him a confused look, “Tokyo.”

“Why there?” Kenshin again asked, suspicious, and yet, grudgingly trusting in Saito's judgement.

“We'll all soon see, Battousai.” Saito answered, as he began to move towards the city, forcing the kendo instructor and former hitokiri to jog along behind him in order to keep up.

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Sanosuke grumbled uneasily as he stood watch outside of the Aoiya. Beside him, Misao also waited; blue eyes anxiously peering into the growing darkness for the duo that had not returned yet.

“I hope they're okay, and that Hiko-san is all right.” Misao murmured, as she wrapped her cape tightly around her and stood closer to Sanosuke for added warmth.

“Same here. I can't help but feel that somethin' bac has happened.” Sanosuke mumbled, as

the snow again started to fall.

“You might not be far from the truth, Tori-atama.” a familiar voice said, as the owner appeared from the gloom.

“Saito!” Sanosuke shouted, ready to beat the cop to a bloody pulp, but stopping dead in his tracks when he saw that the cop now half-carried an unconscious Hiko Seijuro towards them. Without another thought, Sanosuke rushed over and got on Hiko's other side; effectively shouldering the weight between him and Saito.

“What in the world happened?! How did he get like this?” Misao asked, as she felt the swordmaster's brow for a fever, and gaped at him in horror when she felt how cold he was.

“We just found him like this, Misao-dono.” Kenshin said, wearily, as he and Kaoru joined Saito and Sanosuke.

“Damn....the let's hurry and get `im inside!” Sanosuke said, for once ignoring Saito when he uttered a sarcastic response to that.

“The place we should be going is Tokyo. Saito-san said we might find some answers there.” Kaoru stated, as they entered the inn, anyway.

“Then wait here while sessha goes and gets some tickets for the next train bound for Tokyo.” Kenshin said, as he grabbed a dry coat from one of the pegs on the wall (not really caring at this point in time that it was a little too big for him) and took off into the night.

“Well, I guess this really does make this his master, then.” Saito muttered, thoughtfully, as he helped the group get the tall swordsman situated for the time being in one of the ground-level rooms; knowing that it wouldn't take the rurouni long to get the tickets.

“Yeah.” Sanosuke murmured, too disturbed to realize that he'd actually agreed with Saito, for once.

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It was very early the next morning when the group (which now consisted of Kenshin, Kaoru, Yahiko, Sanosuke, Misao, an unconscious Hiko, and Saito) trudged into the confines of the Kamiya Kasshin Ryu dojo.

“He'll have to use my father's room while he's here, since it's the largest and farthest from the training hall.” Kaoru stated, wide-awake in the face of these disturbing events.

“That's all well and good, Kamiya, but that is assuming the man lives.” Saito grumbled, wincing slightly under the deadweight of the senseless man, and his mantle (Sanosuke had gone to get Megumi and Doctor Gensai, thus leaving the carrying job to Saito alone once again).

“True. But we can't give up on him.....Not yet.” Misao added, speaking softly as they moved down the hallway. They made it into the room just as Yahiko was turning down the covers on the futon, and Kenshin appeared with some extra blankets. After a bit of a struggle to get the taller man settled, they finally were able to get him between the warm blankets.

“That was harder than it looked!” Misao muttered, tiredly, voicing the sentiments of the group, exactly.

“The understatement of the hour, Itachi Musume.” Saito grumbled, with less than his usual icy calm, as he stood up and stretched; popping his joints back into place as he did so. Misao growled and gave him the finger, but, before she could give him a taste of her kunai, another male voice interrupted her.

“That was shameful, Misao.” Aoshi's voice said, as the owner of it appeared; seeming to melt from the shadows.

“How long have you been here, Aoshi?” Kenshin asked, a bit surprised by this turn of events.

“Long enough to know that time isn't on Seijuro's side.” Aoshi replied, simply.

“What have you found out, Shinomori?” Saito questioned, getting curious looks from Misao, Kaoru, Yahiko, and even Kenshin, but ignoring them all.

“Judging from what you told me to look for, the only shrine in the area that has reported unusual activity is the Higurashi Shrine. Apparently some strange lights and sounds have been occurring within the shrine keep.” Aoshi informed, coolly, yet casting a concerned glance at the strangely still swordsman on the futon.

“Any particular part or building within the shrine keep, Shinomori?” Saito again asked; his amber eyes glinting when he sensed a potential clue.

“A small well-house, and a tree on the grounds near the top torii. Those are the only ones I noticed.” Aoshi replied. Saito nodded silently; satisfied with the onmitsu's report.

“What does this have anything to do with? You don't mean to say that the lights and sounds are connected to Hiko-san, do you?” Kaoru asked, voicing her skepticism on the matter.

“They could be.” Saito murmured, looking aside when a slight movement caught his attention.

“Hey! Hiko-san's waking up!” Misao chirped, as Kenshin and the rest noticed the swordmaster rousing up as well. At first, only the sound of slightly quickened breathing could be heard, and then his eyebrows furrowed and his dark eyes opened.

“W-what.....? Where.....?” Hiko asked, weakly; his voice a far cry from having the strength it once had.

“Rest easy, Hiko-san. You're in Tokyo, in the Kamiya Kasshin Ryu dodjo.” Kaoru said, looking relieved, yet still a little concerned since Hiko still looked far too pale for her liking.

“Tokyo? What am I doing here?” Hiko again asked, confused and a bit alarmed by this bit of information.

“It will take a while to explain, Shishou, but it started when Kaoru-dono, Yahiko, and sessha found you collapsed in the snow.” Kenshin explained, quietly. Hiko sighed.

“The don't bother explaining.” Hiko snapped, tiredly, as he allowed himself to relax; reclining on some pillows that Kaoru and Misao had thoughtfully piled behind him when he'd struggled into a sitting position.

“Hiko-san, do you know why you collapsed earlier?” Kaoru asked.

“Yes. But it is something I can handle on my own. No need to worry.” Hiko replied, as he made a move to get up. He didn't get very far.

“Shishou!!!” Kenshin yelped, as the light seemed to fade from his master's eyes, and the taller man started to lapse into unconsciousness again; falling forward into Kenshin.

“Hiko-san!” Kaoru and Misao shouted, just as Megumi and Doctor Gensai arrived and rushed to his side.

“Kenshin....” Hiko gasped, getting his apprentice's attention instantly.

“Shishou?” Kenshin responded, very afraid that his master was dying in his arms.

“The Go-shinboku.....the seal is giving way....freezing time....” Hiko whispered, shivering as he said that.

“Freezing time? Shishou, sessha doesn't understand....” Kenshin said, as several pairs of concerned eyes gazed at the two.

“The Bone-eater's Well....only way to get to the era.....Please hurry....” Hiko muttered, before his eyes closed again, and he went limp in Kenshin's arms.

“Shishou!” Kenshin shouted, as Megumi hurriedly pressed her fingers to Hiko's neck. A look of genuine alarm flitted across her features before she looked up at the group gathered closely around, and at Kenshin's horror-stricken face.

“He's still alive....but....” Megumi trailed off, hardly believing what she was seeing.

“He's colder than death, right?” Saito finished for her. Megumi could only manage a numb nod

as she brushed her fingertips across Hiko's skin; actually scraping frost from it as she did so.

“And he'll only keep getting colder unless we find the cause.” Saito said, gravely; for the first time allowing a minute trace of concern to emerge on his lupine features.

“Shishou had said something about a well before losing consciousness. That it is the only way to the era'.....Sessha only wishes he knew what he'd meant by that.” Kenshin murmured, as he laid his master back down on the futon, stood back, and allowed the two doctors to get a good look at the ailing man.

“We may find out, if we find the well he was talking about. Did he give the well a specific name, Himura?” Aoshi asked. Kenshin nodded.

“The ‘Bone-eater's Well’.” Kenshin answered.

“And there seems to be a well goin' by that name on the Higurashi Shrine grounds.” Sanosuke added, surprising Aoshi and Saito somewhat with that bit of news.

“Then that would make sense. Maybe that glowing well Aoshi-san had mentioned leads back to another time.” Kaoru suggested.

“It sounds like both the Tanuki and Tori-atama may be on to something.” Saito mumbled, smirking somewhat when Sanosuke and Kaoru both gave him their ‘Bite me’ looks in response to being called by their hated nicknames.

“If that is the case, then what time does the well go to? How far back does it go, and how will you get back to this time if you do make it through?” Misao asked, pointing out some possible problems.

“Again, those are some things we're going to have to find out for ourselves. But, as a precaution, we should each take something that ties us strongly to this time, so we don't end up in the future, or back in the Bakumatsu.” Aoshi stated, as Kenshin shuddered at the thought of that possibility.

“The Battousai already has what he needs; that being his sakabatou shinuchi. Since it was and still is a sacred sword, its' power alone should be enough to get him back here.” Saito said, then added, “I also have something that ties me to this pathetic era, as well.”

“Oh? And what is that, pray tell?” Megumi asked, skeptically contributing something to the conversation at hand, since there was nothing else she or Doctor Gensai could do for Hiko at that moment.

“A gift from my wife.” Saito said, simply.

“He has a wife? You've gotta be kiddin' me.” Sanosuke muttered.

“We'll explain that later, Sano.” Misao said, as Kenshin nodded in agreement. Then all the attention turned to Aoshi and Sanosuke.

“Do you still need something, Aoshi-sama?” Misao asked. Aoshi only nodded. With that motion made, Misao wasted no time undoing the ribbon from the end of her braid and tying it carefully onto Aoshi's coat.

“That should do it! That ribbon is brand new, so it should get you back here okay.” Misao said, brightly, as Aoshi gave her what could only be his version of an abashed look. With a slight growl, Megumi walked over to Sanosuke and tied something to his wrist.

“What's this, Megumi?” Sanosuke questioned, bewildered when he saw what appeared to be a dark blue ribbon tied there.

“Just something to get you back to this era, that's all....Though I am more than a bit skeptical about all this.” Megumi mumbled, as she stood back and looked at the four men.

“Any sane person would be, if the situation were a normal one....But, unfortunately, it isn't. This out-of-season snow and the strange collapse of this swordmaster....And now the odd occurrences on the shrine grounds.....None of these are by any means normal.” Aoshi reasoned.

“Very true....And I want you all to be careful.” Kaoru said, thoughtfully, as she stood and walked

over to them, embracing Kenshin when she was close enough.

“Please be careful. Come back safely.” Kaoru urged, softly.

“Don't worry, Kaoru-dono. Sessha will return, that is a promise.” Kenshin assured, as he gently broke the embrace. Kaoru smiled in a way that said ‘See that you do’, then glanced at the other three men. Even though she didn't really trust Saito, she wished no ill will upon him, and genuinely hoped that he would also come back safely.

“We'll be back, Jou-chan. And we'll have that arrogant ahou back on his feet in no time.” Sanosuke said, with a confidence he may or may not have felt at that time.

“Let's get going, then. By the looks of things, Seijuro may not have that much time left.” Aoshi murmured, as he led the way out of the dojo. Silently, Kenshin, Saito, and Sanosuke followed.

“Kenshin!” Yahiko called, breaking his silence for the first time since they had gotten Hiko to the dojo.

“What is it, Yahiko?” Kenshin replied, even though he didn't turn around.

“Let me come with you! I'm sure I can get Tsubame-chan to give me something that'll tie me to this era!” Yahiko cried, stubbornly. At this, Kenshin turned and looked at Yahiko.

“No, Yahiko. Sessha can't let you come with us. It might be too dangerous in that time for you.” Kenshin said, seriously.

“Why? Don't you trust in my abilities?!” Yahiko asked, furiously. Kenshin shook his head, in exasperation. How in the world had Hiko put up with this sort of thing?!

“Yahiko, sessha is counting on having you strength here to defend the dojo in case something happens. While it is true that Kaoru-dono and Misao-dono can take care of themselves, they'll need all the help they can get if the dojo is attacked while sessha is away.” Kenshin explained, as patiently as he could.

“And besides, brat, we won't have time to protect or rescue you every five minutes. So shut up and let us leave.” Saito growled, irritably, as he took up the leadership of the small group and briskly walked away. Without another word, Kenshin followed; but not before giving Yahiko an apologetic glance as he did so. Moments later, the four men were swallowed by the darkness, and the falling snow muffled their footsteps into eerie silence.

“Kenshin.....” Yahiko muttered, as he stared after them. He received no more responses.

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All seemed normal around the shrine, as a young man in his early twenties patrolled the grounds. That is, as normal as it could get, considering the huge tree near the entrance of the shrine grounds and the old well house were glowing a brilliant shade of blue.

“Just what in the world is going on here? Why are the Go-Shinboku and the Bone-Eater's Well glowing like this? Could it be a sign that the Shikon no Tama is about to be found?” the man wondered, looking up when he heard footsteps coming his way.

“Halt! What brings you to this shrine at this time of the night?!” the man asked, as he held a ceremonial spear towards the four men that had just gotten onto the grounds.

“Gomenasai for the intrusion, de gozaru.” On said, politely, even though his voice had a strained note in it.

“We have reason to believe that that tree and a well on these grounds are linked to these odd happenings hereabouts.” another man added; his strange, amber eyes catching the light of the few lit torches and making it seem as though he was only partially human.

“Is that so? Then why are you here at such an odd time? Couldn't you have come during the

daylight hours?" the man asked, suspiciously.

"We were told to come here by a dying man.....a man whose life now hangs in the balance because of all that has been happening here." a third man murmured, quietly.

"Why would he tell you to come here?" the guard asked; now curious, despite himself.

"He'd mentioned a well.....A 'bone-eater's well'. Does that sound familiar to you?" the first asked, in turn, with some hope in his voice. The guard reeled back in shock, then nodded.

"Hai. There is a well here going by that name. But why would a dying man be interested in an old, dry well?" the guard questioned, completely baffled by what he'd heard so far.

"Because that man had said something about it getting us to a certain era. Which one, we have no idea." the third replied, matter-of-factly.

"I think I may....." the guard said, trailing off when the men gave him expectant looks.

"What time does the well go to?" the fourth man asked, having been unusually silent until that moment.

"The Sengoku Era. At least.....that is what the old tales about this well say." the guard said, hesitantly. For a moment, the four men gave one another befuddled glances.

"Kenshin, are your master's ancestors in trouble or somethin'?" the fourth man questioned, turning to the first for answers. 'Kenshin' shook his head and shrugged.

"Sessha has no idea, Sano. The only way to really find out is to go down into the well and find out." Kenshin replied.

"And that is what we intend to do. Lead the way to the well." the amber-eyed man ordered, fingering his sheathed katana as he did so.

"R-right away. F-follow me, gentlemen...." the guard stammered, before hurriedly leading them to the now-glowing well house.

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Once inside, Kenshin, Sanosuke, Aoshi and Saito could see that something was happening inside the well itself.

"What the....?! There's moths coming from inside it!" Sanosuke yelled, as he eyed the glowing insects warily.

"Indeed.....but they certainly aren't of the ordinary variety. These insects are demonic in nature." Saito muttered, as he and the guard started to descend the steps leading to the well.

"How can you tell.....aside from the obvious?" Sanosuke asked. Saito smirked slightly in response to the disgust he heard in the ex-fighter-for-hire's voice.

"Let's just say that I have always been able to see what normal humans shouldn't.....Now, to open the well so we can get through....." Saito said, as he slid his sword up under the well cover, and pried it open. The moment he did so, however, they were all blown back by a fierce, icy wind; and an overwhelming aura of evil washed over them.

"This is it! This is what's causing the snow to fall!" Sanosuke shouted, then let out a startled cry when Kenshin dashed over to the well, leaped into it, and disappeared in a flash of blue light.

"Kenshin!!" Sanosuke yelled, as he followed the rurouni down.

"And thus, I follow fools." Saito growled, when Aoshi had disappeared into the well after the first two.

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In a quiet forest glen, a miko stood gazing morosely at a well that stood before her. She had, just moments before, pushed another, younger girl down into it; before the suddenly alive wood blocked the way forever.

“You must never be with Inu-Yasha again....Nor I. For I am one of the dead, and as such.....I, too, do not belong here.” the miko said, sadly, before turning to walk away. Yet, before she could even take one step, she sensed a shift in power in the well, and turned just as blue light flashed within it once again.

“What the.....?! How could she return? The well is blocked!” the miko thought, as she went and hid behind some trees, then faced the well and waited for the schoolgirl to reemerge. Instead, to her shock and consternation, four men climbed out of the now overgrown well, instead!

“Well, this doesn't sound like the Bakumatsu, at any rate.” One man stated, as he scanned the area with his ice-blue eyes, calmly taking every detail in.

“It certainly doesn't, but sessha can sense that this time is just as turbulent.” another added, his fiery red hair shining in the evening sun (or what little of it could be seen through the thickening clouds); reminding the miko of a creature whose fur made up the raiment of one she'd cared so much for in life.

“Indeed. Now, if the one who had seen us come through the well will show herself, we can be on our way.” a third man demanded, as he unsheathed his katana and pointed it in the miko's direction; his golden eyes showing impatience on his part. Silently impressed that he'd known she was there, the miko emerged from her hiding spot and walked over to the quartet. She could tell that at least three of the men were trained warriors, since their expressions changed slightly when she got closer.

“The wolfish one, the one in the strange white coat, and the one with the red hair know that I am not alive; but the fourth, though strong, does not.” the miko mused, then asked, “Who are you? What brings you to these troubled times?”

“We're looking for the cause of some strange weather in our own time, Miko-sama.” the man in the white coat replied, calmly.

“Then you have come to the right time....But do you have the means to stop it?” the miko asked, again.

“Not exactly. In fact, we came to see what this time has to do with sessha's master.” the fire-haired one stated.

“What is happening to him?” the miko asked, out of curiosity.

“He's freezin' to death.” the fourth man said, point blank. The miko's eyes widened slightly; how could that be possible?!

“That would only happen if he were in some way directly connected to this time....” the miko said, trailing off when she saw the disbelieving looks appearing on the men's faces as well.

“Kenshin, how old is your master, really?” the fourth man questioned, voicing the sentiments of the whole group, exactly.

“Sessha really has no idea, Sano.” the redhead tiredly replied, then glanced at the miko again.

“Miko-dono, if sessha may, could he ask you something?” Kenshin asked.

“Go ahead.” the miko urged.

“Where might sessha find a man going by the name of Hiko Seijuro?” Kenshin queried, getting an unusual look from his companions while he was at it.

“Last I had heard, there was a warlord going by that name living to the west of here. In fact, his lands border....the other....Go-Shinboku.....Oh no.....” the miko muttered, finally realizing what these men had come for.

``Arigato, Miko-dono!" Kenshin shouted, before he again rushed off; moving faster than a normal man towards the evil glow that could be seen in the west. As the other three moved to follow `Kenshin', the wolf-eyed turned, dipped a respectful bow to her, then murmured, ``I hope you find the peace that has been stolen from you, Miko-sama."

And with that, Kikyo, the undead miko, watched them go with trepidation.

``Keep safe, you four. And may you return to your own time safely." Kikyo thought, as she again turned away from the well, and disappeared into the forest.

2. Chapter Two

Chapter Two

With an uneasy soul, the warlord looked out at the lands to the east of his domain. He could sense and see that something fell was going on.

"Milord, the scouts have returned." One man murmured, bringing the troubled warrior out of his musings for a moment.

"Send them in." the warlord responded. With a nod, the servant did as he was told and then ushered three somewhat winded men in.

"What do you have to report?" the warlord questioned, a bit worriedly.

"Milord, it is as you had feared. The youkai that had been sealed in the other Tree has been unleashed, and he's stealing the souls of the living and the dead!" One man blurted, fearfully.

"I was afraid of this.....Gather as many mikos and houshi that are living in this area as you can, and have them erect a barrier. Tell everyone within this domain to go to that one spot and remain there till I return." The warlord ordered, grimly; turning abruptly and leaving the audience chamber before he could be stopped.

"But Milord! Why must you go out and face it? Even though you are the strongest swordsman in the Western Province, you can't possibly face this youkai on your own!" the other messenger shouted, after the warlord's retreating figure.

"I can certainly try." The warlord murmured, as he then rushed from the castle; his white mantle whipping back behind him as he moved from a normal run, to incredible speed.

.....

The battle at the other Go-Shinboku was going badly for the two who had come on their own to try and reclaim a possessed friend.

"Kazaana!" a male voice shouted, as he released the cursed vortex from his right hand, yet watched in shock as his opponent closed her own kazaana and allowed herself to be carried by the current of air towards him. When she was close enough, she reopened her hand and they met with a slap of flesh; hand to hand.

"Very nice! You're a handsome one, young houshi!" the youkai stated, then sneered, "Makes me want to dig out your heart and eat it!" With that said, she started phasing her hand through his arm; her smirk widening when she saw the look of horror on the houshi's face....and when the horror turned into agony. With an outcry of pain, the houshi withdrew his hand from hers; and covered his kazaana; severing their gruesome connection. The youkai only smirked again as he hand emerged from his chest; blood flying freely as she took up her halberd once again, and thrust it at him....only to have it stopped by another blade.

"What?!" the youkai snarled, as she turned to face the owner of the sword.

"//1...//1...." the houshi thought, as he also looked at the blade's owner. The man was tall; lean and strong in body, and had cunning in his amber-hued eyes.

"Can you stand, houshi?" the stranger asked, getting a shaky nod from the houshi as a response.

"Yes. Your arrival couldn't have been better timed. But where did you....?" The houshi questioned, as the man pushed the youkai back, and then stood poised for the next attack.

"Feh, I'll imagine all will be explained later, when this fiasco is finally settled. Until then, we'll have to concentrate on the battle at hand." The stranger growled; his eyes narrowing when he saw that the youkai was calling more to aid her.

"You're right, of course....By the way, I am known as Miroku. Who are you?" the houshi asked, as he took up a defensive stance beside his benefactor.

"Hajime Saito." The man replied, shortly.

"Well, then, Saito-san, let's not spend any more time talking. It looks like our conversation is about to be interrupted, anyway." Miroku said, with a grim smile.

"Indeed." Saito mumbled, inwardly reminded of a friend from his own past when he heard Miroku's remark.

.....

"Kirara!" a young woman's voice cries, as she dodges some flames that are being thrown at her by one of the other youkai; barely holding the possessed feline off, when it attacks her and pins her. With a desperate heave, the woman got the nekomatta off of her, and watched as it returned for another swipe.

"Kirara, snap out of it!" the woman shouted, desperately, as she blocked the attack, and watched as her friend returned to the side of the one that had enslaved her.

"It's useless. She cannot hear your voice anymore." The youkai sneered, then added, "A human and a youkai...You were never destined to understand one another." With that said, the youkai, who went by the name of 'Hari', blew on some leaves from the plants decorating her hair, and sent them flying at the woman; only to have the attack interrupted by a man's voice, and a black blur.

"Kagemaru!" the voice shouted, as the blur roared and followed the implied command; moving the woman out of harm's way before the ki-charged leaves could reach her.

"What the...?! //1 nekomatta?! But where.....?!" Hari asked, her eye widening when she saw what appeared to be a white-mantled, armored warrior standing on a branch over their heads.

"//1 partner, witch, and you would do well to remember it." The man growled, as he leaped down from his perch and landed gracefully in front of the woman; drawing his sword as he did so.

"Are you all right, Taijiya?" the man asked, as he glanced at the female warrior behind him for a brief moment, and then returned his attention to the angered youkai in front of him.

"Yes. But what are you doing here? Don't you realize how much danger you're now in?" the taijiya asked, concernedly; more afraid for his safety, than her own, at this point. The man only gave her an arched eyebrow for that.

"I would ask you the same, if it weren't for the fact that your own partner is being held under sway, here. The main reason I am here is to try and get the souls of my people back from this cursed tree." The man replied, calmly.

" 'Your people'? You're a warlord?" the taijiya questioned, confusedly; she'd hardly ever heard of a warlord who was that willing to protect those he cared for! The man nodded.

"Yet, it is something that can be discussed later. There's no time for it, now." The warlord stated, barely leaping away in time before Kirara charged at the both of them; with fangs and claws bared.

"Right!" the taijiya agreed, then said, "My name is Sango! What name do you go by?"

"Seijuro Hiko the Thirteenth, current lord of Kitakata." The warlord answered, with an unruffled calm that the taijiya was almost instantly secretly jealous of.

"//1.....//1" Sango mused, as she, Hiko, and the black nekomatta named Kagamaru continued their running battle....and their efforts to get Kirara back.

.....

"Damn! There's no end to 'em! Where're they all comin' from?!" Sanosuke asked, as he and Aoshi fought side by side. They had lost track of Kenshin and Saito in the midst of the chaos surrounding the tree, and now fought a losing battle against creatures that shouldn't have existed at all.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Sagara.....But, if I must hazard a guess.....I'd think they were coming from within the tree itself.....It seems almost as though some sort of seal has been broken." Aoshi gasped; actually sounding as though he were getting a bit winded by the battle.

"//1.....//1//1//1" Aoshi thought, as he and the former fight merchant stood back to back; faced with the very real possibility that they were going to die in this strange era, and there would be no one to mourn them.

.....

Back in the Meiji Era, Kaoru sat beside Hiko's futon; keeping a silent vigil, since she was too uneasy and worried to sleep.

"How is he, Kaoru-san?" Misao asked, as she quietly entered the room, with honest worry in her own blue eyes.

"About the same." Kaoru replied, somberly.

"I see...." Misao murmured, as she gazed at the man who had been the Oniwabanshu's hero, not too long ago. His brave, handsome face was very pale, and a bluish tinge had settled on his eyelids and lips.....In truth, he looked almost dead.

"He looks worse than he did earlier." Misao stated, as she sat down alongside him as well, and put a hand to his cold brow.

"But we can't give up....not yet. It wouldn't be fair to him, after he'd fought so hard to survive what had happened in Kyoto, and then...." Kaoru said, trailing off when she thought of all that had happened during the worst of Enishi's Jinchuu, and what they were now faced with. Misao nodded in agreement. The older warrior had been through so much more than they had, and yet carried himself with a dignity that they were only just beginning to see.

"//1" Misao thought, as she continued to sit and watch, as well; hoping against hope that the four who had gone to solve the mystery would do it in time to strengthen Hiko's now very fragile hold on life.

"//1" Kaoru mentally pleaded, as she turned her worried gaze to the window, and the snow falling quietly beyond it.

.....

At that very moment, Kenshin reached one of the highest branches just adjacent to the huge center of the evil tree, and stared at the unbelievable sight before him. There, in the very center,

a glowing orb floated. Within the orb, something that resembled a man "stood" with his arms raised, and had an elated smirk adorning his features.

"//1.....//1//1//1" Kenshin thought; looking down when he felt an odd warmth come from the sheathed sword he now gripped tightly in his left hand. It was to his added astonishment that he saw what appeared to be a soft glow settling around it!

"//1.....//1....." Kenshin mused, as his mind quickly pieced the mystery together; remembering what Saito had said about it earlier, and how it could possibly aid him in this fight.

"//1....." Kenshin thought, as he braced himself, and then attacked.

"Kuzu Ryu Sen!" Kenshin shouted, as he whipped the sword from its" sheath, and dove at the unholy light.

"What?!" the youkai within the sphere yelped, turning when he saw a bright red and silver flash coming right at him; eyes widening when the nine slashes left their marks on his barrier.

"Whatever it is you"re trying to do, sessha can"t allow you to continue!" Kenshin said, his voice gaining the hard edge it was known for, when he was particularly ticked off.

"Oh? So one lowly human has come to challenge me?" the youkai asked, as he sneered down at the rurouni with contempt (and barely concealed uneasiness) in his eyes.

"Aa." Kenshin replied, as he held the now brightly-glowing sakabatou in his right hand; his own eyes narrowing as a single thought crossed his mind.

"//1....."

.....

"Had enough of this yet, houshi? What do you say to settling this little battle?" Ruri asked, sneering when she saw the wary expressions appearing on the pair"s faces.

"Saito-san, you might want to hang on to something.....Things are about to get turbulent." Miroku stated, as he gripped the beads that warded his right hand with a grim look on his face. Saito only nodded; somehow sensing what was to come, and quickly moving aside.

"We'll test your kazaana against my own, and we'll see who will be sucked inside first." Ruri said, before both she and Miroku shouted, "Kazaana!" From his vantagepoint nearby, Saito could see that they were, for the moment, evenly matched....then watched in consternation as the woman cut the palm of her right hand with the tip of her halberd, and as the wind increased in ferocity.

"And now, Houshi, swordsman, prepare to die! Farewell!" Ruri laughed, as she watched Miroku begin to slide towards her; his own kazaana now entirely overwhelmed. Yet, Miroku started when he felt a hand grab the back of his robes and hang on; feeling surprise when he looked and saw that Saito was now doggedly trying to keep him from being drawn in.

"Thanks." Miroku said; earning himself a snort from the tall swordsman as a response.

"I'm not one who can leave bakas hanging." Saito responded, shortly, as he dug his katana into the rough wood beneath him, as well. Miroku in turn could only sigh and shake his head; he'd heard Inu-Yasha say something similar before.

"I win this battle!" Ruri cackled; not noticing until it was too late that her kazaana was spreading even farther than before.

"Foolish woman." Saito growled, when he saw this happening....and Miroku was inclined to agree.

"Oh, what's this?!" Ruri yelled, when she finally realized what was happening, and gripped her swiftly disappearing right hand in shock; the kazaana was devouring her! Seconds later, the wind became so strong, that even Saito was beginning to think that he wouldn't be able to hold on anymore....then Ruri vanished with a scream into her own hand, the backlash of the two opposing currents of wind creating a tremendous explosion, and leaving a crater in the tree itself.

"Someday....that very fate will befall me....My own flesh and bones will be sucked into the void of my own cursed hand...." Miroku murmured, when the last of the wind had finally abated, and he'd been able to cover his own kazaana again.

"You'll defeat it." Saito muttered, with certainty, as he then turned and looked in another direction; ignoring Miroku's questioning look, when he'd sensed some very strong ken-ki coming from there.

.....

"You both refuse to admit the obvious. Youkai are born to be controlled.....and the best way is with power." Hari sneered, when she saw what kind of damage she was inflicting on the pair below her. Sango was bruised and battered from the constant running battle, and Hiko was bleeding from a few wounds, as well.

"Not true! My relationship with Kirara is nothing like that!" Sango argued, as she stood side-by-side with the Hiten master and his dark-furred partner; prepared for the next blows. She allowed a yelp to escape when Hiko blocked an attack from behind, and when he shoved her aside when it knocked him off of his feet.

"Hiko-sama!" Sango shouted, in alarm, when both swordsman and dark nekomatta were pinned by the just-arrived demon.

"Don't worry about me!" Hiko replied, growling as he focused his attention on the beast that was now trying to slice him to pieces, "Free Kirara!"

"Right!" Sango said, then glared at Hari again.

"Fools! Still so naive and stubborn....You won't be missed." Hari snickered, as Kirara seemingly roared in agreement, and continued her charge towards her former partner.

"Kirara.....I know this isn't how you want to be." Sango tearfully said, then dropped the Hiraikotsu (much to Hiko's shock and alarm); and, moments later, was sent flying by a blow from one of Kirara's paws. She didn't realize that, when that happened, one of her tears had landed on Kirara's forehead! She could vaguely hear it when Kirara uttered an almost pained screech, and started bashing her head into some nearby branches.

"What's the matter with you? Finish her off!" Hari commanded; seemingly bewildered by the nekomatta's actions, and when the feline didn't listen to her.

"Kirara?!" Sango cried, fear for her partner taking root, when she saw what was happening, "Kirara, stop it!" Within seconds of her saying that, the sound of something shattering came to their ears; shards of blood-red crystal flying free from the diamond-shaped marking on Kirara's brow. With almost a scream, Kirara collapsed into a heap; exhausted from the effort of freeing herself from Hari's control.

"Kirara!" Sango shouted, as she forced herself to her feet, and raced over to the downed nekomatta.

"Finally...." Hiko muttered, relieved that the nekomatta was finally free from Hari's control, and, at the same instant, finding the strength to kill the youkai on top of him.

"Are you all right, Hiko-sama?" Sango called from beside Kirara; noticing when the man freed himself and rushed over to her.

"I'll live." Hiko replied, calmly; allowing a slight, tired smile to shine through, when Kagemaru gently nudged Kirara, and tried to help her get to her feet.

"Kirara, I have no further use for you!" Hari howled, furiously, as she started to attack them again. Without another word, the taijiya and warlord both leaped onto their respective nekomatta's back in order to avoid the ki-charged leaves that were now flying at them.

"Milord! Hiko-sama!" a man's voice shouted, desperately, from amidst the chaos. Startled by this, Hiko looked down; eyes widening when he saw one of his retainers standing there with a sword in hand, and a vaguely panicked look on his young face.

"Shin! What in the name of the seven hells are you doing here?! I thought I'd told you to remain within the lands!" Hiko replied, as he rushed over to help the younger man fend off some more of the youkai's onslaught.

"Milord, there's more mainland youkai entering the lands! They're being summoned by this one! We're being overwhelmed!" Shin cried; his deep blue eyes fearful as he said this.

"Damn!" Hiko snapped, then shouted over his shoulder to Sango, "Taijiya, you're going to have to handle this one on your own! I'm needed back in my lands!"

"Okay! Keep safe, Hiko-sama!" Sango replied, as she watched the white-mantled warlord turn towards his imperiled lands; grabbing Shin by the arm when he was close enough to do so, and pulling him onto Kagemaru's back.

"//1...." Sango mused, as she watched him go; the foreboding building until she pushed it aside, and motioned towards her weapon, "Kirara! The Hiraikotsu!" With a roar, Kirara dove towards the fallen weapon; determined to settle the score with this youkai, if nothing else.

.....

Sanosuke looked up, when he heard what sounded like a roar overhead.

"shoot! Not more attacks from up there!" Sanosuke cursed, as he turned to face the newest threat. Both he and Aoshi were now almost too tired to fight, since they had been fighting

nonstop after arriving at the tree. And yet, instead of finding a new attacker, they were shocked to discover who had just arrived. The man in question appeared to be a strong, capable warrior, who wore sturdy-looking armor and a white, red-trimmed mantle. His long dark hair was tied back in a high tail, yet thick strands still blew free from it; hinting at the rough battle he'd just come away from. Astride behind him, a younger man also rode the strange, catlike creature they both sat on.

"Either you're braver than most men, or you're suicidal. Fighting youkai with bare hands is something only hanyou are foolish enough to do." The just-arrived warrior stated, as he and his companion leaped from the cat's back and cut down some more youkai that had moved in to attack during the lull.

"//1....." Sanosuke thought, as his eyes took in the regal warrior. In this younger Hiko Seijuro's visage, he could not see the cynicism he'd become so used to seeing in the future version's face. Instead, this version had a look in his eyes that was more similar to the one that was normally in Kenshin's!

"Your arrival to aid us was very well timed, milord. Thank you." Aoshi gasped, as he wearily bowed to the white-mantled man. Hiko nodded, then looked almost worriedly over his shoulder at the lands to the west. He could sense very clearly the youki of the arriving youkai, and was secretly fearing for his family.

"We must go now, milord. The shield won't last for much longer." The man beside Hiko reminded, equally as worriedly.

"Right." Hiko agreed, then both returned to the nekomatta's back and motioned for it to head in that direction. As they watched him go, Sanosuke couldn't help but think of the reasons why Hiko had remained separate from the fighting factions during the Bakumatsu.

"He'd had a lot on his shoulders in this time, Sagara....One can only imagine how much worse it would have been, after all he'd been through in this era, if he'd gotten involved then, as well." Aoshi stated; having guessed what was crossing Sanosuke's mind about this encounter.

"Yeah...." Sanosuke quietly agreed, then added, "Let's see if we can find the yarou and Kenshin." With only a nod, Aoshi led the way to where he'd felt Kenshin's ki coming from; hoping that the rurouni was holding out against the demons as well as they had.

.....

Kaoru and Misao looked on in dismay, as Hiko's condition continued to worsen. By now he was so cold, that even the blankets on top of him were becoming icy to the touch.

"//1" Kaoru thought, grimly; looking up when Megumi again entered the room, and gave her a questioning look.

"Still no change?" Megumi asked. Kaoru shook her head.

"lie. He feels even colder than before." Kaoru replied, somberly.

"Then there's only one alternative I can think of that might work.....since no amount of blankets or warmed sake will help, at this point." Megumi stated; knowing that the two girls knew what she'd meant, when they both blushed slightly at the idea.

"Sharing body warmth? Is that it?" Misao asked, and got a nod from the female doctor as a response.

"It's a last-ditch effort.....but I don't think any of us really wants to give up on him without a fight." Megumi said, even as their blushes deepened, nonetheless.

"I've got at least two winter yukata we can use, Misao-chan. Let's go and put those on....I have the feeling we're going to need them." Kaoru murmured, after a few more moments, before she and the kunoichi left the room to don the warmer clothing.

"//1" Megumi silently begged, as she kneeled down beside him, and brushed a gentle hand against his cold brow; hope fading even more, when she felt the frost that had formed there. Time was running out.

.....

"So, it seems Myoga was right about Menomaru....." Miroku gasped, as he and Saito climbed onto one of the thicker branches, and got a good look at what was happening.

"Maybe. But it seems as though one of those I had come with had given him something to worry

about." Saito muttered, when he saw the multitude of cuts in Menomaru's youki barrier, and knew who had inflicted them.

"Saito!" Sanosuke's voice shouted, getting the attention of both Houshi and Wolf of Mibu.

"You two had managed to survive, as well?" Saito asked, almost casually (and almost getting the finger from the former fight merchant as a response).

"No thanks to you." Sanosuke grumbled, irritably; looking aside when a young woman arrived on the scene, as well.

"Houshi-sama!" the woman called, from astride a cream-colored nekomatta, as the feline landed near them.

"Sango!" Miroku replied, relief coloring his own voice as she got off of the feline's strong back; her eyes showing some surprise when she saw the three strangers, as well.

"How did you do?" Sango asked; seeming more than a little concerned, when she saw how tired Miroku looked.

"Well, I managed. I overused my kazaana a little bit, though." Miroku wearily admitted.

"It feels as though the demonic aura has gotten stronger than before....I can only hope that everyone is holding out all right." Aoshi stated, grimly; ice-blue eyes narrowing when he felt how powerful the youki had become.

"You're right about that, friend. I can only suggest that you three go with Sango and make your escape. I'll use my kazaana to take care of it." Miroku suggested, bravely. All he got in response from the four before him were stubborn looks.

"You're not getting rid of us that easy, Houshi. We came here to stop whatever it is that's freezing time....and we're not about to back down, now." Sanosuke said, determinedly. And yet, further words were forgotten, when the youki they were sensing from the evil tree's center suddenly spiked; an ominous light shining brilliantly from it, as something started to emerge.

"//1" Saito inwardly snarled, then looked at the four alongside him, "If anyone has an idea of how to handle this youkai, then say so. We won't have another chance to think of one, once we head into this battle."

"I don't think any plans we make will mean much against //1.....The only thing we can do is be ready." Aoshi murmured, getting a grim agreement from Sango, Miroku, Sanosuke and even Saito for that.

"Then let's go. That thing isn't gonna come to us." Sanosuke growled, before they all took off towards the evil light.

.....

Kenshin uttered a yelp, as he was thrown back from the orb; tumbling end over end till he rammed into something in midair.

"Dammit! What the hell are you doin' here, human?! Tryin' to get yourself killed?!" an irritated voice asked, as the owner of it caught him, and they both landed on one of the branches closest to the orb. Dazedly, Kenshin looked up at the speaker; trying to remember where he'd heard that voice before....

"//1.....//1" Kenshin wondered, his vision frustratingly slow to focus on the speaker's face, for some strange reason.

"Go easy on him, Inu-Yasha! He's probably here to fight against that youkai too." A girl's voice rebuked, then asked, "Daijobu desu ka?"

"Sessha is all right, de gozaru.....Just a bit dizzy, that's all. Why are you here?" Kenshin questioned; putting aside any surprise he may have felt upon hearing the name of someone he'd met in his own past.

"We're here to kill Menomaru. Whatabout you?" Inu-Yasha questioned, shortly.

"To save someone sessha regards as a father." Kenshin replied, as he regained his footing, and gazed out at the menacing light. All three of them flinched when a tremendous explosion violently shook the tree.

"What was that explosion?" the girl asked, shakily, as she clutched her bow tightly in her delicate hands.

"Curses! We're too late!" an old man's voice shouted, in dismay; prompting all three of them into looking at Inu-Yasha's shoulder. There, a tiny flea youkai stood, gazing anxiously at the center of the tree.

"Oro?" Kenshin heard himself ask, bewilderingly.

"Myoga?!" Inu-Yasha also asked, surprised that the tiny youkai wasn't running for cover.

"You're not running away?" the girl questioned, equally as surprised by this turn of events.

"I can act when it's necessary." Myoga retorted, insulted by their disbelieving tones.

"Seems I'd misjudged you, Myoga my friend!" Inu-Yasha said, actually sounding pleased, as they watched something ominous begin to emerge. They were forced to move to avoid what appeared to be huge portions of broken crystal; pieces of the barrier that Menomaru had erected around himself. Seconds later, the youkai appeared, in all his fiendish glory.

"Look at the size of him! He's enormous!" the girl shouted, with true alarm emerging in her young voice, as the sight.

"Size isn't everything, Kagome!" Inu-Yasha retorted, then added, as he glanced at Kenshin, "You agree with that?"

"Aa." Kenshin replied, with a firm nod of agreement.

"You can't scare us, moth man!" Inu-Yasha howled, as he charged into the monstrous youkai's sights; only succeeding in getting blown back for his efforts.

"Daijobu?" Kagome asked, worriedly, when the hanyou had somehow managed to land on his feet.

"Don't waste your time worrying about me." Inu-Yasha growled; starting when Kenshin leaped in next.

"Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu! Ryu Tsui Sen!" Kenshin cried, the sakabatou glowing brilliantly as he struck the youkai's chest, full force. With an enraged roar, the youkai tried to backhand the tenacious redhead with one huge hand, only to have Kenshin use it as a springboard to back away from him!

"That was amazing! Where did you learn //1?!" Kagome questioned, as the redhead returned to their sides; getting a slight smile from the rurouni for her question.

"Sessha had a very good teacher, Kagome-dono....One that might end up dying, if this thing isn't stopped soon." Kenshin murmured, as he gazed up at the youkai for added emphasis.

//1" The youkai snarled, as he recoiled from the burning wound Kenshin had inflicted.

"And kicking! Now it's //1 turn to thank //1!" Inu-Yasha snapped, angrily. He only got a laugh from the youkai as a response.

//1" the youkai, who had once been Menomaru, cackled, as he spread what appeared to be wings, and unleashed a new horde of beasts from within them.

"What are those youkai?! Where'd they come from?!" Kagome asked, as Inu-Yasha and Kenshin stood in front of her; shielding her with their bodies.

"They are youkai from the Continent." Myoga replied, gravely.

"There were youkai even in the mainland, Myoga-dono?" Kenshin questioned.

"Hai. The only way to defeat them is to combine the powers of the Tetsusaiga and Kagome's arrow." Myoga continued.

"Wait a minute! This swordsman's sword is glowing with the same light that usually comes from my arrows! Maybe he can help too!" Kagome suggested.

"Indeed." Myoga agreed, as he took in the sight of Kenshin's sword, "///1"

"My Tetsusaiga, Kagome's arrow, and this fool's sword? Would that actually work?" Inu-Yasha asked, as a plane began to form.

"We won't know until we try. Right?" Kagome asked, as she glanced at the both of them.

"Right. Now, I will take my leave! Good luck to you all!" Myoga said, before leaping from Inu-Yasha's shoulder and high-tailing it away from the imminent danger.

"He's running away again....." Inu-Yasha growled, in frustration, as he watched the tiny demon run.

"You can't fault him on that. If it weren't for the kenkaku sessha had learned, he would be running too." Kenshin admitted, "This creature's presence is that frightening."

"So, you're a coward too, then?" Inu-Yasha sneered, as the thought of a cowardly swordsman brought a tone to his voice that Kenshin was very used to hearing, by now. Kenshin only shook his head and allowed a grim smile to appear on his youthful features.

"No. Sessha just has a strong desire to live." Kenshin replied, ruefully; remembering //1 particular lesson a little too well, at this point.

"///1" Kenshin mused; gazing grimly at the monstrosity before them, and listening as it sneered at them.

"///1" the youkai commanded, and sent the deluge at the trio.

"Feel the wrath of my Tetsusaiga!" Inu-Yasha shouted; sweeping the mighty fang in a sideways arc, and dispatching many of the attacking youkai.

"Yes! He did it!" Kagome cheered, "Nicely done!"

"Dammit! I'm not getting anywhere!" Inu-Yasha growled, listening when Kenshin bashed a few more aside, as well as their yelps of shock and pain in response to his sword's burning aura.

"There are more coming!" Kenshin said, as he did his best to protect both Kagome and the

kitsune with her from the next wave.

"Here they come!" Kagome cried, as she desperately notched an arrow into her bow, and fired it. She was stopped from firing any more when a few of the youkai slipped through Kenshin's defenses, and swiped at them with their sharp claws.

"Grab onto my shoulders! Both of you! Quickly!" Kenshin urgently ordered, when he'd managed to knock the attacking youkai back away from them again. With no arguments, both Kagome and the kitsune did as they were told; gripping his gi tightly as he leaped as high as he could to avoid what appeared to be a giant boomerang as it screamed past.

"Hiraihotsu!" a young woman's voice shouted, strongly. To all of their relief, the cavalry had finally arrived!

"Sango!" Kagome said, glad to see that the other girl was all right, and that a nekomatta was with her.

"Miroku too!" the kitsune added, yet they both seemed surprised when three more men joined them on the branch Kenshin was landing on.

"Good to see that you're still in the land of the living, Kenshin." One of them said, with a hint of relief in his normally reckless eyes.

"You doubted it, Sano?" Kenshin asked, rhetorically.

"Nah. Not really. The yarou was doubting it, however." Sanosuke replied, as he turned and glared at Saito for added emphasis; not really surprised when the former Wolf of Mibu ignored it completely.

"Don't just stand there! Help me out, here!" Inu-Yasha snarled, impatiently.

"Right. Hang tough, man!" Sanosuke shouted, before he launched himself into the battle before him.

"That moron." Saito grumbled, with an irritated sigh, before he and Aoshi also unsheathed their blades and fought.

"Kazaana!" Miroku cried, as he unleashed his own power onto the horde; sucking in as many into the vortex as he could, before shouting, "Hurry and go! I'll take care of them!"

"Thanks, Houshi-sama! Good luck!" Sango encouraged.

"Please, do your best. Should any of you not live through this, I'll never forget you." Miroku said, in all seriousness, as his cursed hand swallowed the youkai whole; yet getting a deadpan look from Kagome, Sango, and Kenshin as a response.

"Not very encouraging..." Kenshin muttered, dryly.

"Yeah. Don't jinx us before we can even get started!" Kagome added, irritably.

"We're gonna win, ain't //1 obvious?!" Inu-Yasha snapped, with just as much annoyance in his voice as Kenshin and Kagome had shown.

"//1" the huge youkai asked, angrily.

"Feh....Why're all mainlanders so full of it?" Sanosuke asked, with a snort of contempt at the youkai's words.

"Good question, Tori-atama." Saito muttered, reluctantly agreeing with the fight merchant on that sentiment.

"I'll //1 ya how it's done!" Inu-Yasha retorted, as he again charged into the fray.

"Inu-Yasha! Wait!" Kagome called, as she started to run after the hard-headed hanyou.

"Kagome-chan, be careful." Sango warned, as she got astride the nekomatta again, and prepared to take the fight to the youkai waiting in the air.

"I'll be fine! I'm with Inu-Yasha!" Kagome replied, confidently.

"And sessha is still willing to help, as well." Kenshin added, as he ran alongside her. This got an encouraged smile from the girl in response.

"Arigato....um....Kenshin-san....was it?" Kagome asked, remembering what the youngest of the trio had called the redhead when they had arrived.

"Aa." Kenshin replied; not realizing that, as he turned his head to momentarily look at the her, she'd spotted the scar on his left cheek, and that her eyes were widening in shock.

"//1.....//1.....//1.....//1//1//1...." Kagome thought, as she then remembered what he had said to her and Inu-Yasha when they had entered the fight.

"//1" Kagome wondered, as they reached the spot where Inu-Yasha was fighting, just as the hanyou was knocked flat on his back again.

"Are you all right?" Kagome asked, when she had gotten to the hanyou's side, and when Kenshin took up a position in front of them.

"//1" Hyoga growled, in disgust, as he watched Inu-Yasha sit up, and as Kagome boldly stood alongside him.

"What's wrong with them being together?" Kenshin questioned, knowing full well what the pair faced, since he had seen some degree of the same thing, in his own time.

"//1" Hyoga snarled; his aura growing as he glared down at them.

"//1" Inu-Yasha thought, as he got to his feet and gripped the Tetsusaiga's hilt even tighter than before; watching as Kenshin did pretty much the same thing with his own sword,

and knowing that the human swordsman was feeling the oppressive weight of Hyoga's aura, as well.

"Kagome, shoot an arrow! Kenshin, follow my lead!" Inu-Yasha ordered.

"Right! Ready when you are!" Kenshin replied, as Inu-Yasha started running.

"//1" Kenshin thought, as he launched a Ryu Kan Sen at Hyoga's abdomen; slashing into the barrier surrounding the youkai with a flash of pure light. As he descended, he saw it when Kagome's arrow impacted as well; hitting the spot where his strike had landed, and opening it even further.

"There! The spot where the air collides! Kaze no Kizuu!" Inu-Yasha cried, as he swept a brightly glowing Tetsusaiga at the opening.....yet only managing slight damage, despite their combined efforts.

"I barely even scratched the surface! Damn!" Inu-Yasha snarled, before Hyoga sent his retaliation blazing at them.

"//1" Hyoga roared, before sending a powerful blast of youki at them.

"Kagome-dono! Run for it!" Kenshin yelled, as he picked up the startled teenager and leaped out of the way; his godlike speed just barely enough to keep them from being incinerated.

"Thanks, Kenshin-san!" Kagome gasped, when they had reached a different branch, and he'd set her down carefully on it.

"You all right, Kenshin?!" Sanosuke's voice shouted, from below them.

"Sessha is fine, Sano! Don't worry!" Kenshin reassured, as Inu-Yasha rejoined them on their branch.

"That thing's youki has become so powerful..." Aoshi said, as he gazed at the destruction the demonic energy had caused.

"We really got 'im good and mad, that time.....But we can win. I'll use the Bakuryuuha to send his own energy right back at him!" Inu-Yasha said, confidently, then gave them both a questioning look, "Think you two can time it so that after Kenshin's strike lands, Kagome's arrow will hit?"

"Sessha is willing to try anything, at this point, Inu-Yasha-kun." Kenshin muttered, tiredly.

"Good. Be ready to go at my signal." Inu-Yasha replied, when he'd gotten a nod from Kagome, as well.

"//1" Hyoga sneered, as he watched the humans below him regroup.

"You've got two legs and a heartbeat, so what's stoppin' you from coming to me?!" Inu-Yasha taunted, smartly.

"Inu-Yasha, Kenshin-san, his youki is centered around that mark on his forehead." Kagome said, when she noticed it.

"Think you can hit it?" Inu-Yasha asked.

"I'll try!" Kagome said, then nodded to Kenshin. It was now or never.

"//1..." Kenshin mused, as he sheathed his sakabatou, and prepared himself for Inu-Yasha's signal. With the sound of the arrow leaving Kagome's bow, Kenshin made his move; the beyond-godlike speed coming easily to him, in the face of the desperate situation they had before them.

"Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu Ougi! Amakakeru Ryu no Hirameki!" Kenshin cried, as he unleashed his sword-craft's final move....only to watch as his blow, as well as Kagome's arrow, got knocked off course. Therefore, almost all were stunned by what even the deflected power did next; they struck and severed Hyoga's left wing!

"Great shot, jou-chan! That'll ground 'im for a while!" Sanosuke shouted, encouragingly; giving the teenaged girl a grin and a thumb's up to show his support.

"Thanks!.....I guess....." Kagome said, mumbling the last part since she wasn't very certain about the fighter's sincerity, at this point.

"//1" Hyoga snarled, then sent yet another blast at Kagome; this time knocking her off of the branch she was standing on.

"Kagome!" Inu-Yasha yelled, in horror when he saw her begin to fall.

"Kagome-dono!" Kenshin echoed, as he leaped to try and catch her; managing to curl himself around her in an effort to cushion the fall, yet finding himself surprised when he felt someone grab the both of them from midair!

"Wouldja look at this? I caught me a miko //1 a man! It seems I'm having some luck today!" a female voice cheerfully said; startling the both of them into looking up.

"Arashi-san!" Kagome said, pleased to see the one that now held them.

"Orororo?" Kenshin asked, bewildered by this turn of events. The woman that now held them had the same silver hair and amber, cat-slitted eyes as Inu-Yasha, yet had a single red stripe on both cheeks. Her armor was simple in design, and lacked any shoulder-guards, signaling that she was an archer, as well.

"Sesshomaru-nii sent me to help you out, since he's busy trying to keep the rest of Hyoga's forces from making landfall. Are you both all right, Kagome-chan?" Arashi asked, as some concern filtered into her golden eyes. Kagome nodded, then glanced at Kenshin.

"Sessha is just fine, thanks to you, Arashi-dono." Kenshin replied, with a smile.

"Good. Glad I'd made it in time, then." Arashi stated, with a relieved smile, then started her descent to where the two groups now stood.

"That was pretty damn reckless, Kenshin." Sanosuke growled, when they had gotten back down to the ground again.

"Sessha knows, Sano.....yet sessha couldn't just stand aside and do nothing." Kenshin replied, with a slight smile; knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that all three of his companions were inwardly agreeing with his master, at this point. All turned to look when Hyoga took one step towards them, angry enough now to come after them.

"Seems as though he's not going to wait for us to come to him, this time." Saito snarled, as he wiped what he could of the demon blood off of his sword, and prepared to start fighting again.

"Yeah....Kagome, aim for that mark again! Kenshin, use that same attack you'd used a while ago that'd helped sever his wing!" Inu-Yasha commanded, as he gripped the Tetsusaiga even tighter in his clawed hands.

"His aura's too strong! My arrow will never make it that far!" Kagome replied, uncertainly; jumping slightly when she felt Arashi place a hand on her shoulder, and turned to see her grin.

"Don't worry too much about that! Hit 'im with your best shot!" Arashi encouraged.

"Just be overconfident like usual and fire the arrow!" Inu-Yasha added.

"Like you're one to talk!" Kagome retorted, angrily.

"Oro....." Kenshin sighed, shaking his head as he listened to the argument, then saying, "We have no time for arguing, Inu-Yasha-kun, Kagome-dono."

"//1.....//1" Sanosuke thought, as he watched the trio from where he stood. It was all up to them, now.

"I'll use your combined strikes to relay my Bakuryuuha! Just trust me!" Inu-Yasha said; knowing that time was of the essence, and didn't want or need their uncertainties to get in the way.

"All right!" Kagome agreed, her determination rekindled by those words.

"//1" Kenshin mused, offering the both of them an agreeing nod to prove that he was ready.

"//1" Hyoga roared, as he prepared to hurl an even stronger attack at them; the marking on his brow glowing in an even brighter intensity than before.

"You can do it, Kagome!" Sango and Miroku both murmured.

"C'mon, jou-chan.....Don't let that monster's size intimidate you."

Sanosuke added, "And Kenshin, put your all into this strike!"

"Don't blow it, Battousai." Saito grumbled, as he felt for his cigarettes and matches; scowling when he found that they were gone.

"GO!!" Kagome cried, as she loosed her arrow, and Kenshin moved from her side; swiftly and easily matching the arrow's speed. With a blinding flash, Kagome's arrow struck Hyoga's barrier and Kenshin followed it in; intent on unleashing the ougi as soon as he was close enough.

"I'll show you, Hyoga! You mocked us, and now you're gonna feel our true power!" Inu-Yasha growled, as he adjusted his grip on the Tetsusaiga, and readied his own aura for the attack.

"Bakuryuuha!!"

"Amakakeru Ryu no Hirameki!"

The battle was decided, in moments.

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The first thing he became aware of, was the fact that he could hear his own heart beating. At first, the sound was very weak, and then it started getting stronger. Soon, he was finding that he was shivering from an icy cold that was slowly but surely loosening its grip from around him.

"Hiko-san?" a young woman's voice asked, the sound of it echoing slightly in his fogbound brain....yet he was jolted somewhat into wakefulness when he realized how close the voice had come from. Slowly, he opened his eyes; finding to his shock and consternation that not only was Kaoru lying next to him, but so were Misao and Megumi, as well! Kaoru was on his right hand side, Megumi was on his left, and Misao was on top; all three of them sharing their body warmth with him.

"You three.....took a tremendous risk....." Hiko whispered, his words alone rousing Megumi and Misao from half-slumber.

"Hiko-san!" Misao yelled; getting off of his chest and smiling at him when she saw that he was awake.

"Daijobu, Hiko-san?" Kaoru asked, gently, as she sat up and brushed a hand against his brow; seeming relieved when she felt his skin warming back up again.

"I've felt better.....But trying to keep me warm by using that method was dangerous, at best.....You three were at risk for freezing, as well." Hiko murmured.

"True.....And we were all starting to get cold there, after a while.....But nothing else was working. We couldn't just give up and let you die without trying everything!" Kaoru stated, even as a fervent blush appeared on her face, regardless.

"//1.....//1" Hiko wondered, with a slight sigh of exasperation.....yet couldn't stop the feeling of warmth that stole into him at the thought that they had risked it all to keep him from dying; so like another group he had known, so long ago.....

"Hiko-san, do you think you can sit up? I'm pretty sure Yahiko has some soup warmed up, by now." Megumi finally said; breaking her unusual silence, at last.

"Feh, as long as I can have some sake to go along with it." Hiko retorted; smirking when he saw one of her eyebrows twitch in irritation, and heard the quiet laughter from Misao and Kaoru for his comment, as well.

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Kenshin watched from afar, as things slowly returned to normal within the Sengoku Era village; smiling when he heard Sanosuke and Inu-Yasha yelling at one another.

"Quite the lungs on those two, wouldn't you say?" the elderly miko asked, as she joined him in the sunshine.

"Aa. But sessha couldn't ask for a better comrade than Sano. Or Aoshi, for that matter."

Kenshin said, inwardly chuckling when he saw Aoshi return from the clearing where the well waited; shaking his head in exasperation as he did so.

"Things are coming to a head, Aoshi?" Kenshin questioned.

"Unfortunately." Aoshi muttered; his eyes showing mild irritation as he looked back in the direction he'd come from. They all turned to look when they heard a baby begin crying within the hut behind them, and when Arashi's voice softly spoke, and then began to sing a gentle lullaby in response.

"That's another thing that is strange about this....While Inu-Yasha's strike slew Hyoga, the power of your Sakabatou Shinuchi and Higurashi-san's arrow rescued Menomaru. He can start his life over, thanks to that gift." Aoshi added, as he watched Arashi emerge from within the hut with the teal-haired baby in her arms.

"But how he uses the 'gift' is up to him. We can only hope, at this point, that we won't have to come back here again later to finish him off." Saito grumbled, from his perch on top of the hut. At this, he got an unreadable, yet fiercely protective, look from Arashi as an answer.

"He will be raised as my own, and, when the time comes, will be told of what had happened in that battle. What will decide his future, at this point, is how he is raised. And I will see to it that he becomes an honorable youkai, this time around." Arashi said, determinedly, as she gently brushed clawed fingertips across her adopted son's tiny brow; seeming surprised when Kenshin approached and did the same.

"Sessha wishes you and your mother all the best, Menomaru-kun." Kenshin said, softly; smiling when the baby's tiny eyebrows furrowed in response to the rougher feel of his sword-calloused fingers. Then he withdrew and gave the former Okashira and Wolf of Mibu a nod. It was time to go home. As they began to walk towards the well, they were again stopped by Kagome calling out to them.

"Hey! Wait a minute! I've gotta ask you something!" Kagome shouted, as she dashed over to them.

"What is your question, Kagome-dono?" Kenshin asked, curiously.

"Are you really.....? What I mean is, are you.....Himura Kenshin?" Kagome asked, in turn, then added, "And he's Saito Hajime?"

"Last time we checked, kid. Why?" Saito questioned; feigning irritation, even though he was curious as to what had brought this on.

"W-well....It was just a big surprise to see you guys here, that's all. I just never thought that anyone else from another time could come through the Bone-Eater's Well." Kagome stated, competently.

"Time isn't what you think it is. It isn't solid or streamlined, and paradoxes can happen all the time. At least....that is what I have learned, from my own personal experience."

Saito murmured, almost distractedly; ignoring Kenshin's surprised expression at his knowledge on the subject.

"I guess so. But on another note, can I ask you guys for one little favor before you go?" Kagome questioned, as a pleading look appeared on her childish face. Feeling dread creep up on him as he saw that look emerge, Kenshin nodded.

"Can I have your autographs?!" Kagome asked, with a smile, as she pulled a small notebook from nowhere, and held it out to Kenshin and Saito. In response to this, Kenshin fell flat on his face, while Saito's expression went utterly deadpan.

"Ororororororo....." Kenshin mumbled, even though his face was partially buried in the soil near Saito's feet.

"For once, Battousai, I couldn't have said it better, myself." Saito muttered, as he reluctantly took the proffered notebook and pen from the teenaged girl, and started writing his own name in it (albeit with some difficulty, since he wasn't used to the kind of pen Kagome had lent to him to write with).

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"Tou-san! What're you lookin' at?" a child's voice asks, as she approaches what appears to be a white-mantled warrior. With a calm smile, the man turns, picks her up, and continues looking in the same direction he'd been looking in. The same direction where Hyoga's Go-Shinboku had once been.

"Just enjoying the view, Kaoru-chan. That is all." The warrior replies, gently, as he held his daughter close, so she can hear his heartbeat. He smiles when he senses her confusion, and when she looks up at him with a puzzled look in her sapphire eyes.

"But I don't see anything different, Tou-san. Just a buncha trees....." Kaoru said, confusedly. This got warm laughter from her father for that.

"Hiko-sama? Is Kaoru-chan out there with you?" a woman's voice asks, as it's owner emerges from one of the ornate buildings behind him.

"Hai. We'll be inside in just a moment, Natsu." Hiko replied, as he turned and gave his wife the same calm smile he'd just given his daughter. As he started to follow his wife back indoors, he could only inwardly wonder if what he'd felt when Hyoga had disappeared had been true.

".....//1" Hiko wondered, then shrugged. He had enough to worry about, without that adding an extra burden.....as he was soon to find out, in short order.....

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Kenshin released the breath he didn't even know he'd been holding, when he finally emerged from the Bone-Eater's Well, and the well house it was being sheltered by, and found himself back in Meiji Era Japan.

"Well, at least //1 nightmare is over!" Sanosuke muttered, in relief, as he stretched to relieve the tension in his muscles.

"Aa. Sessha agrees wholeheartedly with you on that, Sano." Kenshin stated, then added, "Let's get back to the dojo." With no more words said between them, three of them hurriedly made their way back (while Saito simply walked away in the opposite direction, fully intent on getting home to his wife, first and foremost). And the sight that greeted them when they arrived filled Kenshin even further with relief. Hiko was standing on the dojo's porch, waiting for them. And, as Kenshin got closer, he could see an odd look of realization appear in the older man's eyes, before the Thirteenth master sighed and shook his head.

"Shishou? Daijobu desu ka?" Kenshin asked, quietly.

"I'm fine, Baka Deshi." Hiko replied, in his usual tone....yet, as he moved aside to let Kenshin get past him, he quietly (and even proudly) added, "You did well." Startled by this, Kenshin turned to give the gruff swordmaster a shocked look, yet only got a mildly irritated one

in answer to it.

"Go inside, you three. The Kitsune-onna, Tanuki, and Itachi are waiting for you." Hiko commanded, motioning towards the door as he did so.

"Will do." Sanosuke replied, then added, "I can smell the Kitsune's ohagi from here!"

"Aren't you coming inside as well, Shishou?" Kenshin asked, as he opened the door and glanced back at the white-mantled warrior; not seeming in the least bit surprised when Hiko didn't answer him. and yet, after he heard the trio go back inside, and was certain that they were out of earshot, he called out to someone that waited close by.

"Kagemaru." Hiko called, and was answered by the dark-furred nekomatta flying into the yard, with a cream-colored nekomatta following close behind him.

"As hard as it is for me to believe it, old friends, those three pulled it off." Hiko murmured, then silently added, "///1.....//1.....//1" And, with that thought in mind, Hiko Seijuro gave Kagemaru and his mate one last scratch behind their ears, then reached into his gi, pulled out a small, well-worn piece of paper and looked at the date written there. He still had a little over a hundred years to wait...and who knew what would happen, before that time came?

///1//1