

The One Who Serves
by Emilee Breanne Ward

Kadaira was safe. This was something that was not allowed to be refuted. Centuries ago the village was secured by building a stone wall around the inner part of the village and utilizing the natural hot springs to create a deadly moat around the farmlands that dotted the rest of the community. Unlike most hot springs, these were far too hot to navigate and the toxic sap from surrounding trees would seep into the waters killing all the fish within. By the time you were halfway through the river, your skin would be peeling off and your blood would become poisoned.

Villagers were afraid at first when they learned of the toxic waters but as time went on, they discovered that it kept them safe from the dangers outside the village. Most beasts and enemy villages could not bypass the river or Kadaira's wall so things were mostly peaceful.

Even so, it was agreed that there must be some sort of system for handling disagreements, crime, and emergencies. The samurai were then created and Hinata was one of the first to be nominated for service. He was the only son of the Shio family. He was strong, handsome, skilled, and humble which were all traits that the village felt embodied the nature of the samurai. His family was also from a long line of noble people.

Before Hinata was officially a samurai, he was required to pass three important tests: one of strength, one of wisdom, and one of honor. Each test was proctored on a single day along with other young men that had been nominated. They were allowed three months beforehand to practice, study, and meditate which Hinata utilized this time to the fullest extent. Even though he was heavily involved in his Father's farm, he spent all his spare time preparing for the samurai evaluations.

Nothing was going to get in the way of his success in the trials. That was, until he knew that he had to cross the river.

Hinata was specifically nominated to be one of the first samurai because of his deep seated beliefs in the welfare of Kadaira. Even when he was a young boy, he prided himself in his integrity and loyalty to the people and his family. He could not think of anything more noble than maintaining order and goodwill in Kadaira.

Next to his ideals, Yua was the most important thing in his life. He was grateful that the woman he had been paired with before birth was the same woman that he had fallen in love with. They were to be wed once he had completed the trials and had officially begun his new assignment as a samurai.

For now, he prepared for the first trial which would test his strength. His family was not worried about him being unable to pass this test because watching Hinata drain the rice fields, cut the plants, and transport them to another field to dry required endurance and strength to complete. Every swing of the scythe during the cutting portion revealed the muscles in Hinata's arms expanding and contracting. He also barely had to take any breaks which couldn't be said for his fellow laborers.

When Hiroshi Shio noticed his son had paused his work to wipe his brow, he approached and put a loving hand on his shoulder. "I am so proud of you." His eyes

scrunched up along with his smile as he said this and Hinata returned the praise with a nod.

Once he had caught his breath he said, "Thank you, Father. It is an honor to be chosen."

"It wasn't a hard decision." Hiroshi patted his son's back a couple times and then dropped the hand back to his side.

"You flatter me." Hinata joked.

They both laughed together at the knowledge that Hiroshi had been part of the committee that had selected samurai nominees. Even so, the committee had gone to great lengths to ensure that there was no favoritism in the selection process.

Out across the vast rice fields the other workers continued cutting down the plants for drying later. Hiroshi was very prosperous and could afford the expense of paying employees to work the fields so he no longer did much physical labor himself. Him and his wife had tried for a long time to bear children. Because of this, as Hinata was coming into the dawn of his adult life, Hiroshi was entering into the twilight hours of his life. He felt confident that his son would be able to care for him and his wife for as long as they had need so nothing caused him any concern for their future.

Hiroshi left his son's side so he could continue preparing the rice for drying. Getting back into his rhythm wasn't hard and it enabled him to disassociate from the physical ache in his muscles and the sun beating down. Once Hinata completed his morning work, he breathed a sigh of relief as he saw his love and the light of his life cresting the hill with a wooden tray in her arms. It was time for lunch and to be in the presence of her. Good food and a beautiful woman were the things that made work worthwhile. When she was three yards away, he could see that she had let her hair down in straight black ribbons along her back. Her kimono was cream colored and trimmed in black to like her hair and her eyes.

She smiled as she saw him gazing at her and ducked her head slightly. He set his tools down and rubbed his hands together to get off some of the loose dirt.

"Yua, you look beautiful."

"I wish I could say the same for you. You look very rough." She smiled flirtatiously.

"I'll go wash up then and maybe you'll change your mind." He led the way to a spot they usually dined which was near a clean stream that ran close to a cherry blossom tree.

He removed his sandals and socks and stepped into the water. After he had cleaned his feet and rinsed his face and hands, he sat beside his bride to be and began to pour himself a cup of tea.

"Thank you for preparing this." Hinata said graciously.

Yua had placed the tray down on the ground between them so this freed her up to lean in and kiss his lips softly. "You work hard. Besides, the stronger you are, the sooner we can be together."

"That responsibility doesn't fall on your shoulders. It is my job to be as prepared as possible so I will be able to give us a beautiful life together." Hinata said solemnly.

"Even so," She insisted. "I want to give you as much as I can. Food does good for the mind, the heart, and the body."

He picked up his chopsticks and began to eat the rice, vegetables, and fish that had been prepared just for him. The tea had a bitter refreshing quality and the spices of the food were a mixture of sweet and sour. He was full very quickly and took the rest of the time to just enjoy the rest and gazing at his bride.

“I’ve been working on my dress for the wedding.” Yua said shyly interrupting the comfortable silence.

“Oh?” Hinata said as he took another sip of tea.

“Yes.” A coy smile played at her lips.

“I can’t wait to see you in it, my blossom.” He kissed her again.

As quickly as the meal had begun, it was over and Yua was returning to her mother’s house with an empty tray and a quivering heart. Hinata struggled to transition into the rest of his work. He wanted to be sitting in the cool shade of the cherry blossoms and splash his feet in the stream. He wanted to kiss Yua again and rest in her embrace until the sun descended below the horizon. But earnest and hard work is what would provide them with the comfortable life they both desired and this is what motivated him to keep going even though the sun beat down on his bare shoulders and sweat dripped from his brow.

As he reached the last row for the day he breathed a sigh of relief. The sun was beginning to set and, as a cool breeze blew, the last remaining stalks quivered. Just then, something caught his eye that didn’t look familiar. The corner of a small brown chest poked up from the dirt. The only way he could see it from where he was at was because of two tarnished gold hinges that could be seen. Besides this, the brown of the box camouflaged it so well. Hinata glanced around the field and saw that some of the men were still completing their own rows. Subtly, he marked the spot with a twig that was lying nearby and continued working.

When he had completed harvesting he went through his usual late afternoon ritual of bidding goodbye to his fellow workers and exchanging comments about the day’s work. When Hinata was sure the others were gone, he returned to the spot he had marked. It was hard to find it in the dying light but once he had seen it, he began to dig with the stick. Because of the dampness of the field, the earth moved easily and he was able to remove the mud-covered chest. It wasn’t locked but opened to reveal a thick leather-bound book. He closed the lid and returned to the stream he had bathed in before lunch. He splashed the outside of the box with water to remove the mud and then rinsed his hands. Drying them on a corner of his kimono, he stood and proceeded home.

He knew his parents would be worried about him so he planned to read some of the book close to bedtime. Once inside, his parents were waiting for him at the dinner table with concern etched on their faces.

“Where were you?” Yayoi Shio asked.

“I found this.” Hinata said. “While I was working I saw it halfway buried under the mud.”

“An old box?” Hiroshi asked.

“Yes. It has a book in it that I thought I would read later.”

“Seems strange that someone would bury a book.” Hiroshi commented.

“Put that away and sit down for dinner.” Yayoi insisted.

“Of course, Mother.” Hinata bowed his head slightly out of respect and went to place the box next to his bed. Hinata had always been honest with his parents so the box and the book were of no interest to them.

Even though he always enjoyed meals with his parents, he found that his mind was consumed by the book which made it difficult to focus on the conversation going on around him. He would have skipped dinner to read the mysterious book if he could have but he knew his parents wouldn’t understand. Meal times were important in their household.

When the necessary family responsibilities were completed, Hinata prepared himself for bed. He shut his door to his room, lit a candle, and sat on his bed. On the spine was the name “Haru” in gold letters and inside there were lines and lines of Japanese that were handwritten in perfectly straight rows.

“We urge you to seek Haru beyond the river. The security and peace Kadaira offers will be shattered.” Hinata’s breath caught in his throat at these words. Who was Haru and why would Kadaira fall? “You have certainly been told that the waters are treacherous but what you haven’t been told is that you can survive it.”

Hinata continued to read, glued to the pages of the book. The book read like a letter with themes of sacrifice and courage and honor. But the main theme that continued to reverberate through every page is how necessary it was to cross the river and completely surrender.

Before he knew it, he was waking up. The candle had gone out and the book was lying on the floor. He picked it up, dusted it off, and slid it under his pillow. He wasn’t sure how his family would feel about what was inside the book but it went against everything he was taught. That wouldn’t sit well with his father.

Over the next three months, Hinata continued to work to build his strength but at night he would read Haru which he considered to be increasing his wisdom. He kept what he had learned to himself and didn’t even tell Yua about what was inside. As he got further into the pages, he found himself thinking on the things he had read consistently throughout the day. One time, he had been ashamed to be distracted during lunch with Yua. He was dwelling on an interesting passage that had talked about a war that had occurred beyond the river between neighboring villages. He kept thinking about it because he had never considered what life must be like outside Kadaira.

“Hinata?”

“I’m sorry, Yua. I just was thinking.”

“Are you nervous?”

The trials were three days away now but he didn’t want to admit he hadn’t even been thinking about them lately.

“Not really.”

“What is it then?”

“Have you ever wondered what’s beyond the river?”

She laughed. “No, of course not. It doesn’t concern us.”

“Well, I have.”

Yua’s face returned to solemn respect and then she said, “Why?”

Hinata took a deep breath then said, "I found a book of letters and stories. I just finished reading a story about a war across the river." Yua looked afraid but said nothing as Hinata explained what he had been reading.

Finally she responded, "Well, it's probably just fictional stories."

"I don't think so." Hinata said eagerly. "I think it's real and I think I need to cross the river."

Yua put her hand over his and she said, "Please. Don't. I don't want you to die."

Hinata felt his heart drop. This was the first time he had ever felt like Yua did not understand his heart so he kept his thoughts to himself and embraced her to hide his face. He couldn't promise that he would not cross the river.

As the day of the trials dawned, Hinata dressed in his best kimono and sheathed his sword. When he hopefully became a samurai, he would have two swords instead of just one.

When he went to the kitchen, he saw that his mother had prepared for him a bountiful breakfast of fish, miso soup, rice, and green tea. "You're going to do great." His mother said as she stood on her tip-toes to kiss his cheek.

"Thanks, Mother." Hinata said warmly, squeezing her tightly.

His father stood behind his wife beaming brightly. This was when Hinata truly felt the weight of what he was about to do. These trials would decide the outcome of his family's future and set him up for a happy marriage. It would determine his standing in the community and the financial freedom they had as a family. It was an honorable thing and he was considering abandoning all that for a collection of stories he had read in a book he found buried on his father's farm.

When he thought through all these things, he realized how ridiculous it was. He wasn't going to jeopardize all that was before him or disappoint his family and Yua.

"Father," Hinata released his mother and turned to his father. "I will bring honor to our family."

"I know you will." Hiroshi said warmly.

They all left together for the trials which were just beyond the farms surrounding the villages. There was space that had been cleared just for events like this. On one side were the woods and on the other were benches for onlookers. In the middle was simply a large expanse of grass and dirt. Everybody was wearing their best and families of the nominees were in the very front. The Shio family parted ways and their son took his place in the middle of the field.

Tsuyoi was already there and Hinata couldn't help stare at how big he had gotten since last time they spoke. Before the trials, they were told they were not allowed to train together so Hinata had only seen him from a distance as he was tending his family's chickens. Tsuyoi had always been strong but he must have been pushing himself much harder over the last few months because he easily dwarfed Hinata.

"Good to see you, my friend." Tsuyoi said. His voice was deep and cool which was always the second most noticeable thing about him. It did not seem to match with his size and was disarming to listen to. Otherwise, everything else about him was unremarkable.

"Good to see you." Hinata returned.

“Do you think Kokatsu will be late as always?”

“Surely not. This is an important day.” Hinata chuckled.

Kokatsu was the only other nominee that Hinata knew well. Since their childhood, Kokatsu had always been late even though in every other area he excelled. It was apparent that he was going to uphold his reputation for lateness as more people arrived and they still hadn't seen Kokatsu.

As the elder of the village rose to begin speaking, Kokatsu appeared by Hinata's side. “I'm here.” He said, struggling to catch his breath.

“Thank you all for coming.” Choro Meishu said in a voice that was hardly audible. His kimono was silver and lined with black silk. His hair was gray and tied up into a bun on the back of his head. He had since stopped shaving so his facial hair looked bushy and unkempt. He was quickly becoming old and worn down yet continued to insist on speaking at every community event.

“Today we will be testing our best young men to see if they can lead the way as the first samurai. As a symbol of their position in the village, they will be given two swords that they will keep in sheaths on their belt. They will serve our community by promoting order and creating peace for all who live here.” The crowd applauded and with that, the trials began.

The strength trial was nothing unfamiliar to Hinata. It involved several obstacle courses to run through while carrying heavy rice bags or trying to catch livestock. Hinata barely broke a sweat as he executed each task perfectly. He was of one mind and continued to push the stories in the book to an unobserved corner of his memory.

When this trial was completed, the judges had time to evaluate each nominee. Hinata took advantage of the moment to get a drink from the stream and wash the sweat from his brow. When he returned, Choro explained the next trial.

It was a series of riddles and puzzles all handwritten on to long pieces of scroll. Each man was given a tablet to write on and an hour to answer all questions. Wisdom was not his strongest asset but he found himself soaring through the questions and just barely finishing before the hour was up.

When they handed in their scrolls, it was time for the final trial which was about honor. Each nominee was placed with a judge and asked a series of questions about their character. The interview seemed to take the most time to complete but it wasn't hard.

“Final question...are you loyal to Kadaira and all of the inhabitants?” The judge asked.

This was the only time that Hinata had paused throughout the whole interview. Unbidden thoughts came rushing into his mind about fleeing after the trials and leaving everything behind for what was beyond the river. His heart fluttered in his chest at the thought. It excited him the prospect of leaving and seeing if what he had read was real.

Despite all this, the “yes” came from his lips and the interview was complete.

While results were being tabulated, each nominee went to their home to eat lunch and clean up. Yua joined the Shio family for their meal and sat by Hinata so she could hold his hand under the table. While his body was present, his mind wasn't. Not only was he worried about the results but he was worried that they would know he had lied about his loyalty. He had never lied like that before because the intentions of his heart

were always known to him. He had never been in so much moral chaos before. Yua gazed at him for a moment as if trying to read his thoughts but she never asked anything.

When the meal was over, they all returned to the field where the judges all stood in a firm line in front of rows of chairs where the nominees were instructed to sit.

“After much deliberation, we have chosen the very first samurai of Kadaira.” Choro announced. Everybody in the crowd applauded and the food in Hinata’s stomach gurgled. “It was tough but 7 of our 10 nominees were selected. Come up and receive your swords as I call your name.”

As Choro began to call names, he closed his eyes until he heard the familiar sound of his name ringing out. He walked up to the village elder in reverent silence and received his two swords.

“I’m so glad you were selected.” Choro whispered.

Hinata thanked the old man and returned to his seat in a daze. Something felt wrong.

After a day of celebrating, dancing, enjoying good food, and kissing Yua, Hinata returned to his home and went to his room. He lit the candle and was just about to undress for bed when he noticed the book lying on the mattress. It was open to where he had left off and he had forgotten to put it away.

He picked it up and sat down on the bed to begin to read. The first words he saw were, “Many will doubt your convictions and doubt the words in this book but it is because it is easier to accept momentary safety which could end in pain rather than a second of excruciating agony which ends in pleasure.”

Hinata lowered the book slowly. The day’s events flew across his memory. The challenge of the trials, the adoration from the village, the pride from his parents, the love from Yua. All of it filled his heart with undeniable happiness. But...if everything in the book was true, all of this happiness would be gone. Maybe not today but someday and the only way to be sure of joy was to cross that river.

By the light of the moon, Hinata trekked across the rice fields to the beginning of the woods. His two swords clinked softly against his armor and while he knew that anything the river had to offer would not be stopped by armor, he felt better wearing it. At least he would die as an honorable samurai and not simply a farmer’s son.

Nobody stopped him as he breached the tree line. He looked back one more time and then continued deeper into the darkness beyond. It finally had become so dark that the moonlight was no longer visible so he lit his lantern.

He suddenly understood why no one ventured this far into the woods. The bark of the trees were black and dead looking. The sap that glistened on the surface was bright orange and the leaves were vomit green. The path was barely visible which caused Hinata to stumble several times.

When he heard the sound of water he paused because up ahead there was another glimmer of light. In front of him were some low hanging branches so he pushed them away and could clearly see Yua standing near the river. She was wearing her wedding kimono and, even though Hinata had never seen it before, he knew this must be what she had spent three months sewing. It was lilac in color with a knot of pink silk tied at the back of her waist. Her long dark hair was now tied up in a beautiful bun held

together by a sparkling butterfly clip. In one hand was a lantern and in the other was a bouquet of cherry blossoms.

“I knew you would be here.” She whispered.

“Yua...” Hinata started.

“You were distracted all day and I knew you were planning to come here.” Tears were coursing down her cheeks making little tracks through the white powder on her face. “You are going to have everything you want once we’re married and...you want to leave me!” She sobbed and threw up the hand holding the cheery blossoms to wipe her eyes.

“No, my blossom. It isn’t like that at all.” He reached to grasp her shoulders but she twisted out of reach coming too close to one of the toxic looking trees.

“Look at the river.” She commanded.

He looked. It was bubbling and steaming. It appeared to be dark purple in the darkness and trails of orange sap were seeping into it. No fish swam in this river.

“You will burn alive before you get anywhere.”

“Come with me.” Hinata insisted. “I want you to go with me. Then we can be safe. Together.”

She shook her head. “You’re not the man I love.”

“No, Yua. Look!” Hinata pulled the book from his pocket and opened to the passage he had read just an hour ago. “All of this,” He waved his arms to encompass the village behind them. “Is temporary. If we want joy we must push forward. We must seek Haru” He pocketed the book then held his hand outstretched to her. “Please?”

Her lower lip quivered and she seemed to be thinking it over. Hinata didn’t want to lose her but he knew how important this was. The conviction was deep in his heart.

“No, Hinata. I can’t.” She fled from him and back to the village.

In that moment he was breaking but he did not chase after her. This was a journey he would be taking alone. As he stared at the ominous waters, he felt an unusual calm wash over him and a certainty of this decision. He set his lantern down and bowed his head in prayer. Taking a deep breath he stepped one foot into the water. He could hear the waters hiss but his skin had not made contact yet. He moved the other foot in and it hissed too.

After several more steps, he finally could feel the boiling water soaking through his socks and weighing down the hem of his kimono. The lower half of his body finally registered the temperature and began to throb. He flinched slightly but tried to remain calm. His heart began to drum in his ears and he was feeling a bit woozy. Once he was waist deep in the waters it felt like his skin was being peeled off. He shouted in pain but it was too late to turn back now. The current was pulling him further in and he had a moment of doubt in his plan.

“Haru!” Hinata screamed. “I cannot, Haru!”

The pain dissipated and the waters before him were beginning to clear. They no longer looked purple but a deep blue and were reflecting the moon above. He continued to step forward and found the ground rising up to the opposite shore.

A man then walked out of the woods and greeted Hinata by name.

“Hello, Hinata. I am Haru. Are you ready to go back and tell the others?”



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