

Baka Deshi

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My take on Kenshin and Hiko's first week as apprentice and master. Covers the events in Tsuiokuhen and manga volume 12.

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Chapter 1 - Stray Puppy

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1 - Stray Puppy

Aki (present day Hiroshima)
1859

The tiny redheaded boy was held back from fighting by the three girls in front of him. Violet eyes watched in horror as they were skewered and slashed one by one. Horrified by all the carnage, the small boy turned his back on the scene and imagined that he was in his village with his parents and brothers.

Suddenly, there were sounds of yelping and struggling. The boy heard voices from up ahead.

"What are you?!"

"There's no point in naming myself to dead men."

A black and white blur cut through the bandits, sending them all crashing to the ground, blood gushing from their twitching bodies. The blur stopped, revealing a huge swordsman with long black hair pulled back in a low ponytail, sharply chiseled features and a huge billowing white cape with red trim.

The giant turned and looked down at the little boy sitting with his back to the scene.

"You were an unlucky child. The shogunate's laws have been lax since the black ships arrived two years ago. More and more ronin prowl this area as bandits," said the giant swordsman in a booming, but not unkind voice.

The little boy didn't respond or even turn to look at the giant, who flicked the blood from his nihontou, wiped it off and sheathed it.

"Some fate brought me here and I've taken revenge for you."

Silence.

"But the dead will not be brought back by mourning or hatred. Such things happen every day, everywhere in today's Japan. You should be thankful that you survived," he continued.

Still no response. Was this child dumb or in shock? The swordsman couldn't guess one above the other. Still he was but a child, and the giant felt the unusual stirrings of compassion in his heart.

"If you go to the village at the foot of the mountain and tell them your story, you will be cared for," he said before turning his back and leaving the red haired boy.

The little redhead sat for hours after the giant swordsman left. Neither his mind nor his body could move. The air he breathed was thick with the stench of blood and decay. The screams of the dying echoed in

his ears. The sun moved toward the horizon and was just slipping under by the time he found the will to stand.

There would be no sleep for the waif tonight. He had work to do.

The giant swordsman, Hiko Seijuro XIII was his name, continued on his way, stopping and killing or beating off more bandits and thieves before finally reaching his mountain top home. Hiko shut his door firmly before removing his white cape, revealing a heavily muscled body.

Hiko whipped out a jug of sake and poured it into a saucer. As he drank, he found that strangely, his thoughts were travelling back to the scene of the carnage that morning. Images of the little boy with the startling red hair popped into his mind and wouldn't leave even when he tried to banish them.

The child had been so small, fear and grief rolling off his ki in waves. Hiko had seen his share of carnage before, but never had he seen a child sit so still and so silent; most children screamed or cried. What was it about this child that was so different?

The next evening...

Try as he might, Hiko couldn't get the image of the little boy sitting in mute misery among the squalor of the corpses out of his mind. When he found himself dreaming about the child, he realized he would have to go to the village and see if the kid was alright if he were ever to have any peace again.

Hiko went to the village under the presumption of buying sake from the old man he'd bought it from for the past 15 years. This man knew all the goings on in the village and would be able to tell Hiko if the red-haired boy had in fact gone there.

Hiko arrived at the house and pounded on the door frame. Fudoro, the sake vendor peered out the barred window. Upon seeing who it was, he grabbed a jug of his finest sake and slid his fusuma open.

"Greetings, Hiko-san," he said.

"Greetings. Would you happen to know if a small boy with red hair showed up in the village in the last day?" Hiko ventured.

"Not that I've seen," said Fudoro.

"He's not here?" Hiko was taken aback. He thought for sure the boy would go to the village. Who would want to stay in a field full of corpses?

"Nope. No kid, no stray cat. Nobody's come this way for a week," said the sake vendor.

Not knowing what else to say, Hiko paid for the sake and left. His feet took him back to the scene of the massacre. As he walked, he pondered the boy's fate and the state of Japan.

'Suicide in despair? It's certainly common enough these days. Even when I wield my sword according to Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu's philosophy, often I can't save a soul. I kill and kill, and still the villains, like maggots, spring from Japan's rotting corpse. There will be more and more of these acts, and all I can do is bury the victims.'

Hiko was lifted from his gloom by the sight that revealed itself to him in the field. Instead of a battlefield of rotting corpses, the place had been transformed into a makeshift graveyard full of crosses. In the middle of the field, before three rocks, stood the red haired boy.

Hiko walked out onto the field and stood behind the boy who again did not turn to look at him. The child was filthy, hands bloody and raw from having dug holes and moved the corpses of grown men into them, then burying them. What sort of child was this?

"Not only for your parents, but the bandits too?" Hiko asked.

For the first time, the child spoke.

"They were slavers, not parents. My parents died of cholera last year," he said in a soft voice. "Bandits or slavers, once they're dead, they're just bodies."

"Still, you made graves for them?" asked Hiko, unable to believe what he was witnessing.

Hiko's eyes traveled to the three stone graves.

"What are these three stone graves?" he asked.

"Kasumi-san, Akane-san and Sakura-san," explained the boy. "All three were taken from their parents by force as payment for debts. I only knew them for a day, but I was the only boy here and an orphan. So I thought, even if it costs my life, I have to protect them. But I couldn't find the right stones to make nice graves for them like I wanted. I looked for flowers to offer, but couldn't even find one."

Stepping up beside the child, Hiko uncorked his sake jug and poured it upon the three stone graves. Finally, the little boy looked up at him with huge, soft violet eyes that were far too old for such a young child.

"Man or woman, to move to the next world without knowing the taste of good sake is a crime. A good sake is the least I can do," said Hiko in an unusually low voice as he continued to pour.

There was no doubt about it. This boy was the one!

"What's your name, boy?" Hiko asked as he corked the jug.

"Shinta," said the little boy softly.

Hiko's stomach quailed. No way in Hell would he have an apprentice with a name like that!

"A child's name, unfitting for a swordsman. From now on your name will be Kenshin. I shall also give you

my most precious knowledge," said Hiko.

Without another word, Hiko began to move away from the grave yard toward his home. It was getting late and he was hungry. Whether Shinta, or Kenshin, followed was up to him.

Not a moment later, Hiko heard the sound of soft footsteps behind him and smiled to himself. The boy was awfully small to learn a sword style like Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu, but he had a maturity of spirit and strength in his heart that would give him power where his physical strength would fail him. Hiko knew he had chosen well.

As they climbed the mountain to Hiko's cabin, young Kenshin began to lag behind the large man. Hiko, with his back to the boy didn't even notice this until he heard a moan and a soft thud. Turning to look, he saw Kenshin lying prone, sprawled out on the ground. Rolling his eyes, he knelt down and shook the boy's shoulder.

"Kenshin! Wake up!" he said, a bit gruffer than he'd meant to.

No response.

"Kenshin!" he said again.

Still no response.

Hiko rolled the boy over to check if he was still breathing, which he was. Swearing mentally, Hiko picked the tiny redhead up in his arms and carried him the rest of the way to the cabin. When they got in, Hiko got out an unused spare futon and set the boy down on it,

Hiko opened Kenshin's gi a bit, revealing a frame that was far too thin and bony.

'No wonder he collapsed. This kid is skin and bones,' Hiko thought. 'I can't begin training him like this. I have to feed him and put some flesh on him first.'

Hiko went to the kitchen and got everything ready. The boy wasn't to the point of emaciation, so he could probably handle a bowl of miso soup alright. Soon Hiko had a pot of miso cooking. The room filled with the delicious scent.

Hiko heard the rustling of cloth behind him, turned and saw Kenshin sitting up on the futon, looking around with confusion in his violet eyes.

"So all it took was the scent of cooking soup to rouse you from your nap, I see. This is my cabin. You'll be living here from now on. I have a spare room in the back that I just use for storage. When you're a bit stronger, I'll have you clean it out and you can stay there," he said.

Hiko glanced at the boy and decided the first thing he needed was a good bath.

"Kenshin, how old are you?" asked Hiko.

"I think ten new years," answered Kenshin quietly. Honestly, he didn't know, as such things were trivial to peasants who had enough to do just trying to scratch out a living.

"Old enough to wash yourself. You positively wreak and I don't want my cabin smelling like blood and corpses," said Hiko, heading over to a shelf.

Hiko handed Kenshin some rice bran soap, a scrub brush and the smallest shirt he could find. With Kenshin following mutely behind him, Hiko pointed to the river flowing a few yards away from his house.

"Leave your clothes on the shore and wash yourself from head to toe. That's the smallest shirt I could find. It'll swim on you, but I expect just about anything will. I'll wash your clothes for you this one time and tomorrow we'll see about getting you some new clothes. The soup should be ready by the time you're finished," said Hiko.

Kenshin nodded, went down to the river bank, undid his ponytail, stripped and then headed out into the icy water, shivering from head to toe. Without looking at the boy, Hiko knelt down and picked up his filthy, ragged slave clothes and took them to his house. First thing tomorrow, that kid was getting some decent clothes made.

Kenshin waded out to his chest, dunked himself under the water, then lathered up the scrub brush with the rice bran soap. He worked quickly, his breath coming out in vapor streams in the cold evening air. Goose bumps rose on his skin, but he had to admit, it felt great to scour the crusted dirt, blood and filth off his skin.

Finished soaping and scrubbing, Kenshin dunked himself again and came up soap free. Without the dirt and blood on him, naturally pale skin and a beautiful, almost angelic face were revealed. Lathering his loose hair with the rice bran, Kenshin scrubbed it vigorously several times before dunking his ruddy head.

When he came up, hair as scarlet as blood was revealed having been freed from its long entrapment in dust and offal. With the pale skin, violet eyes and crimson hair, young Kenshin was truly a sight to behold. Shivering in the light of the dying sun, Kenshin emerged from the river, water dripping from his thin frame and long hair.

Using the towel, he quickly dried himself off and slipped into the shirt, the bottom of which came down past his ankles. He would have to be careful not to trip in it. The sleeves were so long, his hands didn't even stick out. Kenshin rolled the sleeves back and pulled his wet hair back into its low ponytail. Picking up the soap bar and scrub brush, he made his way back to the cabin before he caught a chill.

When Kenshin got back in, he saw his dripping wet clothes hanging on a line in front of the irori. Hiko looked up at the clean but bedraggled looking child and had to choke down a laugh. With his hair dripping and the long shirt trailing past his feet, Kenshin was a funny sight to behold.

"You look like something the cat dragged in," said Hiko with a smirk.

Just for a moment, Hiko thought he saw a glint of anger in Kenshin's violet eyes. It was so brief, he

thought he could have imagined it, but it was definitely there.

"Well, enough chit-chat; soup's on," announced the magnificent swordmaster, gesturing for Kenshin to sit on the floor beside the irori to dry his hair off.

Hiko poured the miso into two equal bowls and set one before Kenshin. Kenshin didn't eat, but instead sat staring at it.

"What? You don't like miso soup?" asked Hiko, pausing his own meal.

Silence.

"It's impolite to answer a question with silence, Kenshin," said Hiko. "Do you like miso soup?"

The boy nodded, looking down at the soup.

"Then eat it! That bowl is for you," said Hiko.

Only after Hiko had given this command did Kenshin pick up his chopsticks and begin going after the vegetables and meat that floated in the broth.

'Ah, I see. He thinks he needs to wait till I give him permission to eat. Typical of a slave I suppose,' Hiko thought sorrowfully.

"Kenshin," said Hiko.

The boy looked up wide-eyed from his soup with a bit of fish dangling from his mouth. Concealing his amusement, Hiko spoke.

"When I give you food, you're to eat it right away and not wait for me to tell you to, or I'll take your portion for myself. Understood?" said Hiko.

Kenshin nodded and quickly went back to eating. The last thing he wanted was to lose food.

'This is going to take a while. His soul is in far worse shape than his body,' Hiko thought as he returned to his own meal.

After they were finished, Hiko had Kenshin put his bowl in a wash basin to be washed the next day.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm going to turn in. I'd suggest you do the same so you can start putting some flesh on that scrawny body of yours," said Hiko with a smirk.

The brief flash of anger again. There was definitely a fighting spirit in the boy. It just had to be drawn forth. Hiko pointed to the futon he'd set Kenshin in earlier.

"That will be your futon from now on. Tomorrow, I'll show you around my land and what I'll expect of you," said Hiko before disappearing into his bed room.

After Hiko had gone, Kenshin laid down on the futon, snuggling into the warm blankets. The sun had set, leaving a starry sky outside. The fire in the irori and the clothes hanging from the line cast eerie shadows on the walls. Other than the sound of crackling wood and Hiko's prodigious snoring from behind the closed shouji, the cabin was silent as a grave yard. Kenshin was afraid to sleep. Last night, he had dreamed of the massacre and the three girls dying before his eyes. Tonight didn't promise to be any different, even if he was clean, full and in a warm bed.

Despite his misgivings, sleep over took the exhausted boy easily enough. It wasn't long however, till the nightmares started.

Shinta looked on in silent horror as his mother let out her last raspy breath. She lay beside her husband, who had died earlier in the day. Shinta's two older brothers had died earlier that week and had been cremated.

Suddenly, his mother's violet eyes opened wide and looked at him sadly.

"Shinta, you'll be all alone in the world. Sleep with Mommy and Daddy," she pleaded, reaching out toward him.

Shinta scrambled back against the wall, his tiny body quaking as his parents' bodies came to life, stood up and started advancing toward him.

"We miss you, Shinta," moaned his father.

Shinta's eyes filled with tears as he shrank from his parents' advancing forms. He felt hands on him.

His violet eyes opened and saw the scene shift. Now the slavers loomed over him. Shinta struggled but was helpless as hands touched him where they had no business to.

The scene changed again to the battlefield. Akane, Kasumi and Sakura died before Shinta as each girl was slashed and skewered through the heart with a sword. Their eyes flew open and like his parents, they called to him.

"Come with us, Shinta. We miss you," they called out mournfully.

The bandits advanced, lust in their eyes. Suddenly, there was the swing of a huge nihontou and the large man, Hiko appeared behind the bandits, cutting them down.

"Come with me if you want to live," said Hiko, holding out a hand.

Shinta took his hand and left the battle field and the mournful voices behind him.

Kenshin's body jerked as he came awake. Breathing heavily, his violet eyes looked about the room. Where was he?!! Then he remembered; he was in the cabin of the big swordsman, Hiko-san. The fire had died down to just a few embers and his clothes looked like they were nearly dry.

Kenshin looked out the window and saw that the sky was still dark, but gradually lightening in the east. There would be no getting back to sleep now. Might as well get up and get some work done around his new home.

Kenshin began to move and realized something was terribly wrong; his sheet was wet. Closing his eyes, he berated himself for being so childish. What would Shishou think of him when he found out about this?

Standing up, Kenshin stripped the covering off the futon, then folded the bed and put it away. Going over to the clothes line, he touched his gi and hakama and was relieved to see that they'd dried overnight. Stripping out of the way-too-large shirt, Kenshin quickly dressed in his own clothes, which although threadbare were familiar.

Grabbing the bucket he saw by the door, Kenshin headed out to the river, dipped the bucket in and filled it with fresh, cool water. Returning to the cabin, Kenshin dumped the water into the wash basin, grabbed the washboard, some more of the rice bran soap and turned to the offending bed sheet. Kenshin dipped the bed sheet into the water and began scrubbing it against the washboard with copious vigor.

Hiko was roused from his sleep by the sound of scrubbing and water splashing. Instantly, he was on his feet, Winter Moon in hand. How could he have not sensed the ki of someone breaking in?! Hiko slid his bed room door open and was surprised to find Kenshin knelt over the laundry basin, scrubbing away at his bed sheet.

"Kenshin, what are you doing?" barked Hiko, startling the little boy and causing him to turn around quickly and look up at him with fear-stricken eyes before quickly averting them to the floor.

"I wet the bed," he said softly to the giant towering ominously over him.

A trembling Kenshin kept his head bowed, expecting the blow to come any time.

'Oh great...' thought Hiko. Of all the deshis he could pick, he'd have to pick an emotionally traumatized slave with bed-wetting issues. This was going to take a lot of patience and a lot of sake.

"Kenshin, stop trembling like that. I'm not going to beat you for an accident," said Hiko.

Kenshin looked up at Hiko with moist violet eyes.

The boy's slavishness would definitely have to be overcome if he were ever to become a swordsman

"When you're finished washing the sheet, hang it up to dry and we'll have breakfast, then I'll show you around," said Hiko.

After a breakfast of rice and fish, behold shishou and deshi walking away from Hiko's cabin out to the training grounds. Kenshin's eyes took in everything. There were thick wooden posts and trees to be practiced on and a huge waterfall that fell into the river that he'd bathed in last night. What a beautiful sight to someone who had looked on so many unlovely things in his life.

"This is where you'll start training next week," said the haughty swordmaster. "Right now, we're going to the village and get some suitable training clothes for you."

Kenshin didn't respond, just kept staring at the waterfall.

"You like the waterfall?" asked Hiko.

Kenshin nodded.

"A bit young for that type of thing, don't you think?" said Hiko, a glimmer in his eye.

"Oro?" Totally innocent violet eyes.

"Never mind," said Hiko. 'Kids...!'

Kenshin walked up to the training posts and looked them over. They were sturdy and looked like they'd taken a lot of punishment from Hiko's nihontou. Kenshin looked up at Hiko with a question in his eyes, but stopped short of asking.

"If you have a question, ask," said Hiko.

"What happens if I break one of these posts?" asked Kenshin.

Hiko snorted.

"Then you'll go into the forest, cut down a tree and make a new one," said Hiko.

Kenshin opened his mouth to say he didn't know how.

"I'll teach you when the time comes," said Hiko. "Alright, come on. Time to get some clothes made for you."

Kenshin fell in behind his master and they headed out. Hiko led the way down the mountain, going at half his usual pace so Kenshin could keep up. Even with the slower pace, Kenshin was completely winded by the time they reached the village.

Hiko took Kenshin to a tailor's shop where he was greeted by a matronly-looking old woman with her hair pulled back in a bun held in place by long hair pins.

"Good morning. How may this humble woman serve the great samurai?" asked the seamstress, noting Hiko's nihontou and bowing low.

"This boy needs to be fitted for kenjutsu training clothes, three yukata, three gi, three monpei and three sets of tabi," said Hiko.

"Ah. Right this way," said the seamstress. Hiko and Kenshin followed her inside, stepping out of their

sandals as they went.

She led Kenshin and Hiko to the back and gestured for Kenshin to stand on a small pedestal. At her instructions, Kenshin held his arms out to his sides while she measured him vertically and horizontally.

"Alright. I'll have the clothes ready by week's end," said the seamstress.

"Very good. Kenshin!" called Hiko turning to leave.

Kenshin turned from admiring the pretty rolls of fabric and followed his master outside, stepping into his sandals and following Hiko back home.

Over the rest of the week, Hiko continued to feed Kenshin a high protein diet to get some flesh onto the boy's thin body. He was pleased to notice that within three days, Kenshin looked more like a real boy and less like a waif of the world. His eyes were brighter and the hollow spots on his face and frame were beginning to fill out. His skin was still pale, but perhaps that was normal.

Hiko introduced Kenshin to his regular chores which included: Chopping the firewood, gathering water from the river, washing the dishes and cups, dusting, sweeping, scrubbing the floor and doing the laundry (since he seemed to possess a knack for getting yellow stains out of bed sheets).

"New rule. Nothing to drink for one koku before you turn in," said Hiko on the third morning of Kenshin's stay at his cabin as he watched the boy scrub yet another bed sheet.

Kenshin could only nod in agreement.

Hiko also decided to teach Kenshin how to cook when he thought the boy could be trusted not to burn the cabin down.

In addition to those chores, Kenshin would be responsible for maintaining his training clothes when he got them.

"You'd better not tear them or lose them because they're all you're getting for six months," said Hiko. He would have made it a year, but he knew boys this age grew.

Looking up from washing the latest sheet to be stained, Kenshin gulped and nodded.

"When you're finished with the sheet, we'll go and see if they're ready," said Hiko.

After Kenshin hung the sheet out to dry, he followed Hiko down the mountain to the village. When they came to the tailor shop, they went inside and stepped out of their sandals before stepping up into the store. The seamstress recognized them immediately.

"Ah yes, they're all finished," she chirped. "Wait here and I'll get them for you."

Hiko nodded while Kenshin stood still beside him, violet eyes again admiring the pretty fabrics.

The seamstress returned with the clothes folded in a pack with a string tied around them so they could be carried easily. She made to hand them to Hiko, but he stopped her.

"They're not mine," he said, gesturing to Kenshin.

The seamstress handed the pack to Kenshin who took it in his arms. Hiko paid the seamstress, then turned to Kenshin.

"Well, she made them for you. Aren't you going to say something to her?" he asked.

Kenshin bowed.

"Thank you for the clothes, madam," he said so softly he could scarcely be heard.

"You're most welcome, little one," said the seamstress, not believing Kenshin any older than eight.

Kenshin's cheeks turned scarlet at being called "little one", but he decided it prudent not to rebuke her in his master's presence.

"Kenshin!" called Hiko as he turned and headed to the genkan.

Kenshin followed Hiko out of the shop, stepping into his sandals as he went. Back up the mountain they went, Kenshin finding it quite difficult to navigate with the clothes in his arms, but not daring to drop them, nor to ask for help.

Finally, blessedly, they reached the cabin. As soon as they were in, Hiko turned to his apprentice.

"Alright, Kenshin. I want you out of those rags and in your training clothes in five minutes. Your week of leisure is up as of today," said Hiko.

Kenshin frowned. He hadn't found the week too leisurely, what with Shishou making him do chores nearly from dusk till dawn. Hiko turned and strode from the cabin.

Laying down the pack and untying the string, Kenshin lifted the clothes out. There were white yukata, three gi, one blue, one gray and one dark green and three monpei, all the same shade of gray. There were also three pairs of tabi, which matched each of the gi in color. Kenshin selected the dark green for his first day.

Quickly, the boy stripped down to his loin cloth and slid his arms into the yukata and tied the sash. This done, he picked up the dark green gi and slid his arms into the sleeves and folded the left flap over the right, then stepped into the monpei, pulled them up and tied them. Next he pulled the tabi onto his feet as far up as far as they'd go. He then stepped outside the cabin, stepping into his sandals as he went.

Kenshin walked down to the training ground, conscious of how different he felt in these clothes. He'd never had new clothes in his life, having worn his brothers' outgrown clothes as a peasant and rags as a slave.

Ah, there was Shishou by the large training posts. Kenshin stood before him.

"About time. I was beginning to think you didn't know how to tie your monpei," teased Hiko.

Kenshin flushed scarlet with indignation.

"Sh-shishou!" he cried.

Hiko snorted, then looked Kenshin over with a critical eye.

"Hmmm, you still look like a stray puppy with that ponytail. C'mere," he said.

Kenshin stood before his master, who turned him around, pulled his hair out of the ponytail, smoothed it down a bit, then caught it and yanked up into a high tail.

"Oro!"

"Quit yelping. I'm almost done," said Hiko, binding Kenshin's hair in its tie. "There. I'll teach you how to do it yourself tonight."

Kenshin reached up and felt his hair, now pulled up in a high pony tail on the back of his head, just like the samurai. It gave him a queer feeling.

Hiko pulled a pair of wrist guards out from his cape. He held them out to Kenshin who took them slowly and slid his hands into them.

"They were mine as a boy. They'll serve you well," said Hiko.

"Thank you, Shishou," said Kenshin softly.

"Now, just one more thing," said Hiko, again reaching into his cape.

Hiko pulled out a sheathed katana and held it out to Kenshin. Skin turning paler than usual, the boy quailed and took a step back. Hiko blinked.

"Well, what are you just standing there for? Take it," he barked.

"A real sword?" asked Kenshin in a subdued voice.

"Of course a real sword," snorted Hiko. "What did you think you'd train with, a stick?"

Kenshin nodded dumbly.

"Baka deshi," said Hiko.

"Oro?"

Hiko glared.

"What does 'oro' mean anyway?" he asked.

"I don't know. Everyone in my village said it," explained Kenshin.

'What, were you inbred or something?' thought Hiko.

"Look Kenshin, I'll tell you this once and only once. Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu is satsujinken, a killing sword. Practicing it with shinai, bokken or anything besides a katana will defeat the purpose. As a warrior, you will be hurt and face death many times. You might as well know that at the start," said Hiko, again holding out the katana.

Kenshin reached for the katana, but his hand began to tremble so violently, he had to pull back. He looked at Hiko with shame in his face. What kind of deshi was he when he couldn't even hold a katana?

"You're thinking of those girls," said Hiko.

Kenshin started. How did Shishou always do that? Mutely, he nodded.

"That memory can either destroy you or make you stronger," said Hiko.

"I want to be strong," said Kenshin, meeting his master's gaze.

"Then use that memory as your driving force. You will get stronger so you can prevent what happened to those girls from happening to anyone else you see," said Hiko.

Kenshin nodded, eyes blazing a bit.

'Good,' thought Hiko.

"Enough talk. Training begins!" said Hiko, again holding the katana out for Kenshin.

'It's heavy,' he thought to himself as he took the sheathed weapon into his hands.

"Well, are you going to spend the day marveling at it, or actually begin learning to use it?" asked Hiko impatiently.

Kenshin looked up at his master and nodded, all the doubt gone from his eyes.

'For Kasumi-san, Sakura-san and Akane-san,' Kenshin thought as he slowly drew the polished blade from its sheath and slid the sheath into his obi.

"Now the first thing is how to hold the sword. Do as I do," said Hiko, gripping Winter Moon with his left hand at the bottom end of the hilt and his right hand at the top, just below the tsuba.

Kenshin adjusted his grip and held the katana tightly. Hiko gave Winter Moon a few basic swings and Kenshin followed suit. Although he was clumsy as any beginner would be, Hiko detected definite ability. Kenshin just needed proper training and he would go far with the blade.

For the rest of the afternoon, Hiko did the basic forms and Kenshin mimicked him. Sometimes he caught on right away, sometimes he needed some coaching.

"Not like that, baka deshi! Do it again and get it right this time!" barked Hiko.

"Yes, Shishou," said Kenshin.

He repeated the move and looked to Hiko for approval.

"Acceptable," he said while quickly moving on to the next form.

With an inward sigh, Kenshin continued. He put more strength and determination into each swing as he went. With each movement, Kenshin overcame his fear of the blade and instead began to embrace it as his way to get stronger. One day, with a sword at his side, Kenshin would defend the common people from the tyranny of stronger. His strength would be theirs!

When Hiko was certain Kenshin wasn't looking, he nodded his approval. He could sense the determined spirit in the boy's ki. With each swing, the shackles of slavishness fell away, revealing Kenshin's true spirit.

Their practice continued even as the sun slipped toward the horizon. As the sun set and the birds and woodland creatures returned to their homes, Hiko carried an exhausted Kenshin back to the cabin. The boy would get stronger and would be a worthy successor in a few years. It would be an honor for Hiko to pass the Hiten sword onto him, then he would be able to rest at last.

~~Owari~~

*Waterfalls have an erotic connotation in Japanese art.