

HARU

PART TWO

ONE

No one dared ask the teachers about Fuyuku's disappearance. Not even Itachi, who suffered most from Fuyuku's expulsion: he's been ignored and seems to be getting worse with each archery practice. He only seems to apply himself during meditation, but they all know he's far from actually meditating, all he does is think of Fuyuku, blame himself for what happened, and wish he would come back.

Will he come back?

The teachers, who have found themselves in similar situations before, have let a lot of time pass before broaching the subject. They know the disciples need time to digest this sort of decision: they tend to feel threatened, and feel solidarity with the expelled student as though he were a victim, as though any one of them could be in his place, without realizing that everyone has their own place in life.

They take advantage of a morning of apple-picking to raise the issue. They all agree that physical exertion makes the students more receptive. The exhaustion leaves their minds open.

Used to her parents letting her have her way (something she misses terribly) Natsu declares that it is too hot and asks if she can stay on the sidelines for this activity. She's tried more than once to skip her chores: be it preparing the food, gathering firewood, buying supplies in town, or cleaning the baths. If she does obey right away, it's always with reluctance. She was not born for discipline. She does not believe her destiny is in learning to pay attention, in learning observation, or limits. She has a right to everything and everyone. Picking apples?

It's Mitsu who is in charge of placing the mirror in front of her. She says:

“Have you observed what happens when a plant receives too much water? Have you observed what happens when it receives too little? Have you seen what happens when it receives water and sun in just the right amounts?”

Natsu replies, “I am not a plant.”

Mitsu continues: “You are not, this is true, but you can also rot, or dry out. The balance between what we give and take is our only chance to blossom.”

“And if I don't want to blossom?” Natsu challenges.

“You'll have to step aside and let others blossom instead.” Mitsu declares. “Come on. We have work.

And for now, you have no choice in it.”

The rest of the students and teachers walk toward the orchard, full of yellow and green apple trees. The bright sunlight has them squinting. They shade their eyes against the glare.

The end of summer always makes Haru remember the times she helped her mother to tidy the garden, picking vegetables and eating fruit together under the trees. Thinking of her mother always brings Haru a certain joy, but at the same time the vivid memories bring her the greatest sorrow.

How can two such antithetical emotions be felt so deeply and viscerally, at the exact same time? She seizes the chance to ask Mitsu about it when she falls behind from the group.

The teacher tells her, “The sun and the moon live together in the heavens, Haru. When one reigns, it is night; when the other reigns, then it is day. But the world is of the day and of the night, all at once.”

Haru thanks her for her words and speeds up. She quickly rejoins the group, and hears Takara saying: “If it's time to pick apples, then it's time. The upside to discipline is that it decides what is correct before the moment to decide arrives. It's very practical and saves you time. When you know what must be done, you don't have to think about what you would like to do. Who cares?”

Takara never feels the need to rebel. She agrees with everything before it even happens. When the others occasionally accuse her of conforming, she always replies: Doing what you don't want to do is conforming. Doing what needs to be done, even if you don't feel like it, isn't conforming, it's being sensible. She finishes with conviction: those who don't know what they want, do what they don't want to do.

Kimitake and Shizuka float more than they walk. It's only been two weeks since they confessed their love in secret, and they want to see the apple picking as a good omen, as it is the fifteenth day since getting engaged. The fruit being picked, the ripening of the seeds, the fertile earth.

Itachi responds to every suggestion with resignation. The absence of Fuyuku is just salt on the wound of Shizuka's unfortunate new status, as Itachi remains in love with her. The servant without his master is link without its chain.

Yasunari is happy ever since finding out about the expulsion of the great grandson, grandson, and son of the samurais. His constant air of superiority was unbearable to him. The expulsion allowed him to stop wondering why.

They walk down a corridor of apple trees, leaving their baskets at the end of it to carefully place their fruit in. When the baskets are full, they are allowed to leave.

Haru works quickly; she wants to be the fastest, the most efficient. Once her basket is full, she retires to her room to read, without asking permission. Later on she complains when she sees the others have been given new arrows. Mitsu tells her,

“We put them beside every basket. You were no longer there.”

“But I finished before everyone else!” She tries not to shout, but still raises her voice.

“No, you didn't finish.” Sho scolds. “You rushed to finish. You were competing.”

Kazuko calls out to get everyone's attention.

“Fuyuku was expelled seven moons ago. It seems that some of you consider this to have been too harsh. Is that right? Does someone want to ask or stay silent?”

To the astonishment of everyone, it's timid Itachi who speaks, after coughing several times.

“Teachers, I think I deserved the same fate as Fuyuku. I also snuck out, I also sold my bow, I also lost all my money. Fuyuku saved Haru's life. If he hadn't been there, I wouldn't have been able to. A good deed should make up for a bad one.”

Sho stands up and walks between the students. Then he returns to Kazuko and Mitsu's side. He closes his eyes and replies,

“Itachi, you will have to bear the responsibility for, on the one hand, saying yes to what you wanted to say no to, and on the other, blaming Fuyuku for your decisions.”

Itachi listens with his head bowed. He makes an effort not to cry. Sho continues:

“In regards to whether good actions compensate for bad ones, what do you think?”

There are murmurs, but no one dares reply. Mitsu speaks, saying:

“Does a ray of sunlight choose which tree to fall on? Does the moon, over which traveller it will light the way for?” They all shake their heads. “But don't people choose whether to do wrong?”

“We can make mistakes!” Kimitake asserts.

“Mistakes are like the force of the ray: inevitable. It's what cannot be chosen. When we can distinguish between right and wrong, and still choose to do wrong, that is not a mistake.” Kazuko clarifies. “Life gives us the capability to know ourselves better.”

“But if we don't feel like it was us that did wrong?” Natsu asks, her red hair glowing like fire.

“Then we will foreverafter be dipping from a well of justifications and revenge..” Sho says while handing out the apples they picked. “Is one of these apples worse, for having a worm inside it?”

Everyone waits silently for Sho to continue with his example, which he does after a pause, “and if our apple is the one with a worm inside, will we hide it from everyone? If we hide it from everyone's eyes, are we not giving the worm more time to eat its way from the inside, emptying it completely, so it can quickly move on to the next apple?”

They all look at the apple in their hands. Is it a mirror?

Kazuko ends the conversation there with a quiet clap of her hands. It's time for calligraphy class. The students head towards the building.

Yes, what matters is who you are. It also matters who you allow by your side.