Please Note:

This is the second part of a series. I would strongly recommend you read **Book 1: All it took was a little kindness** before reading this. The link is you can find in my profile.

Thank you for reading this,

Regards,

Jason Dutta

Chapter 11

Will you be my…

From Motoko's eyes

And so it had finished. The tension that once existed in Hinata-sou had been eradicated, for now. From that day on Keitaro and Naru emerged from their rooms less and less as they studied harder for the exams that began on the 16th of January. The mood was brighter now, as they had put their past troubles behind them to attack the coming obstacles in front of them. Nearer the day, they became more serious as the sheer task of passing seemed to be impossible, even at one point, for Naru. Mitsune, for some indeterminable reason, decided to throw a party for them the night before the first day of exams. I asked her if this was necessary. She said it was to boost their spirits before they began the exams; I suspected she wanted another reason to get drunk.

So we prepared the living room, placing streamers up and making banners. They were very surprised when they returned home, and even more surprised by the amount of wine Mitsune forced down their throats. Suu-chan was excitable, jumping around the place, sometimes onto Keitaro, making him fall in Naru on a few occasions. Her response was typically violent, however she seemed to pull her punches at the last moment. Perhaps she was still worried at hurting him further, or offending Suu-chan. Everyone was having fun when Naru and Keitaro were beginning to test each other on certain topics. It became more ridiculous as Naru expected Keitaro to answer a complex maths equation in less than a minute. Mitsune, by now well into her drunken state, realised that she had to spice it up a bit, by forcing them to strip of one item of clothing after each incorrect answer.

Chaos ensued. Suu-chan thought that this was fun and began to join in. Shinobu-chan and I just stood aside and watched this all unfold in front of us. It finally ended with Keitaro being punched out of the door by Naru who had very little clothing left on. It wasn’t until the next day that we found out that Naru and Keitaro woke up late for the first exams. We were

quite worried for them as they ran out the door, struggling to put on their shoes. We wished them luck, since they obviously needed it at that time. We prepared ourselves for the worst during the day, Shinobu-chan making some of her best meals and preparing a fabulous dinner for the two examinees. They returned home explaining how they had run into the back of a truck that they thought was a bus. Keitaro looked off colour, that is to say, totally grey, he was drained of all life. This was understood by all as a bad day for him. He tried to brighten up, saying he would do better the next day.

Off he went, back to his room to study, and the next day they managed to get up at an early time and set off for the examination hall without any problems. Upon their return, they immediately went to their rooms to compute what scores they obtained. If they were high enough, then they would be able to apply for the entrance examination to Toudai. There were no problems regarding Naru's score, however there was a slight scare over Keitaro's. Once again, Mitsune suggested a party to make him happy and to not commit suicide, though I personally doubted that Keitaro would even consider suicide, since he didn't seem the type of person to do that. Nevertheless, it was done, in the hot spring, much to Keitaro's surprise and nosebleed. We later found out that he had in fact got a good mark, angering Mitsune. I smirked, knowing that we must have misconstrued his attempts to talk to us earlier, and I was happy for him to have passed.

The next few days passed by quietly. Study time returned to its normal schedule as Keitaro found out he did actually receive 600 points when he saw it on the bulletin board on the 20th. Keitaro caused fewer acts of perversion during this time, much to everyone's surprise… and my admiration. Yet, as the days pass, I see him look towards the calendar with more dread, as if an important event was about to come up. Looking at the calendar myself, I took it upon myself to find out what was going to happen. After asking Suu-chan to borrow the use of her laptop, which was connected to the Internet, I searched for information regarding the next few days, and found out about Valentine's Day. I realised that he was worried about not receiving any chocolate, so I decided that something had to be done about this.

February 14th

Valentine's Day

Keitaro was happy. He managed to complete his superb cake, his best yet (after many years of practise). Taking it with him to the study centre, he managed to convince Shirai and Haitani that a girl made it for him. They kept on at him, asking who made it for him, yet he wouldn't tell. For the first time in years, they were jealous of him; they had received some cards and a few chocolates, but nothing on the scale that Keitaro had received. He cherished this moment, for it was one of the few times he felt glad that he was the centre of attention for once, and not for being a sad loner, pining over the past. He returned home in high spirits, walking up the long climb to Hinata-sou.

He was surprised to meet with no one at the entrance. Mystified, he walked inside warily, but saw no one about. Walking sullenly to his room, clutching the box that contained the

cake, he almost bumped into Naru as she was walking out of his room.

He was confused. "Naru? What's…"

"Nothing Keitaro… I… I was just looking for something." Naru interrupted him quickly. "It's not important… I didn’t find it…"

"But…" Keitaro was left standing there as Naru walked off immediately, not allowing him any time to speak again.

Walking into his room he walked to his furnace table, still laid out, placed the cake on it, and noticed a small parcel already on it. Picking it up he noticed a note on it that said one word, or name to be precise. "Naru". Opening it slowly, he was shocked to find that it was a small box of chocolates. He smiled, glad that she remembered what day it was. He never for a moment suspected that someone from inside Hinata-sou would give him chocolate, believing that his acts of perversion against most of the residents might mean they don’t want to even know him. *Aah well, one chocolate for the day isn't too bad. Of course, it is the first chocolate I have ever received from a girl, and Naru at that…* Keitaro was interrupted from his thoughts by a rapid series of knocks on his door. Standing up he opened the door, only to see no one there. Confused, he peeked his head out looking both left and right, no one in sight.

"Heeey Keitaro!"

Looking up suddenly, he saw Suu-chan balancing herself on the upper beam of his door. She began to fall elegantly and decided to flip herself into his room via the beam. Walking back a few steps, he tried to catch her, only to fail miserably as she aimed higher than usual, landing on his face. Keitaro fell backwards, landing on the floor with Suu-chan still on his face. She got up skipping over his prone body as he slowing sat up, blood pouring from his nose.

"Oneechan? Why are you so excitable today?" He stemmed the flow of blood by putting bits if tissue paper into his nostrils.

"Oh… no reason…" She paused for a moment, placing her hands behind her back. Unexpected pouncing forwards, she launched onto Keitaro, gripping his back with her legs, and began to force a bar of chocolate down his throat.

"Gogikan!" Oneechan when spoken through a ton of chocolate

Keitaro was unable to clear his airways quickly enough to consume the large amount of chocolate Suu-chan 'gave' him. After jumping off, Suu-chan watched him curiously as he

finished the chocolate leaving large messy marks on the front of his jumper and his mouth when he tried to protest. *Why am I feeling hot all of a sudden? Is it because of the way oneechan is looking at me? No… that cannot be… well, what could it… Oh no…*

"AAAGH! WATER! " Keitaro ran around his room in a panic, smoke billowing out of his mouth. Appearing instantly at different areas of his room, rummaging through his cupboards looking for something.

Finally opening the satchel he takes to the study centre every day, he finally found the water bottle he had bought a day ago, forgetting he had it in his bag this whole while. Cracking open the seal on his lid, he dropped the cap, finishing the entire bottle in a few gulps before the cap hit the floor. Finally having soothed his tongue and throat, which now were in a state of recovery from the burning sensation he experienced, he spoke.

"What was that oneechan?" He coughed; his throat was slightly raw. *Maybe the heat of whatever I ate burned away a layer of my throat….*

"It was Valentine's chocolate!" Suu-chan replied enthusiastically, walking over to him and holding out a hand to Keitaro, who accepted it demurely, was surprised by her strength when she pulled him up with no struggle.

Jumping up onto his back, she began to rub her face alongside his, making him squirm a little, but by now he was used to it. Not wanted her to ask about the box that contained the cake, Keitaro walked out of his room. He was about pass Mitsune's room when she beckoned for him to come into her room. Curious, he did so; Suu-chan also pondered over these events. Mitsune was sitting there reading one of her philosophical books again in her comfortable chair. Placing a bookmark on the selected page, a small figure of Katsuragi Misato jutting out of the book. Looking at him, she smiled and stood up, pulling her chest out further, causing him to begin to falter and sway.

"Do you want it?" She asked simply.

"Wh… WHAT!" He was shocked. There were many images running through his head at that time of what she meant exactly.

"I think I'll give it to you." Mitsune began to walk over to Keitaro, who was now backing away from her, fearful in case Mitsune were to try anything.

"Keitaro! Be strong!" Suu-chan cheered him on, holding one arm up.

Deciding to not wimp out again, he stopped, and waited for whatever Mitsune was going to do to him. *What is she going to do? I have a bad feeling about this…*Mitsune took her time

in walking, swaying her hips seductively, her top accentuating the sheer size and shape of her breasts. Opening her eyes, she looked straight into his eyes. *Oh no… she's looking at me like that again… this can't be good.* She thrust out a fist, and Keitaro shielded his eyes from her, hands up in front of him.

"Ooooh." Suu- chan cooed appreciatively, making Keitaro lower his guard. Looking at Mitsune, he saw in her now open palm, a minuscule present.

"Happy Valentines Day Keitaro." She spoke sincerely, and didn't take her eyes off him for a moment. *Well he has been kind to me in past few months; I might as well give him something in return…*

Keitaro meanwhile was stunned, accepting the gift in a stupor, Mitsune of all people he did not expect to receive anything from. He was touched by this act, opening the gift to find a very tiny amount of chocolate. Frowning as he saw her features resume their fox-like attributes, he reared back as she lurched forward, producing a catalogue of some kind.

"Well, now that you have the chocolate, on March 14th I would like this jacket, these shoes, all of these bottles of sake…"

"Hey! It doesn’t work that way Kitsune!" Tears streamed out of Keitaro's eyes as he stopped her from continuing her list of demands. Nevertheless she ignored him and continued on. Keitaro took this chance to slip out of her room, Mitsune shouting down the corridor after him. Suu-chan turned her head towards the rapidly decreasing figure and waved goodbye to her.

Breaking off a little piece of the already tiny chocolate that Mitsune bought he chewed on it in thought. Sensing Suu-chan was hungry by the amount of saliva she was drooling on the back of his neck and shoulders, Keitaro handed her the remainder, which she wolfed down immediately. Sighing, he realised that he had nowhere to go at that moment, so he decided to wander around the grounds of Hinata-sou. Suu-chan jumped off his back, running about Keitaro. She watching the birds that scattered as she ran into them with fascination, as if she had never seen such things. In all the time that Keitaro had been at Hinata-sou, he had never had time to appreciate its location. Looking down the long staircase to the town, he saw the trees that usually sprouted sakura blossoms, still bare from the bitter winter. Thankfully, he noted that some of them were beginning to bloom. *It's a bit early this year, but there's still much time until they all bloom.* Walking around the side of Hinata-sou, he saw Suu-chan looking at the abandoned part of the inn with great curiosity. Turning, she saw Keitaro and started to skip towards him.

"Keitaro! What is that building there?" Her eyes were wide open, stars glittering inside them, as if she uncovered a hidden treasure.

"I'm not sure…" Keitaro strolled over to the bridge that connected the building to the back

of Hinata-sou, Suu-chan following close behind.

The walkway was in a total state of disrepair; it had not been touched for many a year. Cobwebs were present on most of the hard to reach sections, some spiders flitting from one area to another. Keitaro grimaced, noticing one spider begin to consume some prey caught in its web. The walkway itself appeared to be fairly rickety, planks that were showing definite signs of wood rot and damp, their lamination having worn off a while back, when it was still in its prime. There was even some moss growing in one corner, by a puddle of what Keitaro assumed to be water, but couldn't tell by its colour. At the far end was the boarded-up entrance to the building. The wood here appeared to be sturdier than the one the walkway was made of. A sign with the universal sign for 'No Entry' was on it, the Kanji saying that the building was dangerous.

"Oneechan," Keitaro turned to Suu-chan, who looked up at him, slightly afraid, "all I know about this building is that Haruka-san said that we shouldn't enter it. It is very old inside, and could collapse any minute."

"But why was it closed in the first place, and why the increased fortifications?" Although replying innocently, Keitaro sweatdropped. *Not much gets past this girl, especially when it comes to military style defences.*

"I don’t know, and I don’t think we should pester Haruka-san about it too much." Of course Keitaro knew the full truth about why that particular part of the inn was shut away permanently, but he felt that by divulging that information to Suu-chan, she would go into overdrive and try anything to get in there.

"Suu-chan." He knelt down to her level and faced her, eye-to-eye. "Promise me that you won't go in there ever. Even if your curiosity about this place grows, do not try and get in. Do this for me, for I don’t want you to get hurt."

The young princess stared into his brown eyes, recognising the seriousness in them, and that he wasn't joking this time. Smiling delicately, she nodded, bobbing her head up and down in small movements. Returning her smile, Keitaro patted her on her head, messing up her golden strands of hair.

"Come on, lets go back inside, there's still a lot I have to do today." Picking her up, hefting her onto his side, where she then took the initiative and held him herself, arms around his neck. Noticing that almost an hour had gone by on his watch, he was truly amazed by the power of the old inn, the way in which time seemed to speed up there when compared to the rest of Hinata-sou. He knew that he was right to keep Suu-chan away from there, mystical forces were at work here, and this was not a good sign. A lone figure watched the two walk around the front of Hinata-sou, standing in her favourite spot, the Shinkan, where one can dry their clothes in the open air. Seeing Keitaro walk down the short staircase to the entrance, Suu-chan dozing off on his shoulder, Shinobu-chan began to feel her heart break. *I can't give this to him now, he is with Suu-chan. I know that he has received*

chocolate from at least Kitsune-san, so my chocolate won't be as special as his first chocolate. Clutching her gift tightly to her chest, she breathed in deeply, letting a single tear fall before turning around to resume hanging her towels. Once she had done so, and picked up the dry ones she had put up earlier in the day, she wrapped her present in it so that no one would notice, and went back inside.

Later that evening

Dinner was unusually tense. Although Keitaro had not managed to fondle any of the residents without their permission that day, the atmosphere was very hostile. It seemed to confuse everyone, eyes flitting from one person sitting at the table to the other. However, it was all due the unnatural quietness of one young girl, the self appointed chef of Hinata-sou, Shinobu-chan. Though no one thought that it could be her, no one asked her about what was troubling her, if they noticed at all. It was almost as if she expressed her sadness in her cooking, thus making the meal itself more depressing, which would then lead to hostility. After the meal Shinobu-chan quietly began to pick up the plates and cutlery to do the washing up. Suu-chan bounced up in front of her, wanting to help, but Shinobu-chan politely refused, which puzzled Suu-chan a little. Once she had finished washing up, she had finally picked up the courage to give Keitaro her gift, shaking her fists determinedly.

Walking to her room, she uncovered her gift from within her closet and began to walk to Keitaro's room. However, as fate would have it, the man in question had also decided to dispose of the cake that he made, and was planning on going down to Haruka-san's place to give it to her. *Well, she might think that I made it for her, which should be a nice thing, seeing as she isn't with anyone at the moment. Come to think of it, she never told me anything about her past…* Keitaro decided not to pry into his aunt's life just yet. He opened his door carrying the cake in his hands, and saw Shinobu-chan looking at him shocked, holding a gift in her hands. Blushing profusely at staring, she shut her eyes tightly and bowed to him, holding out her gift.

"S… Sempai," *If only I had a minute or two to prepare myself in front of his door…* "T… This is for…" She opened her eyes only to see her magnificent cake Keitaro was holding. *Wh… Who made that for him? Whoever it was must truly love him to make such a beautiful cake.* She turned around, tears welling up in her eyes. *I can't possibly give this pathetic thing to him now that he has that one…* Before Shinobu-chan knew it, she was running, where to she didn't know. Her tears fell as she ran, leaving behind a glistening trail momentarily suspended in the air. Her vision all blurry, she didn't notice as she ran by Motoko who was lying in wait around the corner. Turning quickly after Shinobu-chan passed her, she walked briskly towards Keitaro, still standing there looking at fleeing figure, and now focussing on the rapidly approaching one.

"Keitaro," She sighed, once she had reached him, "Shinobu-chan was trying to give you a gift, I noticed her preparing it today whilst you were at the study centre." Keitaro was about to reply when Motoko raised a hand to stop him. "I know that it was not your fault, but you must go to her quickly."

Nodding Keitaro walked back into his room and placed the cake on his furnace table, to dispose of it later. Leaving his room, he watched as Motoko vanished upstairs to her room he assumed. He began to think. *I had no idea Shinobu-chan would do something so nice for me, I have to see her. Now where would she be…?* Remembering her favourite place in Hinata-sou, he began to make his way up to the Shinkan. Climbing up the final staircase to the roof, he was not at all surprised to see Shinobu-chan standing on the edge of the roof, looking over the town, facing away from him.

"Shinobu-chan…" He spoke towards her, and noticed her shudder. Seeing more tears falling from her face, he knew that this meant a lot to her. "I'm climbing up there, don't move now…" Doing so, he began to walk the narrow ridge towards the junior high student, and gently laid a hand on her shoulder. *She's shivering… I hope that it's due to the cold and not to me.* "Please let me see your face…"

Turning slowly, she angled her head up towards the face of the man that she admires, to see that he was looking back at her with care. Keitaro could see the unshed tears in her eyes as she refused to let them fall in front of him at this time.

"Gomen Shinobu-chan, I did not mean to upset you. Please, let's go inside to sort this out…" H waited as she nodded quietly, making some of tears fall from their confinement.

They began to walk away from the edge of the roof. However, when trying to walk with her slippers, Shinobu-chan began to lose her balance. Placing one foot over the other, she began to fall, letting out a yelp. Catching Keitaro's attention he immediately lunged for her. Grabbing her arm he tried to bring her towards himself, but also lost balance. Falling forward, he managed to bear the brunt of the impact by twisting himself, hitting the roof first whilst Shinobu-chan fell on top of him. Her heartbeat began to rise as she noticed her awkward position, blushing profusely as she picked herself up. Keitaro also pushed himself up, wiping off the dirt that remained on his clothing.

He smiled at her, "Remind me to clean the roof once in a while, it seems to be dirty." He turned to walk on, but instead tripped over a loose tile, and began to freefall again, only this time over the edge of the roof.

"Sempai!" Dropping her gift to the ground Shinobu-chan ran over to the edge, crouched and gripped the edge of the tiling to peer over the edge.

"Waaah!" She was shocked backwards; Keitaro was still hanging there, clutching a lower portion of the tiling staring up at Shinobu-chan with a worried expression. "S… Sempai?" Her eyes were welling up again, "Do you need any h… help?" She yelped as his left hand suddenly broke a tile, sending it clattering to the ground, he quickly regained his posture on another tile.

"Erm… I'm not sure Shinobu-chan." He maintained a steady voice, but secretly was

sweatdropping bucketloads.

How on Earth am I going to get out of this one alive? I don't think I ever fell from a height like this before. He could feel the tiles behind his fingers beginning to crumble away.

"I think I'll be fin-AAAAAH!" The tiles broke leaving Keitaro momentarily hanging in the air looking into Shinobu-chan's eyes.

"NO! SEMPAI!" She reached out a hand too late, never mind the fact that she would've been too weak to support his weight. Her tears fell as he began to dwindle into oblivion.

Keitaro knew he might not survive the fall as the ground hurtled before him. *Well, okaasan, you were right after all; applying for Toudai would kill me in the end. Gomen everyone. Motoko-chan…* He closed his eyes. He thought he heard someone shout out below him, but what shocked him was the sudden rush of wind around him. It impacted with a certain force, pushing him slightly upwards from the ground. Looking around he saw that he was now moving almost parallel to the ground, straight towards a tree. Striking it, he was cushioned by the amount of branches and leaves, and fell to the earth relatively lightly. Spitting out some dirt that got into his mouth, he fumbled around the ground for his glasses, which had fallen off. His eyesight was very bad, and in the dim light he was even more unlikely to find them. Seeing a bright object in front of him, he moved his hand to it and noticed that it was warm before it moved away. *Could it be…?* He looked up but could only see a blur that seemed to get consistently closer to him. Closing his eyes again, he felt the icy cold metal frame of his glasses press against the sides of his head, and once they were secure behind his ears and resting on his nose, he reopened his eyes.

"Motoko-chan…" She helped him up to his feet, brushing away more loose dirt on his shoulders. After seeing that he was reasonably presentable, they walked inside together, side-by-side.

Shinobu-chan was nowhere to be seen, but they could both hear the sounds of running and slippers padding softly down the stairs. Looking they saw the young girl sneak a coy look around the corner. Happy to see him unharmed, she ran to him, tears of joy in her arms.

"Sempai!" Before she knew it, she was hugging him close. Keitaro took this in his stride; he had noticed Shinobu-chan to get emotional over any event he does. Motoko watched the scene carefully, and sweatdropped as it lasted around five minutes. However, she was feeling envious of Shinobu-chan. *Why is she showing such an obvious sign of emotion in front of others? Hugging him like that? If only I was her…* She put a hand to her mouth without both of them noticing. *What am I thinking? Am I jealous of Shinobu-chan? It is just a simple hug… Or do I want to be held close by Keitaro? To be loved by him…? I will have to meditate more over this.* Shinobu-chan snapped her eyelids open, and knew that she had made a spectacle of herself, in front of Motoko and Keitaro no less. Stepping back, blushing so furiously that Keitaro thought he could feel the heat from it, she bowed three

times, saying 'Gomen' each time. Looking up over to Motoko, he noticed her expression was warm. She glanced over in his direction and nodded. He walked over to Shinobu-chan and knelt down to her level. She was still bowed down.

"Arigatou Shinobu-chan. I… liked that hug." She looked up at him quickly as he continued, "For your information Motoko-chan broke my fall. It's her you should thank."

She looked over to Motoko, who shook her head, "There is no need to thank me Shinobu-chan, I did what had to be done."

"Shinobu-chan…" Keitaro caught her attention once again, "What was it you wanted to give me? I never did get it in the end."

"Umm," She lost her train of thought, but remembered that she was still holding it in her right hand, "Here it is sempai." She handed it over to him.

Keitaro got up and placed it on a nearby table, the two girls following him. He opened the gift, unwrapping the ribbon around it to reveal a large chocolate heart with 'Tokyo U acceptance' written in Kanji in white icing. The only problem was that the heart was now broken in two, straight down the middle. Shinobu-chan began to panic, her eyes swirling around losing focus as she moved her arms rapidly up and down. Keitaro put her worries at ease by beginning to eat some of it.

"Mmm, it's good Shinobu-chan!" He broke off another piece and handed it to her, watching her eat it quietly. He continued when she finished eating, "It's probably the best chocolate I've tasted all day." He smiled to reaffirm that statement, making her smile back in return only to make a puzzled look.

"But, whose cake was that that you…?"

"I made it." He replied shamefully, "I made it to show off to my friends because I never receive any genuine chocolates from a girl. If you won't mind, do you want to have it?" She seemed shocked. "I was going to throw it out now, but you caught me just as I was about to do that, so I think I should pay you back for helping out with the cooking at Hinata-sou by giving you my cake, as a Valentine."

She felt her body tingle. She had never been complimented by anyone like that, let alone Keitaro. She nodded after a moment, afraid to speak since her vocal chords tightened a notch. They walked up to his room, Keitaro continuing to nibble away at her chocolate. He opened the door and handed her the cake. He said that if she couldn't finish it, then she could do what she wanted with it. Wishing her a good night as she left, he was about to go to sleep when Motoko held his hand.

"Come with me Keitaro." She walked on upstairs to her room when she opened the door allowing him in before shutting it again. Kneeling at her shrine momentarily, she got up again and walked to Keitaro, who was standing around nervously.

"Motoko-chan, I can't stay up too late, if have to get up early to revise."

"I understand Keitaro, this will only take a moment." He nodded and waited for her to continue, "You must realise that there was very little time to prepare, and I'm not as accomplished a cook as Shinobu-chan, but…" She held out a gift that she was keeping behind her back, "this is for you."

Keitaro accepted it, stunned. *She would do this for me? I had no idea of this, or her feelings…* He opened it to find a conservative box of chocolates. Lifting up the lid he saw that they looked delicious, caramel-filled, milk, plain, white, all different types of chocolates. He looked up at her, mouth agape.

"You didn't have to do this for me you know Motoko-chan…"

"It was merely courteous of me, seeing as I live here with you…" She tried to wave it off unsuccessfully.

"I don't think so, you went over the mark for me here. Nevertheless, I am extremely happy that you have done this for me." He smiled.

Closing the lid, he walked towards her, noticing but choosing to ignore her face that was now becoming more panicked. *What is he going to do? He seems very determined…* She closed her eyes, half-fearful, half-anxious. Keitaro moved closer to her and held her left shoulder gently…

He kissed her lightly on her cheek.

He pulled back to see Motoko in shock; her heart seemed to stop for a short while. Her mind was racing. *What did he do? Did he kiss me? No it cannot be, he wouldn't do that… or would he? Does he love me? Do I love him?*

"Till tomorrow Motoko-chan." She returned to reality to see Keitaro leave her room quietly. She couldn't even know how long she had been standing there for. Deciding that sleep was the only thing she should think about for now, she promptly undressed and crawled into her futon, ready for the next day. *Keitaro… I wonder…*

Keitaro meanwhile was facing a similar dilemma. *Why did I kiss her? Do I love her? I have*

no idea as to her true feelings for me, if any exist. Why was she still in shock though and not shouting out? Was that good or bad? He returned to his room, still unsure as to their relationship now, would things be different the next day, or would they become a couple? He chose to not focus on that right now and gave in to the sleep he had been holding out on for a while for.

Author's Notes

Finally, the Lent term has ended, it is 4am here (GMT), and thanks to my great ability of telling the time, I have managed to give you this update… many weeks late TT oh well… Hope you enjoy it.

You may also notice that this is in the second book, I'm changing my numbering scheme now, approximately 10 chapters to s book. I foresee around 8-9 such books in the manga timeline, and then a new series, (short, only one book long I think) of the time after the manga. Depending upon my sources for obtaining the English volume 13 (I cannot access FTP's outside my firewall here on campus), I hope to have all 8-9 books completed within two years. Man… that's a long time, I'll see if I can get some immense amounts done during Easter, Summer and any free time I have.

The title is temporary; I just need to post it so that I can get opinions. Please, feel free to review this fic, having zero reviews would depress me ;

Chapter 12

The time is now…

From Motoko's eyes

It has arrived, the dreaded day of the exams. Keitaro has been buried in his studies, as has Narusegawa for the last few days. The residents of Hinata-sou knew to keep quiet at a time like this, even Mitsune stopped having spontaneous parties. Suu-chan and I decided to check up on Keitaro every day to make sure that he didn't go insane from the pressure. He seemed to be relatively content, smiling nervously at me, until he started panicking on the 22nd, thankfully I managed to bring some sense into him, striking him lightly to get his mind back on track. We left him to it, only to find him passed out and drooling in his room the next day. Mitsune and Shinobu-chan were taking care of Narusegawa, and were happy to report that she was doing fine, her nerves not yet at breaking point.

The day before the exam, Keitaro has returned to his usual self, although still a little tense. He wasn’t able to finish his dinner, his stomach unable to digest any more through nerves. Narusegawa gave him some pills to calm himself afterwards, which I felt was a nice touch. He had taken a few pills and decided to walk up to the Shinkan to watch over the town at night. I decided to follow him.

Shinkan

Late evening

Keitaro was sitting there, on the edge of the roof, looking over the town below, the lamps illuminating the streets and homes with lights on inside making it look serene. Motoko walked up the stairs and then along the roof towards him.

"You know… I wonder if I will do well in these exams…" He spoke up suddenly, as if sensing her. He turned his head slightly, but still not facing her. "Please sit Motoko-chan."

Walking up to him, she did so, sitting beside him. "Do you not feel confident about tomorrow?"

Keitaro took his time in replying. "I'm not sure really… I've been revising for a while now, and this will be the third time in taking the exam…"

"But surely," she interrupted, "you must understand a little bit about how the exams work, considering you've done the same ones in the past."

"That's true is suppose…" He still sounded down.

"How does Naru feel about tomorrow?" Motoko had the feeling that she could predict his reply.

"I'm guessing that she will have no problems with it, she did get the National First a short while back. The only sign that I saw of her being worried about this exam is the amount of pills she ate earlier." Keitaro remembered how he face-faulted, collapsing onto the ground as he saw her polish off the entire container in a few gulps.

Motoko was silent, she didn't know what else to say. She had no inkling of what they had gone through in the last few months, let alone what Keitaro went through in the two years previous to this. All her life she was devoted to practising her kendo skills, and some more advanced techniques from the Shinmeiryu. She didn't spend a lot of time studying; she did what was required for her school and nothing more.

"The exams last for two days from what you told me, but you have not told me when do you find out the final results."

"We have to go to Toudai on March the tenth." He remembered the procedure exactly, seeing as he'd done the same thing for two years running, "There they will post up the Student ID's of those students who have passed."

"I see," she concluded, "so if your ID is not on the lists, then you won't have been accepted into Toudai."

Keitaro nodded and sighed. "The same as the last two years…"

He began to look at the city, but instead his eyes were focussing on the pain in the past. Motoko saw this, and began to feel a strange unfamiliar burning sensation in her heart. *His sadness… it's so overwhelming, it hurts me to see him like this…* Reaching out she enclosed one of his hands in both of hers. This action made him look towards her face, now displaying a compassionate smile. Before they realised it they were moving closer together, the distance between their lips rapidly decreasing. They looked into each other's eyes, a blush spreading across both of their cheeks. Keitaro half-closed his eyes and continued forwards. *She's so beautiful, Kami forgive me for what I'm about to do.* Motoko stopped where she was and shut her eyes. *I can't help myself, he's so gentle to me, and it makes me feel happy…* They were about to touch lips before…

"Motokooo!"

The energetic voice of Suu-chan echoed over the sounds of feet running up the steps to

the Shinkan. Pulling away sharply, the two managed to avoid an embarrassing moment in front of the little girl. Turning their faces away from each other, they tried to act nonchalant, despite their reddening faces saying the opposite. As Suu-chan emerged over the boundary, Motoko stood up and walked over to her.

"What is it Suu-chan?" She enquired.

"Nothing," came the innocent reply, "just wondering where you got to."

Seeing Suu-chan's eyes droop a little bit she understood. "You're sleepy aren't you?"

The younger girl nodded, making Motoko play with her hair. "Then I'll be down in a second so you can stay with me overnight."

"Okay!" She bounded off, down the stairs to change.

Motoko turned around to look at Keitaro, who watched all this in silence. "Keitaro, I have to go now, Suu-chan awaits."

He stood up and walked down the slanted roof to her. "I know Motoko-chan." He smiled at her and held her hand. "Arigatou for being with me tonight, it was special."

Motoko blushed again and smiled back at him, "I felt the same," She paused for a moment, "but now we must leave, I need to be with Suu-chan and you require rest to survive tomorrow."

"Yeah… I guess so…" He put his spare hand behind his head, taking one last look at the town below. "Well, it wouldn't hurt us to walk in together now would it?"

"No it wouldn't," She appreciated this innovation by him, "I for one would like that."

Walking down the steps together they continued to hold hands. However once they entered Hinata-sou, Keitaro released his grip, they both agreed that if the residents saw them holding hands together it would result in disaster for everyone. They waved goodbye to each other as Keitaro walked along the corridor to his room and Motoko returned upstairs to her room.

Day 1 of Final Stage Toudai exams

Thursday, February 25th

Early morning

Dawn broke, the sun casting a red-orange glow over the town. One of the first places in the town to receive it was Hinata-sou. Curtains drawn in most rooms meant the sun didn't disturb the sleeping residents there. It wasn't just two people in Hinata-sou who were particularly worried about the coming day; there were many possible candidates who also had the same worry, the coming exams. Almost all of them would have to go to Toudai to take the tests, others who cannot attend being allowed to take their exams in their home towns under strict supervision. The next two days would decide the way their lives panned out for the rest of their lives. The birds began to chirp on the grounds of Hinata-sou, singing a song to welcome in the new day as the sun rose. The residents soon began to wake up one after another…

Room 201

Keitaro continued to kiss the neck of his love, his lips making their way up to plant a kiss on her mouth.

"S… Sempai…" Shinobu-chan was still shocked by his boldness, the way he walked into her room and woke her this way. She couldn't help but moan with pleasure.

"Shinobu-chan…" He pulled back to look into her eyes, "You do know that you are the only one for me." She gasped as he continued, "From the moment I first saw you, I knew then, I fell in love with you." He winked at her, "Why else do you think I made you that cake for Valentine's Day?"

Her face turned bright red, "I… I had no idea sempai…"

"No," he interrupted, "call me Keitaro."

"Okay… Keitaro." She beamed at him, the first time she smiled fully in a long while.

I can't believe this has finally happened, Keitaro-sempai has said that he loves me. I'm so happy right now… It's almost as if this were a dream…

"Mmm sempai…" She hugged her teddy bear closely, making its head bulge out from her hug, dangerously near to tearing it off the body. She woke up groggily, and peered through her eyelids to see not Keitaro but her stuffed toy there. She sighed; it was all too fantastic to be real. Wiping the sleep out of her eyes she promptly got dressed out of her flowery

pyjamas into her school uniform. Her dream began to vanish in her mind as they do to all people, but she remained warm the whole day, it giving a sense of comfort to her that, some day, anything is possible. She cleaned her teeth, brushed her hair and then walked downstairs to cook some breakfast for everyone else.

Room 205

Mitsune got up, stretching her arms lazily; looking around for any clothes around her room. Rummaging through the random piles she had on her sofa, chair and even by the window. Smelling a few of them, she smiled to herself and picked those that weren't too far-gone. Changing quickly she then walked to the window. Looking left she could see the town, but the sun began to blind her.

Drawing back she rubbed her eyes to get rid of the spots that were in her vision and opened her eyes to see they had disappeared. Keeping her eyes open she began to think. *This is it; all their time studying will have to be put to the test. They have to pass… I can't imagine what will happen if they fail. Naru would be upset, but Keitaro? All he has known is failure; there's no telling what he might do if the test goes awry.*

Looking in her mirror she absent-mindedly glided the brush through her hair, still thinking. She left soon after for breakfast.

Room 304

The alarm went off, resulting in a hand hitting it over the top almost immediately from under the futon. Another alarm went off a few seconds later, this time at the other end of the room. The hand fumbled around, picked up the now inactive alarm and threw it in the general direction of the sound, striking lucky when it went quiet. A mobile phone went off on the furnace table, playing the soothing tune known as Komm Suesser Tod. Sighing, Naru got out of the futon and picked up her phone, looking at it for a few moments before turning off the alarm.

She looked in the mirror. *Kami, I look terrible…* Her hair was all tangled and frayed at the edges; she looked like she hadn't got any sleep. Nevertheless, after a few minutes of changing and washing up her face she looked bright as ever. Picking up her prescription glasses she breathed on the lenses and wiped them clean with her jumper. As they glinted in the sunlight that reflected into her room, she put them on, closing her eyes for a second before reopening to adjust her sight quicker. Picking up her bag that she packed last night, satisfied that everything was done, she left her room.

Room 302

Motoko woke up earlier than usual. Looking around she saw Suu-chan nuzzling at her arm

affectionately, still asleep. Petting her cheek, Motoko managed to wake up the princess without startling her, looking at her face more clearly she saw that Suu-chan hadn't cried the whole night, which odd as it may seem was a good thing. Suu-chan yawned like a cat, her mouth growing immensely wide for a few moments before she stretched her limbs out.

"Suu-chan…" Motoko began.

"Yeah Motoko?"

"Remember what we did the last time there was an important exam?"

"Oh…" She recalled the time when the initial exams were taken two weeks before Christmas. "Yeah, I do."

"Well, we must pray again for their luck."

She nodded, and once again they changed into their usual clothes, Suu-chan in her school uniform, Motoko in her gi and hakama. They sat opposite each other, a table bearing burning incense in between them. They sat like that for a few minutes, Motoko saying some words followed by Suu-chan, then a period of complete silence. After a time that Motoko chose, they got up and left the room for breakfast.

Room 204

Kanrinrin's Room

Still snoozing away was Keitaro, the typical bubble out of one nostril expanding and shrinking with his breaths. His alarm went off, making his bubble burst. Sitting up he switched the alarm off and yawned loudly, scratching his head afterwards. Putting on his glasses he went to his mirror. Tufts of hair were sticking out at random point on his head, and now matter how much he pat them they wouldn't go down. He had some small bags under his eyes and the dreaded morning breath as well when he yawned again. Cleaning himself up he looked much better. Then he looked at his bag.

"AAAGH!"

He started running around the room looking for his stationary and other things he thought would be important in an exam. After finally stuffing it all into his bag he combed his hair down again, after it had stood up with fear. Having one more look around his room to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, he left, walking downstairs to the dining area.

Dining area

Everyone was there, ready to eat, Shinobu-chan made some healthy brain food for Naru and Keitaro so that it may help them out in their forthcoming exams. The others were there to see how the two examinees were handling it all. Naru appeared to be outwardly calm whereas Keitaro looked a little jittery; it seemed his nerves would shatter soon. After eating Keitaro glanced at his watch and looked to Naru, who nodded.

"Okay, it's time for us to go now…" He hefted the satchel onto his shoulder and both he and Naru stood up.

"Wish us luck please." Naru smiled nervously.

"Well," Mitsune stood up proudly, "Try your best, and Keitaro…" She winked at him, "Don't kill yourself if you fail."

He sweatdropped. *I guess I can always try not to fail…* "O… Okay Kitsune."

Shinobu-chan piped up, "G… Good luck on your exams Naru-sempai, Keitaro-sempai. I hope you pass." She bowed slightly to finish it off, eliciting a smile from both of the examinees.

"Hey!" Suu-chan jumped up in front of them, "Hope you two have a long life together."

"Wh… WHAT?" They both yelled at the same time, their faces turning red.

"Suu!" Shinobu-chan waved her arms about frantically, "They're going to an exam, not getting married!"

"Aah… Is that all?" She put a finger to her mouth in mock fascination; she then turned to them and giggled to herself. "Good luck, go for it!" She then kicked Keitaro in the face, whereupon she clarified in a wink, "For luck Keitaro!"

Motoko walked up to them, Keitaro straightened up a little and stared at her eyes. "Naru, Keitaro, I wish you luck in this test, not just for Toudai, but for yourselves. Success is not forever, and failure is not fatal. Remember this, we will cheer for you either way."

"A… Arigatou Motoko-chan." Naru managed to thank her despite her numbness at the wisdom in the words spoken. "We will remember it."

Keitaro just looked at her and smiled, looking at her eyes he saw her smile back with them even though it didn't translate to the rest of her face. He knew that she still didn't like to show any form of happiness in public, except to Suu-chan. Turning around he faced them all one more time before waving once, then he set off down the steps with Naru.

Fare well Keitaro. Do your best, that is all one can do. Motoko turned around to go back inside, Suu-chan jumping on her back. Shinobu-chan went to do the washing up, and surprisingly Mitsune, who rarely did any housework of any description, helped her. Motoko dropped off Suu-chan at the door to her room, who jumped in enthusiastically, turning to face Motoko with her hands behind her back she waited.

"I will see you at lunch Suu-chan, behave until then little one." She smiled at her.

"Roger!" she said whilst putting her right hand to her head in a military style salute, "See you then Motoko!" She beamed at her, closing her eyes, as the door closed automatically. Quirking an eyebrow at the door's behaviour Motoko returned to her room.

Sighing, she picked up the incense from earlier and placed it in her shrine. It was still smouldering from earlier; the thin rivulets of smoke spreading the smell of roses combined with cinnamon throughout the room. Taking a deep breath she savoured the smell, it reminded her of home, back with her sister. Picking up her katana she went up to the Shinkan, assumed a stance, and began to train.

The steps of Hinata-sou

Keitaro glanced at Naru. She was making him more nervous by the minute due to the way in which she looked through her flashcards. Thinking to herself that enough was enough, she closed them and put them back into her bag. Looking over she saw that Keitaro was staring at her.

"What are you looking at!" Her face looked angry.

"Oh… nothing sorry…" He turned away, looking down the steps in a downcast manner. Naru was a little surprised; she would've expected him to act in a more panicked way.

"What's wrong Keitaro?" She looked at him with good-natured eyes.

He looked over at her and chuckled slightly, "Nothing much, it's just that…" He paused, thinking for what to say, "… well you seem to have the passing grade already Naru. You're very confident."

"Me!" She put a hand to her chest and stopped walking, causing him to stop as well to look at her. "Keitaro, I have more nerves about this exam than you could imagine!"

Keitaro was taken aback at this. Naru walked down a few steps to be level with him. "I've never sat an exam this important in my life before, so I'm very worried about the end result." She continued to walk down the steps with Keitaro by her side. "So you see Keitaro, you have me at a disadvantage here because unlike you, I have no experience regarding such an exam like this one."

They both looked at each other, they eyes connecting for a split second. "Even though you weren't able to pass the first two times, you would probably stand a better chance of passing this year than me who is taking it for the first time." She smiled at him, "Don't be so hard on yourself, like Motoko-chan said, 'We will cheer for you either way', so if you pass or fail it won't matter, you'll always be Keitaro."

Tears were brimming at his eyes after she said those words. "A… Arigatou Naru, that was so kind!" He then hugged her, much to Naru's shock and embarrassment, as her face turned red.

"Hey… HEY!" She started to feel claustrophobic, "If you keep doing this then we're going to be late!"

"Aah, I see you're getting along with Naru now Keitaro." His eyes snapped open as he pulled back to see they were now outside Haruka's tea shop, with the owner standing outside smoking a cigarette.

Keitaro facefaulted onto the ground with a painful 'Thud', blood seeping out from a head wound, flowing down the steps, whilst Naru turned bright red. "Haruka-san! It's not like that!"

Keitaro got up of the floor, a hand behind his head, "Haruka-obasan, how are you?"

He received a punch to head, sending him to the floor again, "Who's an old lady? Call me Haruka-san."

"H… Haruka-san." He checked his watch, "We have to go now, we'll be late otherwise."

She put out her cigarette on the floor and smiled at both of them. "These are the exams aren't they?" They nodded to confirm it, "Well, good luck then." She watched them run off down the remaining steps as they made their way to the place where destinies change, Tokyo University.

Author's Notes

Ahem, me again, hope this chapter is to your liking, I may have padded it out with the way in which everyone woke up on this momentous day (for them), but I felt it was necessary.

I need feedback now… I'm going to make a fairly huge decision regarding the fanfic, the storyline. Keitaro will fail these exams, there's no two ways about it (I have many plans for him and Motoko-chan). However, I am toying with the idea of Naru passing these exams (as you know, she failed them in the manga) and getting into Toudai first time. It would work out pretty well I feel, I have many ideas about what she can get up to there, but I won't introduce any ACC's, SI's etc (maybe bring in Kentaro from the anime). It also leaves Keitaro to go on his trip alone, but meeting up with Mutsumi for the first time, which is also a rather important occasion. If Naru fails, then the manga will just repeat itself in my eyes when I'm writing this out. If Naru passes, then this will lead to many other prospects that have not been entertained via the manga, Keitaro visiting her there, her bringing friends home, and other things. She'd probably also meet up with Seta-san earlier than usual, thus introducing him and Sara-chan to the story before time. She would also still live in Hinata-sou, she wouldn't move away just because of this.

Anyways, I would like at least five of you lovely reviewers to say whether you think Naru passing is a good idea. It will be my decision in the end, and I do think it is the way to go, however I don't want to be accused of favouritism with Naru or Keitaro bashing. It would be interesting to hear what you say about this matter. I have one more chapter to go, this one dealing with the exam itself and the second day of exams, so there should be enough time for me to receive enough reviews. I hate asking for reviews, it makes me feel as if I'm vying for attention, but this time I don't know…

Yup, that's all I need to say, except Happy (belated) Easter!

- Jason

Chapter 13

The Examinations

Entrance to Tokyo University

They had arrived. Naru and Keitaro faced the memorable clocktower of Toudai, directly opposite them as they waited at the gate. After a few moments, they began to walk in. the grounds were full of people, young people. *'All examinees no doubt'* Keitaro thought. They were all as nervous as each other, few making any noise above casual chatting; some were even flicking through notes of theirs. Making their way indoors Keitaro began to rifle through his bag to find out which room they had to be in; thankfully Naru had hers in hand already. Some current students at Toudai wore special shirts that would enable others to see them to ask questions. Naru walked up to one such person

"Excuse me," He turned his attention onto her and smiled, albeit a bit forcedly. He was rather tall and his hair was dyed blonde, "where can I find room 1-A?"

"Walk to the end of this corridor, turn left and it's the last door on your right." He spoke in a robotic fashion, sounding bored also, just as though he had repeated the same information several dozen more times.

Thanking him the two went on their way; they were both in the same exam hall so Keitaro was glad that he didn't have to speak to the somewhat unfriendly student for his room. Once they had turned the corner, a commotion went up in the corridor they left.

"Gomen…" A short pause until, "She's got no pulse… AAAH Kami, she's DEAD!"

A number of people crowded around the person, trying to see what was happening, including the helper student that spoke to Naru. A collective gasp went around as a pair of antennae could be seen over the heads of the people.

"Ara… what just happened?"

Dust flew up in the air as everyone around her facefaulted to the ground. As the mysterious girl looked around confused, she walked towards the helper student.

"Are you okay Miss?" He began.

She looked back to see most people glancing her way worriedly before walking away.

"Ara…" She held a hand to her head where a double plaster was on her forehead, "I must've fainted again…"

"I see… Is there any help you need Miss?" He was getting tired of this.

"Gomen…" She rummaged through her bag to bring out a tattered piece of paper, "Do you know where Room 1-B is? I have an exam today."

Yes, I can tell just by looking at you… "Go down the end of this corridor, turn left, and it's the last door on your left, opposite Room 1-A."

She placed her palms together before speaking, "Arigatou." The girl then happily walked off to her destination. The helper student frowned as he swore he heard a sound in her bag.

Once she turned the corner she opened her bag, a small turtle popping its head out and waved to her.

"Tama-chan, I'm going into an exam now, so no noise for the next 3 hours, okay?" She said this all light-heartedly.

"Myu!" The turtle positioned its fin over where its forehead should be, in a military salute.

"Good." She smiled and closed her bag placing it back on her shoulder. *Now, to fulfil the promise…* She opened the door to Room 1-B and entered.

Two and a half hours later

"Well, that was embarrassing…" Keitaro mumbled as he left the exam room, a hand behind his head.

"You idiot! I can't believe you, the way you fell apart in that exam room!" Naru followed him as the crowd of people began to pile out of the room. "I'm just ashamed to be near you!" Her face was red with fury, but then she began to chuckle, "Still, it was funny, at least you managed to continue relatively quietly."

"Yeah," He began to recount what happened, "I was about to leave as the last piece of lead fell out of the top of my pencil, until I just calmed down."

"But how!" Naru couldn't believe it, "What made you so calm?"

Motoko-chan, I remembered her face, her words, and most of all her smile. "I… don't know."

They walked around the grounds for a short while until the time for the next exam of the day came about, and they walked in together. The entire day passed without any more events, and sooner than they expected, they left Toudai for home.

Hinata-sou

Late in the afternoon

Shinobu-chan had made food and was fully prepared for anything. She had made two banners depending upon how well they did. Suu-chan kept asking if they were to use the one saying 'Too bad you didn't pass. Hope you do better next year.' This scared Shinobu-chan, because she didn't want them to think that all they expected was their failure. Mitsune had bought several bottles of champagne and sake using some money she earned the week before. They were for celebrations, but she knew that most of it would be left to her. Motoko, not knowing of how to help prepare, sharpened her katana unconsciously. Shinobu-chan became alarmed, wondering what Motoko would do if Keitaro failed.

"What do you assume I'd do Shinobu-chan?" Motoko asked, completely clueless.

"Y… You're not going to hurt sempai, a… are you?" She held her hands together, balled together.

Deciding to humour herself, she thought she'd torment the junior high student, "Well," she held her katana up, the sun glinting from the bottom of the sharpened edge up until the tip, "I will help him to cut his head off if he fails, don't worry."

"Nooo! Don't do it Motoko!" She waved her arms about and unfocussed her eyes. *Sempai might die! I have to stop this…*

"Shinobu-chan," A hand was placed on her shoulder, "I won't hurt him, trust me." She looked up into Motoko's eyes and saw the sincerity in them, and Shinobu-chan smiled at her.

"They're back!" Suu-chan shouted as their heads appeared over the top step.

The first signs weren't good; an ominous shadow underneath Keitaro's hair betrayed nothing, not even his glasses visible, Naru's glasses were also glossed over so that her eyes couldn't be seen. Everyone was worried, even Suu-chan.

Oh boy, this is bad. Mitsune stepped up to Keitaro and put a hand to his shoulder.

"Keitaro, don't worry, there's always next year…"

"IT WENT WELL!" He interrupted, rather loudly.

"Eep!" Mitsune drew back from it as he lurched forward, tears flying out of his eyes.

"I think it was good! It seems that it won't be a dream for me to get into Toudai now!" He stood there, fist clenched in victory, tears pouring over his cheeks.

"Congratulations sempai!" Shinobu-chan was smiling from the bottom of her heart, happy at seeing him do so well.

"Well done!" Suu-chan held out the wrong banner, making Shinobu-chan concerned again.

"And Naru," Mitsune continued, "how about you?"

"I think it went okay." She gave a small smile.

"Well, this calls for celebration!" Mitsune broke open a bottle of champagne along with Suu-chan, the corks flying off with a bang.

"Wait!" Everything in the entire room stopped moving for a few seconds, even the corks paused mid-flight. Keitaro continued, "We still have another day of exams tomorrow, we can celebrate then…"

"Here." Mitsune handed him a glass filled with champagne, obviously not hearing what he was saying.

Sighing he took it and drank it slowly, he and Naru relinquished to the others as they began to drink with them and eat the food Shinobu-chan prepared. A few hours later they felt a bit woozy and decided to leave the party for a short while, taking a walk outside.

"It's a nice night." Naru took in a long deep breath of the cool air, "Very peaceful."

"Yes, it is nice, I hope it remains sunny tomorrow…" Keitaro replied.

Before they realised it, they were walking through many staircase and paths until they reached a certain point.

"T… That sandpit!" Keitaro pointed at the offending item. "I remember that from my childhood!" He walked over in that direction, Naru close behind him.

"It seems familiar to me too…" Naru was trying to think of where she last saw it.

"Naru…" Keitaro was hesitant in asking this, "you know your diary?"

Her eyes narrowed and an anger cross appeared on her forehead. She replied through clenched teeth, "Yes, what about it?"

Keitaro took a step back, "Well, I want you to recall that I only read one line, but only because it was to do with a promise I made to someone here 15 years ago."

Naru looked slightly bemused, "The promise about meeting up in Toudai?"

"Yes, that one, well I was wondering if it was you by any chance."

Naru began to think, "I don't think so, I was only two years old then, and couldn't have made that kind of promise to someone."

"Ah well…" Keitaro sighed, "Just had to ask, that's all." He crouched down and picked up some sand and let it pour out through his fingers.

"One more day to go…" Naru was looking over Keitaro, staring at the night sky, the stars glinting back at her.

"Yep, then we wait…" Keitaro stood up and stared at the stars with her.

Standing there in silence, they kept quiet, left alone with their thoughts. After what seemed like a few minutes, they chose to walk back inside. The sight that they were met with was rather amusing. Mitsune was sprawled over the floor in a rather odd position, her limbs

splayed in every direction, Shinobu-chan was in a foetal position, using a pillow as something to cuddle. Motoko was lying on her back, arms by her side holding her katana and Suu-chan was attached to one of her legs, drooling all over it.

"We'd better take them back to their rooms before they catch cold." Naru began.

"Yeah…" Keitaro looked around, "I'll take Suu-chan and Motoko-chan back whilst you take Kitsune and Shinobu-chan."

"Okay."

She began to wake up Mitsune, who needed help walking due to the amount she had drunk. Keitaro pried Suu-chan of Motoko and then carried her to her room. Waking her up gently as he reached her door, because he had no idea where her futon was, he told her that she would need to change into her pyjamas before sleeping with someone. She yawned and went into her room to do so. Walking back, he went to wake up Motoko but saw that she was sleeping soundly. Carefully he picked her up, still amazed at how light she really was. Walking upstairs to her room, he opened the door and walked in. opening her futon with his foot he gently cradled her head as he placed her in there. Taking off her slippers and putting them outside the futon, he made sure that she looked comfortable before leaving, watching her as he slid her door closed. Turning around he almost jumped with shock as Suu-chan stood there.

"I think you'd better stay with me tonight imouto-chan." He recovered quickly, "Motoko-chan looks exhausted so we should let her sleep."

"Okay Keitaro," She smiled back drowsily, "I won't place too much pressure on you because you have an exam tomorrow."

He smiled back and walked away from her, glad that she jumped on his back soon after. Getting down to his room he placed her alone in his futon for a minute as he got changed behind a partition. He returned to find her nearly tearing his pillow in two. Slightly panicked he coaxed it out of her grip before assuming his normal position with her, and slept the night away.

Day 2 of Final Stage Toudai exams

Friday, February 26th

Early morning

The second day was here, as was the final chance to do well in the exams for entry to Toudai. Keitaro woke up on time, managing to stop his alarm from ringing any longer than necessary. He woke up Suu-chan and told her they would need to go downstairs for breakfast. She nodded and went to her room to change into some clean clothes. Keitaro watched her leave and then began to change himself. Everyone else woke up around the same time again. Motoko woke up, perplexed at how she managed to get back to her room; the last thing most people remembered was falling asleep in the dining room.

Shinobu-chan, despite drinking a little alcohol, had managed to cook breakfast for everyone. The examinees as well as everyone else thanked her and began to eat the rice she had made. Keitaro and Naru knew that eating something heavy in the morning might lead to cramps later on in an exam hall, so they opted for a more Western style breakfast of cereal with milk and a glass of orange juice. Now fully sated they got ready to leave, everyone else wishing them luck again. Smiling, they left Hinata-sou.

Entrance to Tokyo University

"Well, here we are again…" Keitaro said, staring at the clocktower again.

"Yeah…" Naru spoke longingly.

"The last day… I wonder how it will pan out." He kept staring upwards.

"We can only do our best Keitaro." Naru turned to smile at him, "Shall we go in now?"

"Yeah," he smiled back, "why not?"

Walking in together the walked past the same bunch of people who were waiting outside the building. Getting inside the building they found another helper student; he seemed to find them through a whole crowd and went straight for them, or more precisely, Naru. His dark hair was unkempt and long, four bits of hair served as his fringe keeping his thin eyes under a shadow; he too was taller than Keitaro.

"How can I help you Miss?" He purposely addressed Naru alone, ignoring Keitaro completely.

"Gomen," She checked a piece of paper, "we need to find Room 2-C. Do you know where that might be?"

"Of course." He put a hand behind her back to move her, making her face a staircase. "Go up these stairs to the floor above and then you will find that it is the first door on your left."

"Arigatou…" She was still blushing slightly from his touch.

"Sure, no problem." He smiled, and Keitaro could've sworn that he heard a 'Ting!' sound, whereupon twinkling stars of light surrounded the helper student's head.

They left the helper student, and Keitaro walked alongside Naru.

"You do realise what he was up to Naru?" He sounded concerned.

"Huh? No, but I thought he was rather handsome myself…" She drifted back to the helper students' serious eyes.

As they reached Room 2-C and were about to walk in, Keitaro spoke.

"Good luck Naru-chan." He smiled at her.

"You too Keitaro-kun." The doors opened and in they went.

Around midday

Room 2-A

"Miss… Miss wake up." A lecturer, one of the people overseeing the exam spoke to a girl who had her head lying on the desk assigned to her. He assumed she was sleeping.

"Hello?" He began to shake her awake, but she wouldn't respond. Letting her go she dropped to the ground, and from the lecturer's point of view he could only see the whites of her eyes. Alarmed he picked her up, much to the surprise of the other students and took her to the door where some other lecturers were standing, wondering what he was up to.

"Call an ambulance, she has no pulse." He walked outside the room, one of the female helpers running to the end of the hall to a phone. He attended to her, making sure her head was secure and that she was as comfortable as can be. Going back inside, leaving her with one of the other lecturers, he picked up her bag and had a look at her student number. He adjusted his glasses while looking down a list.

"A10035… A10035… Ah, here it is, Miss…"

His voice was drowned out by the paramedic's arrival. The lecturer couldn't leave the exam as yet, but gave the paramedics her name and told her of her current condition. They took her away on a stretcher, oxygen mask on her face. As she left he looked at her face. *So calm. I hope she stays alive.* He dusted off his lab coat and was about to light up a cigarette before he remembered that the building was no smoking. *Ah well, maybe later…* Going back inside he told the others that she would be okay and asked them to continue as normal.

In the ambulance

The girl woke up almost immediately scaring the two paramedics who were close by her.

"Ara?" She said, looking with interest at the paramedics.

"We have to take you to the hospital, you had no pulse back there for a few seconds."

"Really? I must've just fainted again…"

"Fainted!" He was incensed, "This isn't normal behaviour for a minor fainting, for precautions we're still taking you there."

Another minute passed and they arrived at the nearest hospital. The Emergency Room staff was ready for a near death, but was surprised when a girl came out the back walking very delicately. Knowing they had a job to do, the paramedics explained the situation, giving the ER doctors her pulse, oxygen levels and so, including the state of the patient. Leaving her in the care of the ER, the ambulance left on another emergency.

3 hours later

The doctors checked her over but were baffled at her lack of fatal injuries. They weren't sure so they did any test they thought would've worked, but could find nothing. Tired, they allowed her to discharge herself later that day.

"Ara, I'd better back and finish my exams…" She looked around the hospital but didn't recognise any buildings.

"Myu!" The small turtle popped its head out again from her bag

Smiling at him she spoke, "Tama-chan, do you know where Toudai is?"

The turtle known as Tama-chan flew up in the air very high, much to the shock of most people around her, a few moments later it flew down to her shoulder and began to talk.

"Myu myu myu!" He used a fin and pointed in some direction.

"Ara, I see, go down this road and take the fifth road on the right…"

The girl then began on her way, but no sooner than a few steps she walked straight into a lamp post.

"Gomen!" She didn't notice what she had hit and continued.

After many incidents and causing a multiple car pile up, she arrived at Toudai, plasters all over her face and hand, dirt covering some of her clothes. The clocktower read 5pm.

"Ooooh… I missed it." She put a hand to her head, and Tama-chan did the same. "What to do now?"

As she stood there facing the clocktower, two familiar figures had already left the building prior to her arrival. Naru and Keitaro were now happier, no more exams for a long while. They had finished the exams for Toudai, now the wait for the results begins…

Author's Notes

Well, what can I say? Thank you for all the lovely reviews, I didn't realise how many of you read it. My decision is now made, Naru will pass, but many more events will happen. Remember how Naru was jealous of Mutsumi and her relative closeness to Keitaro? Well, who is in Naru's shoes now? That should stir up some good debate. Keitaro will need another way to study… who will he turn to? What technique will he use? (You might guess by now what I have been planning)

Although I said no ACC's, I have left two openings for some in this chapter. It wouldn't be Love Hina if new characters didn't have some outside influence upon the people there. They will not play any major role, nor will they be SI's (God, I hope not…). They will just be some typical people you might expect to find. I'm still debating whether or not to bring in Kentaro from the anime… though it might be too late now. I also regret not bringing in the old men from the council; their moments of wisdom would've been well at home in the fic TT

Hope you recognised the two new people in this chapter (not the helper students). I thought it would be nice to see how her time went. Sorry for not focussing on the exams, they are rather boring you must admit (and I'm going to be in some very important exams for my second year at uni).

Chapter 14

And the conclusion is…

Hinata-sou

Tuesday, 9th of March

It was dinnertime and Keitaro wasn't particularly hungry. Most people noticed this around the table. Shinobu-chan was the first to speak.

"Sempai? Are you feeling okay?" She had a worried expression on her face. Keitaro didn't answer for a short while, eating whilst focussing on some faraway object. "Sempai?"

"Huh?" Keitaro tuned back into reality and saw everyone looking at him with curious expressions on their faces. Turning to Shinobu-chan he smiled, "Oh don't worry Shinobu-chan, I'm fine." Keeping up his new lightened demeanour he continued to eat just as though everything was normal, but he still felt uneasy. *I couldn't remember anything that happened on the second day. I knew that I wrote down the answers, but I didn't truly focus on them… What is wrong with me? Why do I feel an overwhelming sense of doom?* Unbeknownst to him two pairs of eyes watched his every move, and by the end of the meal, Naru and Motoko knew that he was lying.

Everyone retired to their rooms after that, relaxing, reading, training, and jumping about, whatever took their fancy. Keitaro though was alone in his room, lying down, his legs under the furnace table. He sighed as he stared at his ceiling. *What am I getting so down about? It's over and done with… There's nothing more to think about.* Yet, Keitaro did not move from his position until a few minutes later.

"Hey you!" He angled his head back to see a Liddo-kun staring at him from the hole in the ceiling. "Why are you so down?" Strands of auburn hair replaced the stuffed toy a few moments later.

"It doesn't matter…" Keitaro acted normally, but this didn't convince Naru, who promptly jumped through the hole into his room.

"No, something is the matter Keitaro." She sat down opposite him placing her own legs under the furnace table. "You weren't your usual self at dinner this evening."

"I guess so," He sat up to face her, "I'm just feeling down from the exams, I just feel that I did badly in them…"

Naru was silent, thinking of a suitable reply. "Keitaro," she started, "there's not much I can say to stop you feeling this way. However," she paused to emphasise this point, "I do know for a fact that you tried your best, and you should be proud of that."

Keitaro was a bit dubious of this. "Maybe… I'm not sure if I did my best though…"

Naru sighed, "Keitaro, I can't help you any more, you are the one that has to get yourself out of this…" Naru stood up and left the room via the doorway.

Keitaro was shocked. *That was a bit cold of her… Maybe something's bothering her also…* He put that out of his mind as he picked up one of his books and began to read. The old feelings of anger became to resurface themselves; it had been around a year since they last emerged. This anger was not directed at Naru or with anyone in Hinata-sou, but with himself. He couldn't get rid of this feeling no matter what he focussed on. Frustrated, he threw his book at the wall, where it landed with a dull thud, then falling to the ground, the pages crushed beneath the cover.

Standing up he began to pace around in his room; he was frowning and not focussing on anything in the room. This continued for a while until he began to fume whilst sitting down. Tragically, someone chose to knock on his door at this time.

"Who is it?" He sounded irate.

"Umm, Motoko…" came the hesitant reply.

"What do you want?" He was still fuming to himself.

"C… Can I come in please?" She tried to ask him gently. *Why is he being so hostile?*

"Fine…"

She opened the door to see Keitaro glowering at something. Worried for him she walked into the room, noting the book to her right as it lay on the ground. She sat down opposite him.

"Keitaro, what is wrong?" She had a rare look of concern on her face, "Are you okay?"

He looked at her angrily, "Why do you ask that?"

This is very odd "It's just that you didn't seem to be yourself at dinner…"

"Why is everyone so interested in me all of a sudden!" He began to raise his voice slightly.

"It's… It's just because we care for you Keitaro." She was getting nervous.

He was shaking now, his voice barely audible, "Please, just leave…"

"But…" She began, almost desperately.

"Leave before I say something I regret, Motoko!" He shouted.

Motoko was stunned; he didn't use his usual term of endearment to her. *This must mean he no longer has any feelings for me…* She stood up respectfully and walked to the door to his room. Bowing slightly she opened the door and spoke.

"G… Gomen Urashima, I did not mean to disturb you. Goodnight to you." She left quietly, sliding his door shut as she entered the corridor.

Keitaro was aghast. *What have I done! Why did I say such things to Motoko-chan? What in Kami's sake is wrong with me!* He grabbed the sides of his head, scratching his head furiously, almost tearing out hair and placing pressure on the sides of his temple. A few minutes later he released his self-imposed punishment, resulting in a pounding headache and a burning sensation on his head. Sighing, he realised something.

"I'd better apologise to her, I was out of order." He stood up and opened his door, making his way up to Room 302. Knocking on her door, he heard no reply, trying again, this time more forcefully, no reply was forthcoming. Disheartened, he returned to his room. *Where could she be?*

Walking down the stairs at the front of Hinata-sou was a lone figure, that of Aoyama Motoko. Feeling the wind ruffle her clothing, some of the cool breeze permeating to her skin, she walked down towards the street below. *I need to clear my mind of what I thought I had with Keitaro.* Going straight into the town she walked by the few late night restaurants that were open. Walking by a couple who were laughing together Motoko began to feel her heart break, then they kissed each other, which only worsened it for her. It looked like everywhere she walked, every street corner, there was a happy couple. *Is this a test for me? Am I merely imagining all these things?* She began to run faster through the streets, not paying attention to all the looks that she received from people walking by her. She eventually stopped after having run through the entire town. Panting slightly she looked back to see Hinata-sou towering in the skyline. *Should I go back? What is left for me to stay for?* Then she thought of her sister, the way she ordered her to go to Hinata-

sou, no reasons as to why, but just that she needed to go there. *I cannot defy my sister… I must return to Hinata-sou…* Walking back she was about to pass by the teashop when a voice from within startled her.

"Motoko-chan, what's the matter?"

Turning towards the voice, Motoko saw Haruka walk outside with a cigarette, the tip glowing.

"Nothing of any importance Haruka-san. I must go now, goodnight." Turning back she walked up the stairs, the older lady watching on.

"Keitaro… what have you done now?" She mumbled to herself before returning inside.

Posting Day

Wednesday, 10th of March

Morning

Breakfast was subdued, Naru and Keitaro were going to find out whether they had passed or failed. Everyone attended except Motoko. They all pondered over why but only Keitaro knew what this meant. *She hates me now; she doesn't want to lay her eyes on me any more.* Finishing his breakfast Keitaro stood up and thanked Shinobu-chan for cooking it. He returned to his room wondering over what to do. *Is it too late to apologise? Would she kill me if she saw me?* He didn't have time to act however, since Naru knocked on his door.

"Well?" She had her satchel with her, "Are you ready to check the results?"

"Err, yeah…" He looked at his room, it was a complete mess, "Just give me a minute…"

"Keitaro… I don't care how dirty your room is, it is a guy's room after all…" After a pleading look from Keitaro she walked back out exasperated, "Fine, but not too long okay!"

Under the pretence of cleaning his room he packed a few things he might need in his larger than normal bag. *Let's see now, clothes, underwear, toiletries and money, I think that's about it…* opening his door he walked out of Hinata-sou with Naru, waving goodbye to everyone except Motoko who was still not there. Seeing the bag he was carrying she spoke.

"Why are you carrying such a large bag?" She looked confused.

"Umm…" He struggled to think, "No reason… I was just… bringing my notes with me… for luck!"

"Gees…" Naru couldn't believe it, "Whatever you think is necessary Keitaro."

Tokyo University

A short while later

They had arrived at Toudai. The atmosphere was chaotic. There were many scenes of people happy, jumping with joy with friends, to the other extreme of people who could barely speak, clouds over their heads as they had failed to get in. Keitaro checked his student ID to memorise his number to look for. As they approached the imposing boards, he and Naru looked at each other.

"Here we go." She said. They began to move apart as they went to look for their numbers.

Keitaro stared up at the board, hoping for his number to come up. *A10461… A10463… A10464… Please come up… A10467… A10470… A10474… Huh?* He wiped his eyes and checked again. *A10473 isn't there…* He sighed.

"I failed… I didn't make it…"

He looked over, past the scores of people cheering and crying to see Naru looking over a board, then seeing her eyes light up as she started smiling like never before. *So Naru has passed… I might as well go now…*Keitaro walked off the grounds of Toudai, making his way through the streets o his destination. Meanwhile Naru was still at Toudai wandering around the boards. *Where is Keitaro? I told him to wait for me!* Remembering his number from the time he dropped his pass she looked up to the boards and began scanning down the numbers. *Oh Kami… he failed… where could he have gone?*

Tokyo Railway Station

Around noon

"Train 112 to Osaka will be arriving in five minutes on Platform 4. Next alighting city will be Yokohama. Train 112 to Osaka will be..."

A figure stood on the platform alone, the wind whistling around him, the sun's rays lazily creeping over the cloud edges to blind Keitaro. Wincing, he removed his glasses to try and wipe away the white spots. Once he had his vision back, he gazed around the empty platforms opposite him. Short-sighted, all he could see was a shade of whites, greys, browns and blues. He sighed. *Time to go home now… I can't believe that I have to return a failure to my parents…* His thoughts were cut off as his train pulled into the platform. Keitaro stepped back as the wind picked up due to the express slowing down.

Once it had stopped he began to move forwards to where he thought the door was. He didn't take into account the large bag in his way, which resulted in him tripping over and slamming his head into the window of the train. Reeling back from his fall he held his head with one hand, squinting his eyes to try and see the door. He wasn't prepared for an object that flew in front of his face towards his left. Turning to that direction his vision faded once again, making it harder to see what the object was.

Meanwhile a confused girl stood about on the platform, looking at the signs above and at the train, she was sweating slightly. From behind her, a small green-shelled turtle landed on her shoulder.

"Myu myuu myu mi!" It pointed to the train with its right fin.

"Ara, so this is the train to Osaka?" She sounded glad, "I'm glad I arrived in time! Arigatou Tama-chan." She stroked Tama-chan's head and skipped into the carriage nearest her.

A few metres back, a fumbling Keitaro managed to find his glasses in his jacket pocket and put them on. He looked around the platform but could find no sign of whatever flew by him. He laughed to himself.

"Hehe, it must've been my imagination, it has to be the stress that made me see that." He looked over to the train and saw that he was a metre off from the door, his faceprint still visible on the glass. Checking he had everything he walked onto the train, a few seconds before it began to pull off the platform.

Hinata-sou

One hour later

"Where could he be?"

Naru was not alone in her worrying over Keitaro's absence from the impromptu party Mitsune had planned for the two of them. All but Motoko were worried for him.

"What happened to sempai?" Shinobu-chan had her hand near her face; she was desperately worried for him.

"I don't know Shinobu-chan…" Naru replied, unsure of herself. "He did fail…"

"Yes… but still!" Shinobu-chan was near tears now, "Where is he!"

Mitsune put a hand on the junior high student's shoulder, "Don't worry yourself kiddo, he can't have gone far…"

Meanwhile

Train 112

Keitaro stared out of the window, marvelling at the beauty of Fuji-san as it towered over the Japanese Alps. *I have to go visit there one day, Hina-obaachan always spoke highly of the goraiko* (sunrise) *when on the peak*. He returned to reading his book as the view changes to one outside his window, to a landscape view with Mount Fuji and the train, to an overhead view of Japan, a small blinking red dot signifying Keitaro, now inside Shizuoka prefecture. The view pans right and we see another blinking dot inside Kanagawa prefecture. The view zooms in on a small town, then to a hill on top of which lies…

Hinata-sou

1 second later

"You may be right Kitsune…" Naru pondered, "But where?"

Suu-chan was on Motoko's back, who was saying nothing.

"Motoko, aren't you worried about Keitaro?" Suu-chan inquired.

Motoko was quiet, keeping her emotions to herself in her corner of the room. Her eyes were drained of life as she watched the others fret about Keitaro. *Why are they so worried about him? He's nothing but a perverted, idiotic, and now a third-year ronin. He has no redeeming qualities…* She tried to lie to herself, but knew that she couldn't overlook his kindness to her at times in which she was less than welcome.

"Well, we can't do anything here but wait I guess." Naru sighed.

"Wait!" Suu-chan jumped off Motoko's back and ran to the others, stopping once she reached their circle. "I can build a device to track Keitaro down!"

"Really Kaorra-san?" Shinobu-chan lightened up, "You think it'll work?"

"Of course it will!" said Suu-chan reassuredly. "Now I must begin my masterpiece!" Jumping lopsidedly about the others in circles for a few moments, she ran in the general direction of her room.

Mitsune sweatdropped. *I hope she doesn't blow up Hinata-sou in the process.*

"Well, there's nothing we can do for the time being, so lets eat our lunch now." Naru stated. They all agreed and took their seats at the table, their thoughts private as they ate the meal in silence.

30 minutes later

Train 112

Keitaro broke away from his gaze outside the window and looked at his watch, a lot of time had passed since he left Hinata-sou. *I suppose I'd better let them know where I am…* He got out of his chair, leaving his bag where he sat in the seat and walked over to the front of his empty carriage where there was a phone. Looking over the instructions he realised he needed a phone card, which he knew he didn't have. A bit annoyed he checked the floor and was happily surprised to see a card there. Smiling he bent over to pick it up, only to bump into someone walking his way from the other adjoining carriage. The person landed on the ground with a loud fwump, getting Keitaro's attention.

It was a woman wearing a plaid light brown top, a while long sleeved shirt underneath, the skirt a beige colour and the brown boots were fairly high. Her long dark hair managed to remain in a ponytail despite not being tied up together; it naturally twisted around itself. Keitaro looked to her face and saw that her pupils were missing.

"Waaah!" Keitaro put his hands on the sides of his head, his hair standing on end.

I… I've killed her! What am I going to do now? I'm going to go to prison. The headline "Dorm kanrinrin kills on train" loomed over his head as he went insane thinking. Meanwhile, the pupils instantly returned to the woman's eyes, and she sat up straight.

"Ara… Good afternoon!" She waved to Keitaro, who at once facefaulted to the floor.

"Are… are you okay miss?" He said, helping her up.

"Hai, I must've fainted again." She placed her palms together, smiling at him, "Arigatou."

Turning she skipped away from him down her carriage, Keitaro looked at her to make sure she didn't fall again and looked back to the phone, not seeing the intrigued look on the woman's face.

He placed the card into the phone and began to input the number for Hinata-sou.

Hinata-sou

A few minutes earlier

"Finished!" Suu-chan bounded around the living area in Hinata-sou excitedly.

"Where is it Suu-chan?" Mitsune asked.

"It's in my room, it needs to be charged up with the fusion reactor first before it can be used properly." She replied matter-of-factly.

"Fusion reactor…? Never mind, I don't want to know…" Mumbled Mitsune as she rubbed her temples, the sake getting to her again.

The phone in the reception began to ring. Suu-chan ran over and picked up the phone.

"The number you have dialled has not been recognised." Shinobu-chan gasped at this and ran to her, "Please hang up and…"

A flash of white light and Suu-chan was flat on the ground; a kettle planted on her head as the others watched her in mild astonishment.

"Hello?"

"Is this Shinobu-chan?"

"Sempai is that you!" Shinobu-chan was so nervous; she wondered why the voice on the other end was so far, she didn't notice that he was holding the handset upside down. "Where are you?"

"I'm on the Super Express, I feel like taking a break from it all."

"When will you come home?" She wasn't able to hide her emotions easily and sounded very worried for him.

"I don't know Shinobu-chan. I'm going somewhere far away and I don't know if I'm coming back. Tell the others that I'll miss them."

"What?" She sounded more despairing now.

The line quality suddenly became poorer**, "Yeah I met ... and bumped into ... I ... dead, but..."** A click and the line went dead.

"Sempai?" She shook the phone, "Sempai! What do you mean you're leaving us? And who's dead?"

Giving up she replaced the handset and looked to the others, replaying as much as she could remember.

"Super Express? Is it tasty?" Drooled Suu-chan.

"I see…" Mitsune remarked, ignoring Suu-chan, "So Keitaro has become completely depressed and decided to kill himself alone…" she surmised rather quickly.

"What!" Shinobu-chan then fainted.

"He wouldn't do that Kitsune!" Naru exclaimed, "He wouldn't…" She suddenly became doubtful, not sure of herself, remembering the way she spoke to him a day earlier.

Everyone was quiet, except Suu-chan who was trying to wake up Shinobu-chan, who was still unconscious. Motoko began burn inside, her heart beating erratically. *What is wrong with me? I feel nothing for Urashima!* She defied her body and refused to move or make a sound.

Meanwhile

Train 112

Replacing the handset Keitaro removed the card, "Oh well, the phone card was bound to be nearly empty. At least they got my message now."

Walking back to his seat he sat next to the window, his chin resting on his hand. The view then changes to that of outside the train and pans across right a few more windows until we see a familiar woman looking outside the window, pointing out things to her pet turtle. Becoming stationary, the view watches all the carriages go by as the train continues on its long journey.

Author's Notes

cough Well, I'm back, and no I'm not dead as some of you might imagine. The last few months have been hell on earth for me with the amount of assignments, revision and exams that I have had to go through, the second year of my course is nearly finished, the hard work out of the way now, leaving me summer to do more writing.

First a few issues with this update. I will explain later why Keitaro gets like this, his completely strange anger. Let me assure you that it is not uncommon to get angry over having done exams, I went through it many times myself. Although you might not think it possible for him to get angry, I decided to make Love Hina a bit more realistic in this respect, and I hope you all don't kill me for doing so.

Fuji-san is the term that Japanese people use to call Mount Fuji, as a term of respect. The sunrise on the peak is one of the main attractions of the mountain, and a great tourist attraction.

Also, I love reviews, please feed me more reviews

Until next time,

Jason

Chapter 15

Escape/The Meeting of the Promised Two

Train 112

Wednesday, 10th of March

Early evening

Keitaro yawned; he had been on the train for a long while. He looked out the window to see the sun beginning to set behind the skyline. He was about to nod off before…

"Train 112 will be stopping at Kyoto. Arrival at Kyoto in less than five minutes. This train terminates at Osaka."

Keitaro didn't need to hear the rest, hearing the message being repeated in English, picking up his bag he sat patiently in his seat. He opened the front pocket to reveal his new journal. He hadn't yet written in it, buying it only recently at the Tokyo station. Closing it abruptly, he looked at the cover, an old anime called Tenchi Muyo was written there, faded images of the characters were on each page. *Heh, yeah right… As if it were possible for one man to be with a load of women…* Sighing he placed the journal back into the pocket and zipped it up just as the train pulled into the station. Standing up he walked to the door easily; he was the only person in his carriage.

Waiting for the door to open automatically he stepped off the train onto the platform. As the sun set, the wind began to blow harder, making the cold seep through to his skin. Clutching his bag closer to him he began to move towards the exit of Kyoto station. Looking over his small map quickly, he made his way through the streets to his destination, a small hotel, run by a kindly old lady… He went to sleep, not even taking a dip in the hot springs beforehand.

Hinata-sou

Thursday, 11th of March

"Hmm, he hasn't called since yesterday…" Mitsune mumbled pensively to herself.

"Where could he be right now…?" Naru spoke to no one in particular.

"Don't worry about Keitaro…" Said a smiling Haruka, who oddly enough appeared from nowhere, "He'll be okay, he always is." They were sitting in the living room having a drink to themselves.

"What!" Naru stood up, "You mean he's done this kind of thing before!"

"Only rarely," She replied, "However the times he does run away he's usually under a lot of strain or pressure." Taking the cigarette out of her mouth she continued, "I'd this was one of those times."

"So he can't handle failure…" Naru muttered under her breath.

Around the corner a quiet Motoko stood, out of sight of those sitting there. She had heard every word uttered by those in that room. Her eyes were closed, arms folded and holding the katana within its sheath. Opening her eyes a pained expression was visible. *Why…? Why did you leave us? Are you ashamed of failing? Failing in front of us? In front of me?*

Meanwhile, two diminutive figures crept around the grounds of Hinata-sou, they were about to go downstairs into the main hallway, but they noticed that the people in the living room would see them. Taking a detour, they went back upstairs and left via one of the windows. The blonde athletic one jumped out effortlessly, whereas the other didn't want to jump, and instead slowly made her way down.

"Escape accomplished!" Suu-chan put up her fist in victory.

"Are you sure you can find sempai?" Shinobu-chan asked, worriedly. "Is it okay to leave Hinata-sou like this?"

"Of course!" Suu-chan beamed at her friend, "My machine is fully charged now, so all we need to do is start it up! I also left a note for everyone there."

Inside Hinata-sou

At that exact moment

The corridors were quiet, the floor looking newly polished. Reflected in the floorboards is the door of Room 302. A healthy green leaf is sellotaped to the door, on it were these words:

Gone to find Keitaro with Shinobu

Suu

A second later

Outside Hinata-sou

Looking behind her nervously Shinobu-chan spoke again. "Can we go downstairs first in case they see us here?"

"Okay." Suu-chan then started to jump erratically but in a general forward direction, Shinobu-chan following her by running as fast as her little feet could go. Once they had reached the bottom of the steps she turned to Kaorra. Reaching into her rucksack, she brought out a strange device that looked like a bowl. Pressing a button on the underside of it, the bowl began to transform into a miniature satellite dish, with three eyes. Placing it on her head, the visor covering her eyes, Suu-chan then brought out a portable keyboard and began inputting commands.

"Kaorra -san… Is that it? That embarrassing thing?" Shinobu said, blushing at the fact that lots of people were staring at them.

"Yup…" Smiled Suu-chan as she continued to type in things.

A few moments later she stopped typing. She lifted up the visor and looked at Shinobu-chan. "Okay… following his credit card transactions, I saw him make a few purchases lately. Some kind of book in a train station and a one way train ticket."

"Train ticket!" Yelped Shinobu-chan. Grabbing Suu-chan by her arms she started shaking her, "Train ticket to where!"

"If you stop shaking me I'll tell you." Said Suu-chan, her head bobbing with the relentless shaking.

"Aah… gomen Kaorra-san…" She let her go immediately and bowed, a light blush covering her face. *I can't believe I lost myself like that… What will Kaorra-san think?*

"Don't worry Shinobu! We'll find him!" Suu-chan said cheerily. Taking another peek into the device she spoke on. "It seems that his final destination is Kyoto."

"Kyoto?" said a panicked Shinobu-chan. *That's really far! How are we going to get there… unless…*

"Kaorra-san…"

"Shinobu, call me Suu! We've been friends for this long, you can at least call me that." Beamed her friend.

"Okay then Suu," she placed her hands together, her index fingers patting each other, "D… Do you have any money?"

"Of course!" Reaching into her back pocket she withdrew an incredibly thick wallet. Shinobu-chan's eye bulged out slightly at this, until it burst open with strange notes. "This is money from my country!"

Snatching a note from the air she peered curiously at it. "Erm… Suu… you can't use this money in Japan…" Her heartbeat began to slow down. *How are we going to get there without any money… Unless…*

"We can't use this?" Pouted Suu-chan, now looking quite sad.

"It… it's okay Suu, let's just go to the station." *Looks like it's all down to me then…*

Meanwhile

Kyoto East Mountain

Keitaro was enjoying himself; he woke up early and had some of the breakfast that the innkeeper made for him. Starting his trip around Kyoto, he decided to go see the fabled Pure Springs Temple.

"Wow…" He marvelled at the architecture of the building. *The legend says that you can jump off here… I wonder…* He peered over the edge and got a sudden attack of vertigo. Feeling slightly woozy he pulled back. "There's no way you can jump off without dying."

He looked to his right to see a familiar person. *Don't I remember seeing her somewhere before?* Without any warning her eyes closed and she leaned forwards, a little too far to be normal.

"Waaah!" Keitaro yelled as he ran towards her.

He grabbed her legs just in time before she fell over the barrier. Stunned onlookers only

watched as he carefully pulled her up over the barrier and onto the ground. A small crowd had gathered around the two of them. Looking at her features carefully he noticed that she wasn't breathing. He moved closer to her face to give her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. However her eyelids snapped open, scaring Keitaro backwards. She then sat up.

"Ara? What happened?" A cloud of smoke appeared as everyone facefaulted around them. Keitaro tried to explain.

"You… you nearly fell off the edge back there." He indicated the spot behind him and noticed her cheery expression.

"I think the height got to me a little." She stood up picking up her bag also as Keitaro did the same. "Ara… so were you the one to save me?" She peered closely at his face.

"Umm…" He started to blush furiously. *She's very pretty…* "Is… Is there anything wrong?"

She pulled back and placed her palms together, "You look cute. Are you in middle school?"

Facefaulting to the ground again, his arm left in the air twitching involuntarily Keitaro leapt up. "I'm 20 years old!" Tear flew out of his eyes and his hair stood up on end as he said this.

"Ara… Really?" She looked at her watch, "Ara? Is that the time? I'd better be off now to sightsee some more." She turned and began to walk away; the crowd had vanished a long time ago.

"W… Wait!" She stopped and looked at him with interest. *She might hurt herself all alone… I have nothing to look forward to back at Hinata-sou, so why not spend it with this girl?* "Are… are you travelling alone?"

"Yes… why so interested?" She had a clueless expression on her face.

Keitaro blushed again, putting a hand behind his head, "Do… do you mind if I accompany you?"

She paused to think about it, "Okay then!" She happily walked to him and smiled again, "So where shall we go now… I don't even know your name yet…?"

"Urashima Keitaro, and what's your name?" He replied.

Keitaro… Sounds familiar. " My name is Otohime Mutsumi."

"Okay… shall we go eat now? I'm quite hungry." His stomach rumbled to emphasise this point.

"Okay Urashima-kun!" She said in a bubbly fashion. He blushed when she added that serif to his name but said nothing of it.

They were walking through Kyoto looking for nice place to eat when they passed a photo sticker camera. Keitaro gawped at it for a second. *A third generation camera! I must get a photo from there! But… not when I have such a nice girl with me, she might think I'm some kind of sad loner…* "Mutsumi-san… why don't you go look over there and I'll have a look down this street?"

"Okay Urashima-kun!" She skipped away down the street he pointed to her, and he made to go in the other direction, but once she was out of sight he ran to the photo sticker booth.

"Hmm… which one should I pick?" He scrolled through all the possible photo frames until finding one he liked. "This looks good, an Omikoshi being held by several men." He pressed the number of stickers he wanted, then pressed the 'Take photo' button. He then felt a slight pressure on his right shoulder and a soft feeling on his back. Waiting until he heard the distinctive sound of the camera, he looked to his right to see a hand placed there. Looking left he realised he was nose to nose with Otohime Mutsumi, her eyes looking deeply into his.

"Waaah!" Jumping back he held both hands to his nose. *Her breast… It was touching my back…* He began to think of some excuse. "Umm… Well… you see, I was looking around and saw this… and then…"

He stopped talking when he heard her laughter. "Wh… What's the matter Mutsumi-san?"

"Oh nothing, you just look so funny!" She began to stifle her giggles. "I just to tell you that I found a restaurant over there." She pointed roughly in the direction she came from.

"Oh… Arigatou Mutsumi-san." He recovered quickly and looked to the machine and picked up his stickers.

They walked together to the restaurant, and sat down, ordering a couple of soft drinks along with their respective meals. Sipping his lemonade Keitaro looked over to Mutsumi.

"It'll be my treat Mutsumi-san, for going behind your back and going to that photo booth."

He felt ashamed, and he knew that she was going to get angry with him.

"It's okay Urashima-kun." She felt into her bag and brought out a thickly bound book. "I have a fascination for photo stickers too. That third generation camera back there is quite rare."

Keitaro nearly choked on his drink, "You knew it was a third generation camera!" He searched in his bag and brought out his book of stickers opening it for her, "I've been collecting them for years, but never had the courage to ask anyone to join me in a photo."

She looked over the book, "It's the same with me, I'm all alone in my photos for the same reason… Aah…" She paused and pointed at one sticker in the top left hand corner of one page, "Who's this pretty girl then?"

Looking at the sticker in question, he noticed that it was the photo he took with Naru back in the opening week of his arrival at Hinata-sou. "Oh, that's just a friend of mine."

"Ara… Really?" She puzzled over this, "It's just that this is the only photo is which someone else was with you."

Keitaro looked at her in amazement. *She managed to skim through and look at every photo!* The waiter then arrived with their meals, and then Keitaro had a bit of his rice before continuing, "Yes… well, I'm a dormitory manager in Kanagawa prefecture, and she is one of the tenants there. It's called…"

"Hinata-sou." They both said together. Keitaro's jaw dropped. "How did you know that!"

"Ara?" She looked confused and scratched her head, "I don't know… It just came to me suddenly."

"Okay…" He scratched his head also. *This is getting a little creepy… I'm getting a feeling of deja vu here.* "So… what are you doing here if your health is so poor? You fainted in the train as well, even though I did bump into you."

"Well… I'm on my way home now, I found out that I just failed in my attempt to get into a university, and just decided to go on a sad trip."

"Hehe, that's the same as me, but I've failed for the third time this year… I'm also taking a sad trip."

"Ara… Third time?" She clapped her hands together, "Then you must be quite stupid!"

"Stupid… Stupid…. Stupid…" Her voice echoed throughout his head as he unfocussed his eyes, his entire body fading away, becoming nothing more than pastels and rough lines. Sighing, he returned to normal, angling his face down. *She's right though, failing for the third time is pathetic.*

"Well… That means that I'm stupid also…" Her cheery demeanour clouded over for a second or two by a deep sadness. "I've failed for the third year in a row."

Loosening his chopsticks in shock, dropping the prawn he was about to eat he spoke, "You mean you're 20 years old!"

"21 actually, my birthday was a few weeks ago." She smiled, "At least I think so…"

"How can you forget your own birthday!" He shouted out incomprehensibly.

"Ara… I tend to forget things sometimes." She put a hand to her head, closing her eyes.

"21... You must really want to go to this university..." He stopped to have a large dumpling, "So, which one did you apply to then?"

She began to beam at him again, "Toudai of course!"

This time Keitaro did begin to choke; the dumpling had somehow lodged itself in his throat. Beating his chest with his fist, and with great difficulty, the obstruction freed itself, landing harmlessly on his plate. Breathing deeply to bring the colour back to his lips he began to speak.

"That's the same one as me!" He said excitedly, "What did you get for your average during the Christmas period?"

"Ara, I think I got 50 overall." She replied, her hand behind her head.

"That's not too bad Mutsumi-san, I only got 49." Said Keitaro, chuckling to himself, unknowingly mimicking her movements.

Looking at the table with a dazed expression on her face, she looked to her friend across the table, "Ara, the food is getting cold now, I think we should finish our meal first

Urashima-kun, before we talk any more."

"I agree Mutsumi-san."

With that they both launched into the dishes in front of them polishing them off before long to the last king prawn. It looked particularly juicy, and Keitaro had wanted to savour the taste of it until the very end. However he was feeling rather full and knew he wouldn't enjoy it as he would were he empty. Poking at it with his chopsticks, he rolled it nearer to the young woman in front of him.

"Here you go Mutsumi-san, I don't feel like eating any more, I'm stuffed." He patted his stomach to emphasise this.

Her eyes lit up like never before, glistening with apparent happiness and disbelief. "Ara... Are you sure Urashima-kun? It does look very fat with all the sauces in it..."

Keitaro managed to stop himself from drooling before answering her, "Really, it's okay, go ahead." *She has just failed entry into Toudai; it won't hurt to let her eat the last piece of food.*

He watched as she playfully picked up the prawn within her chopsticks, and placed it inside her mouth, before she began to chew on it. Upon finishing it she put the chopsticks down on her bowl and placed her hands together.

"Arigatou Urashima-kun!" She smiled at him again.

He blushed again, focusing on her eyes. *She is very pretty... Such a nice character...* At that moment she rose out of her seat to go to the toilet, only to walk straight into a pillar. He sweatdropped. *Well, she is a bit accident-prone...* Once she had returned, she picked up her bag.

"Let's go look around more Urashima-kun." She said, Keitaro following her out of the restaurant.

In mere minutes it seemed the rest of the day went by. For Keitaro, that was certainly true at least. He had spent a wonderful few hours walking in and around Kyoto with a girl, who as most men who noticed the pair of them walking together, was beautiful. Yet, Keitaro could not shake off the feeling that somehow doing something wrong. His glasses gave no indications of what he was thinking, so much so that Mutsumi, who was still by his side, began to get worried. Calling his name once she got no reply. Waving her hand in front of his face elicited nothing either. She realised just how out of it he was when he tripped over a loose manhole cover, then toppling headfirst into a lamppost. A small gasp from Mutsumi

led to her running to the now injured Keitaro. He was fumbling around for his glasses. Mutsumi picked them up and knelt down to give them to him.

"Here you go Urashima-kun." She held out the glasses for him.

Accepting them, he thanked her. "Arigatou Mutsu..." Keitaro's eyes were staring right into her top, showing the cleavage of the 21 year old.

Holding his nose quickly, and looking at her puzzled expression, he knew he was too late to stop it. Blood rushed from his nostrils like there was no tomorrow, bursting through his hands. Mutsumi gasped at this, and gave him a tissue, which he took quickly. Five minutes later they were on their way as if nothing had happened, except for the pieces of tissue stuffed up his nose.

"Well, things like this happen sometimes." He laughed nervously.

"That's true..." Mused the 21 year old, "But it came from nowhere... It must've been triggered somehow..."

Keitaro just laughed again as another sweatdrop adorned the back of his head. They both travelled around the area taking in the sights, sounds and even the smells of the restaurants they passed on the way. After passing a small restaurant, a figure from inside the restaurant became startled and ran outside to look at the departing twosome. Running back inside, the female owner began to dial a number she hadn't used in years, and didn't expect to dial ever again.

Meanwhile

In a rainforest somewhere

The sweltering heat continued throughout the day, the humidity making the living of any animals in the rainforest either very uncomfortable, for those who did not belong there, or a perfect place to live, for the countless predators and insects. In a certain secluded part, there were intruders, permeating places that few have dared to enter.

The trees were getting thicker by the day, even the guides were telling the two women to give up their search for whatever they were after. The older woman just chuckled saying that she was just out for a little bit of fun, much to the guides' disbelief and shock.

One of the millions of mosquitoes that lives in the rainforest came to rest on a pale white arm, a few red spots covering scattered around it already. Immediately a pair of brown

eyes narrowed evilly and a hand came down on the bloodsucker brutally. Wiping the dead creature off her arm, she wasn't at all pleased to see another red mark on it. She sighed to herself, adjusting her hat given to her by the guides. *So many mosquitoes! I can't understand why we have to stay here.* Sweating under her brow once again she took the hat off and fanned herself with it, one lock of hair springing up on her head as if returning to a position it was used to. *The rainforest is unbearable; the crocodile's back there almost ate us! I'm getting tired of all this…*

A sharp high-pitched tone abruptly pierced the forest. The guides looked around, unaware of this birdcall, and fearing it might be dangerous they brought their guns up, aimed towards the trees. Not seeing any of this the girl felt around her backpack and picked out her mobile phone. Unfamiliar with the number, she decided to accept the call.

"Hello?" She asked, curious as to who this was.

The guides having heard the 'birdcall' dissipate turned their guns on the girl upon hearing her voice. Seeing all these men aiming at her she became a little nervous.

"It… It was my mobile." She explained to them, indicating the phone. They lowered their guns and walked on a little. Realising that she had phased out for a bit she turned her attention back to the phone, "Yes? Who is this?" A short reply later and "Obaasan, it's for you."

The shorter woman came into view, the shadow from her hat keeping her face hidden.

"Arigatou Kanako-chan." Said the older woman as she took the phone from the young girl. Placing her phone to her ear she spoke on, "Hello?" The voice on the other cannot be heard, "Yes this is Hina-obaasan." This time a longer pause as the voice spoke on, "So they've been spotted together then? In Kyoto." The shortest pause so far, then, "I see. Arigatou for the information." She cancelled the call and turned back to the young girl.

"Kanako-chan, it's time to call the town elders. The two have finally met up, as I predicted, in Kyoto." She smiled nervously, "We need to be kept informed of what happens now."

Urashima Kanako remained silent, a sombre feeling in her eyes, but she turned to the elder lady and remained expressionless, "Hai Hina-obaasan, I'll get onto it soon."

At that moment

Kyoto

Keitaro and Mutsumi were still walking on, when suddenly they both sneezed once. Looking at each other they laughed at the timing.

"Ara, Urashima-kun, you know what they say about what a sneeze is?" She asked him.

He thought about it for a bit but shrugged his shoulders, "No idea Mutsumi-san."

She giggled, "It might sound silly, but my okaasan told me that it meant that someone was thinking of you!"

Keitaro racked his brains, but could only think of someone who might've been the one. *Motoko-chan…*

Author's Notes

I'm now replacing the chapter, and getting rid of the massive bloopers in there regarding Osaka and Kyoto. After thinking through a certain point in the manga, I realised that Keitaro actually travelled all the way to Osaka, then had to travel back to Kyoto to do his sightseeing stuff. Sorry to all those who were confused by this. I somehow thought that Kyoto was *in* Osaka (don't ask me how).

Anyways, this is mostly the usual plot line here, and the meeting of the two that most of you have been waiting for a while. My time in Spain wasn't entirely profitable fanfic-wise, I kept getting injured of ill, and the past week I've have tonsillitis, which is traumatic considering that eating food equates to incredible pain. Thankfully its gone now.

It also added the little bit at the end because I thought it was about time to bring in the town elders (I miss them, I really do!). Everyone else using them in their own fanfics made me realise that they were quite cool geezers who can be highly philosophical. Hope you liked the portrayal of the two other Urashima family members, not much to go on but they'll be more of them, trust me.

The next chapter will be another Secrets Revealed one, not telling as of yet who it will be about, but you will soon see. My university is beginning way in September 30th, so I don't have to worry about things like work, but research is still required, so I might still not get some time to do it all.

Reviews/flames etc, especially complaints about how similar this is to the whole anime version of events in Kyoto with Naru are welcome, I don't want to seem too repetitive by

carbon-copying episodes and not having enough original thoughts on the matter.

Until later,

- Jason

Chapter 16

Secrets Revealed II: Maehara Shinobu

Tokyo train station

The same day

Late afternoon

Suu-chan continued to type into her machine, searching for details.

"There's a train leaving for Osaka in half an hour. It'll stop by Kyoto, I've tracked some more credit card transactions by Keitaro, and that is where he is." She stated.

Shinobu-chan looked at the darker skinned girl in wonder. *How does she make these things?* She felt into her bag and opened a small purse. Reaching two fingers in, she withdrew the item she was looking for.

"Ooh!" Suu-chan cooed appreciatively, "That looks interesting Shinobu! Is it tasty?"

Clutching it protectively to her chest, she closed her eyes forcing tears from the sides of them, "No!" She yelled, "It's my father's credit card." Her voice lowered, as if speaking to herself only, "It can only be used in emergencies…"

Looking around the station she could see a lot of people in business suits, waiting for their trains to take them home to their families. *Probably all happy families… Full of laughter and joy…* Shinobu walked up to the ticket booth, the employee behind a protective glass plate.

"Two train tickets to Kyoto please."

The chubby vendor couldn't have been over twenty. He looked bored, "Will that be a single or return ticket? Adult or child tickets? What time would you like it at?" His voice boomed over the speakerphone.

"Umm…" Shinobu-chan was thinking in her head, "Two, single child tickets for the next train in half and hour."

The vendor entered the details on his till, "That'll be 8000 yen please."

8000 yen… That's expensive… Not wanting to keep the man waiting any longer she held out her credit card. He swiped it through the machine, and a few seconds later a receipt printed out. Grabbing a pen he made an X mark on it and handed her the receipt and pen.

"Sign here please."

Shinobu-chan twirled the pen around in her hand and wrote out her signature, well her normal handwriting; she hadn't the time to perfect a unique signature as yet. Handing him back the receipt he gave her the tickets and a proof of purchase.

"Have a safe trip." He said.

"A… Arigatou." Holding the tickets carefully she walked over to Suu-chan. "Suu, here's your ticket…" Her eyes bugged out when she noticed Suu-chan munching on the end of it, "Suu! You can't eat this! You need to keep it safe!"

Suu-chan took it out of her mouth, a bit of drool following it, "But I'm hungry…" Her stomach growled loudly as Suu-chan held it. She looked at Shinobu-chan, her eyes brimming with tears, "Shinobu, can we go eat? Please? Please? Please?"

Her face distressed the younger girl, who sighed in defeat, "Okay then Suu, but we can't leave the station, I'll just grab some snacks."

Walking around the station she saw the kiosk in the centre and went straight there, seeing the large amounts of food they had. The elderly woman behind the counter looked at her.

"My, aren't you a cute thing?" She began, "What would you like little girl?"

Shinobu looked at the vast selection on offer and picked a few things.

"Are you sure you want all this? That's a lot of food for a girl your age…" The woman said as she handed over the bag of snacks and change.

"It's not all for me; my friend will be sharing with me."

"Oh, okay then, bye now!"

Shinobu-chan waved goodbye to the elderly lady and went to where she left Suu-chan. The princess was sitting on a bench at the right platform, and didn't look too happy.

"Suu you okay?" Shinobu asked, concerned for her friend.

"Is that food?" Said a brightened up Suu-chan.

"Y… Yes." Immediately Suu-chan opened the bag and began scoffing down the chocolates and sweets that Shinobu-chan bought.

"Delicious!" Said a satisfied Suu-chan, chocolate marks all around her mouth, crumbs on her cheeks.

"Oh Suu!" Shinobu took out a napkin from her bag, "You've got chocolate all over you face!"

She then began to wipe it all off Suu's face, as a mother would with a child. Soon her friend's cheeks were sparkling.

"There, all done!" Shinobu-chan cracked a smile.

"Ahh!" Gasped Suu-chan, "Our train is here!"

They watched as several carriages passed in front of them before stopping, the door opened as some people chose to get off there. The girls waited for everyone who wanted to get off before getting on the train. Finding their seats quickly they sat down.

"It won't be long now…" Shinobu-chan mumbled, closing her eyes slowly.

"Train 253 to Sendai is departing now."

Suddenly Shinobu's eyelids jerked open, her irises shrunk to the size of pinheads. "Huh!" She turned to her partner next to her, "I thought you said this was our train!"

"You mean Sendai and Kyoto aren't the same?" Suu-chan said absentmindedly.

"Noooo!" Shinobu-chan cried, plastering her face to the window as the train pulled away from the station.

Train 112

Destination Kyoto

Exact time unknown

Shinobu-chan sighed, "So long… we've taken so many trains…" Their little adventure took them around most of North Japan, but finally they had caught the correct train, and were on their way to Kyoto.

The sun had set a while ago, but dusk had still not vanished, so the sky was still visible, albeit a dark shade of purple. Looking across the small table Shinobu-chan saw Suu-chan looking at her curiously.

"Shinobu!" She cheerily spoke, "Why are you so worried for Keitaro?"

The junior high student blushed immediately, "I… I just do Suu, that's all…" She hoped that Suu-chan would not pursue the topic.

However the blonde haired girl grinned widely, "So, you love him then." She stated simply.

"What?" More blood rushed to her cheeks as her secret was out in the open, "I… I… I…"

"It's okay Shinobu!" Suu-chan continued grinning, "I like Keitaro also!"

Shinobu sighed and turned away, looking out the window again. "Why do you like him Suu?" She asked, honestly curious.

"He's fun to play with, he makes me laugh!" Beamed back Suu-chan.

"For me, he makes me feel safe and warm…" She said longingly. *Keitaro…*

"Safe?" Suu's expression changed to one of genuine concern. "Why safe?"

Shinobu stared out of the window but wasn't focussing on anything in particular, "It all began a few years ago…"

Four years ago

Hinata Springs

Maehara restaurant

"Shinobu!" A female voice shouted, "Your lunch is ready!"

Running down the stair a nine year old rosy-cheeked Shinobu is seen, beaming like any ordinary girl her age. She's shorter than she is now, wearing a long comfortable dress; her navy blue hair tied in two pigtails on either side of her head. She ran up to the table.

"What's for lunch okaasan?" She asked, beaming further.

"Your favourite Shinobu-chan." Maehara Takami smiled, "Ramen, salted fish, and some other little surprises."

"Arigatou okaasan!" She immediately began to lay into the rice and fish, her mother smiling at her.

The front door of their apartment opened and a fairly upset father, Maehara Sato walked into the kitchen in a huff.

"Anata what's wrong?" Asked his wife.

"It seems that business isn't doing so well, we are making less money from customers and the supplier has increased their prices also…" He sighed.

Shinobu was eating but casually listening to what they were saying.

"Could things improve any time soon?" Shinobu's mother said.

"I don't know, we'll have to see…"

The next few months passed and Sato was becoming more agitated at the lack of money. Shinobu understood that this was important but didn't know how until one day, they had an argument. She listened outside their room when was supposed to be asleep, peeking in through the door which was open a crack.

"We're falling into debt now!" He nearly shouted.

"Shh, you might wake Shinobu-chan…"

"Our living costs are more expensive also, we're spending more money on food and clothing these days…"

"Well," Takami began, "Shinobu-chan is growing up quickly, and we need to buy her new clothes for her school."

"I know…" He sighed, "I love my daughter, but we've had to sacrifice many luxuries in order to give her a good life…"

"What can we do? The problem revolves around Shinobu-chan…"

Shinobu held her mouth to stop her from gasping; her eyes began welling up as she heard everything they said about her.

"I've made a decision," The father declared, "I'm going to move to Tokyo."

The mother gasped, "But… why!"

He continued, "I have a friend who I can share his house with, I'll work in Tokyo for as long as it takes for our troubles to be over."

"And Shinobu-chan?"

"She'll stay with you for the time being," His eyes became downcast, "But I do want to see her once in a while."

Shinobu had run back to her room at this point and went straight inside her futon, hugging her blue teddy bear. She cried herself to sleep that night.

Present Day

Train 112

"As time went by the arguments increased and finally otousan left home…" Shinobu said sadly, "I stayed at the restaurant with okaasan."

"How did you end up at Hinata-sou?" Suu asked honestly.

"It happened a year ago…"

One year ago

Maehara Restaurant

It had been a couple of years since Sato had left the restaurant to live in Tokyo; Shinobu was very sad by these events but had to accept them. Not having much time on her hands, Takami had to run the restaurant by herself; she spent less time with Shinobu, making the young girl sadder. Trying to hide away her emotions, she instead began to focus more on her studies, socialising less with her classmates. Her father sent home money to keep the restaurant afloat, and her mother accepted it without question.

The young girl couldn’t help but notice the relationship between her parents becoming more strained by the day, her father called less, and now on most occasions they would argue on the phone, leading to one of them hanging up on the other. His visits home became less, and when he did, he spent most of his time with Shinobu, which made her happy, but she noticed that her mother wasn’t too pleased at this turn of events.

Then one week, the restaurant began to receive less and less customers. Eventually the visit of Sato would result in a key conclusion. It was another bad day at the restaurant, near to closure time. The only people sitting in the restaurant were Sato, Takami, and Shinobu on one table, a waiter here or there, and an elderly woman who sat at the far end.

"The restaurant is failing…" Sato sighed, "Our competitors have charged cheaper prices for their food, and we can’t afford to lower ours without going into the red."

Takami looked down, "I know… But what can we do about it?"

"We’ll have to close down the restaurant." Sato said bluntly.

"Wh… WHAT!" Takami shouted, "Why! We can still make it work!"

"I’m making more money from working in Tokyo than the restaurant!" Sato shouted back. "And… I want you to come with me…"

Takami looked at him sternly, "You can’t be serious, you know that this is my hometown."

"I know Takami-chan, but we all have to grow up sometimes." He sharply retorted.

Shinobu’s mother stood up, outraged, "What gives you the right to tell me what to do!" She pointed to her daughter, "I’ve had to take care of Shinobu alone for the last two years!"

Sato looked at his wife, a slight hint of anger in his eyes, "That’s why I want to you to come, so that I can spend some time with my daughter."

Takami froze for a second, "You can’t take her, a child belongs with her mother…"

"You’ve stopped me from seeing her!" He shouted back, "I want to spend some time with her away from you!"

The continued to bicker as Shinobu just looked down, the cause of their argument, as tears began to well up in her eyes, a new voice joined.

"Excuse me from intruding, but I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation."

They all recognised her at once, she was a regular to their restaurant, even when prices went up, and was always happy to be there. Through all that time they didn’t even catch her name. A shadow from the lamp overhead concealed the upper part of her face.

"Yes… What can we do to help?" Takami asked.

"The question is, what can I do to help you?" The old woman smiled.

They all had confusion looks on their faces before the old woman kneeled down to Shinobu’s level.

"Child, what do you want to do?" She asked sweetly.

Shinobu looked up a little and spoke out, still scared, "I… I want to stay here… I have friends at school. I… I don’t want to move house." More tears began to well up as a few made their way down her cheeks. The old woman handed her a tissue and patted her on the head.

"We now know what the child wants." She looked to both parents standing up using her walking stick to lean on, "What do you want to do?"

Sato looked to the woman, much shorter than him, but on the same level considering he was kneeling at the table, "I need to support the family, and the only way I can do that is by going to Tokyo to work."

Takami then began, "I… My mother…" She looked down, "She's been ill recently, and I have to stay around this area to look after her."

Sato was shocked, "Why didn't you tell me!"

"Because you were too busy with work!" She replied angrily.

"Then, if you both do that, how about I look after the child?" She angled her head to her left, "I own the girls dormitory on the hill there, I'm sure you know of it."

Or course, they had, it was renowned for being an inn for many years, and then being run as a dormitory for girls of all ages, for those children who find it easier to go to school from there rather than living in their old homes.

"So…" Grandma Hina continued after seeing their looks of deliberation, "What's your decision?"

Present Day

Train 112

"…And that's how I ended up at Hinata-sou. Otousan went to Tokyo to work and my mother left town to look after obaasan."

"So Shinobu is all alone?" Suu asked, looking sad.

"No… I have everyone in Hinata-sou; they are like my family now. Keitaro is the first boy I have ever met properly… But…" She looked down, "I do miss otousan and okaasan."

Suu got up and sat down next to her, beaming, "Then I'll try and make you happy any time I can Shinobu!" She hugged a surprised Shinobu and then raised one arm, "We'll find Keitaro if it's the last thing we do!"

Shinobu giggled at her friend’s apparent enthusiasm and smiled for a long while after.

Kyoto station

Very very late

"How many hours have we travelled?" A droopy-eyed Shinobu-chan complained to no one in particular.

They had just left a train after a trip around the north of Japan, taking wrong trains but eventually picking the right one. The sun had set many hours ago, and it was dark. The two girls were cold.

"Let's find somewhere to stay…" Shinobu said.

Walking out of the station, they were lucky to find an inn close by which was still open. Walking into the lobby they met a kindly old lady.

"Hello there, what can I do for you?" She asked.

"Umm, do you have any spare rooms left? We're tired and just want to stay a night, maybe more if need be." A nervous Shinobu asked.

"We only have one room I'm afraid." the woman spoke sadly, "However I can bring a spare mattress for your friend."

"Arigatou." Shinobu thanked the lady, "That would be ideal."

A few minutes later they had a room and a spare mattress to sleep on. Changing quickly into their pyjamas they settled into their futons, the warmth feeling very welcome to the cold outside. As soon as she was about to nod off, Shinobu felt a moving about in the room, and a presence near her. She froze, unsure of what to do. Turning her head slowly she saw a supposedly sleepwalking Suu, walking to her futon and climbing in.

"Suu…" She began, but couldn’t finish, because of a crushing feeling that surrounded her. Suu was hugging her, hard.

So this is what Kitsune-san meant… Shinobu struggled but eventually managed to breathe. Looking down to her friend, she saw her tears at the edge of her eyelids.

Overwhelmed with compassion Shinobu patted her head and wiped away her tears, sleeping like that the entire night.

Meanwhile

Two rooms away

A certain third year ronin couldn't sleep. Keitaro was tossing and turning throughout the night. Waking up fitfully he looked around and sighed. *I'm still here… When will I return to Hinata-sou…?* He turned around and lay on his side. As it was still dark, his hearing was overactive, he could hear every creak and slight movement in or around his room. That was when he became instantly aware of his door opening and sliding shut. Shuffling footsteps on his floorboard made him sweat more. *Who is this! I'm too afraid to see!*

Without notice something fell on him, making him yell out in surprise. He looked at the object and his eyes bugged out when he noticed it was Mutsumi, her nightgown slowly becoming looser around her shoulders. Keitaro began flailing his arms around, his nose bleeding again. Looking away he grabbed the nightgown and placed it securely around her shoulders before sighing to himself. Glancing at her face he could still see her eyes closed, and she continued to breathe slowly. *She sleepwalks then... I'd better take her back to her room.* He stood up and carefully escorted her back to her room, across the corridor. He laid her down in her futon and she immediately curled over and smiled to herself, hugging her pillow affectionately. Happy that he did something to help her he went back to his room and was thankfully not disturbed any more that night.

Author's Notes

Well, sorry for the delay, my computer was recently upgraded to an incredible system; it's beautiful, really. However as you get with such high powered systems, there were problems, and thus it had to be repaired, leading to a lack of access to my fics. Hopefully this chapter didn't bore you too much, and if I'm lucky then I might avoid the recent problems I've had with uploading things to Word XP seems to enjoy placing another line when I leave a paragraph, so dialogue is horribly spaced out, I'll try and fix it soon if it doesn't work.

I'm also considering revamping my entire fic, improving my third person speaker and trying to make the grammar even better in some cases.

Apologies for lack of Motoko in this chapter and for letting you see the general tedium of Shinobu's life, but I promise you that we will see more of her in the next chapter, and some unique features of her clan. The remainder will go hunting for the others, leaving Hinata-

sou empty.

Also, when I begin my LH/NGE crossover, I'm not sure whether to place it in the Love Hina section or the NGE section... It will be focussing mainly on the evolution of the NGE characters (the pilots and Misato) more than the LH ones. There will be humour as usual, but also more angst from Shinji and Asuka.

Bleh, let me know either way, email or review.

Until the next chapter,

- Jason

Chapter 17

The search begins…

Kyoto

Thursday 11th March

9:47AM

Keitaro stretched and yawned, he slept well, more peacefully than usual. Looking around he picked up his glasses and surveyed the room, remembering where he was. Getting up he brushed his teeth and looked out of the window. Glancing at his watch he decided to take an early morning bath in the hot springs. Grabbing a towel he went into the changing room and removed his robe before going into the hot spring. Placing his foggy glasses on a rock beside him, he slid into the water slowly, letting the warmth envelop him bit by bit. He sighed contentedly and closed his eyes. A few minutes later, he wasn't sure exactly since his watch was still in his room, the door to the hot springs opened. He dared a look but couldn't see much without his glasses, a blurry outline over the steam of the hot springs. Reaching behind him he felt out for his glasses and put them on. He wished he hadn't, for it was none other than Mutsumi with a towel wrapped round her.

"Good morning Urashima-kun!" She greeted happily, stepping into the water for the first time.

"M… M… Mutsumi-san!" Stammered a nosebleeding Keitaro, who backed away further, averting his eyes from her body.

"What is it Urashima-kun?" Mutsumi had by now had her entire body in the water, making Keitaro less embarrassed to look at her.

"Oh nothing Mutsumi-san." The fog had started to clear and he could see her face. She still had her familiar smile; her light-hearted demeanour made him feel calmer. "Did… Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, I slept well, but I was a little confused at the way I woke up in my futon…"

"Aah! About that…" Keitaro started, then stopped, holding his mouth, his face showing signs of guilt.

"Ara? Did I sleepwalk again? Did I disturb you last night Urashima-kun?" She said innocently.

"Y… You surprised me…" His mind wandered back to the previous night, "I sort of ‘sleepwalked’ you back into your futon. Please forgive me!" Keitaro placed his hands together and bowed his head.

"Arigatou Urashima-kun." She replied, "Sometimes I wake up in different rooms, and on a few occasions other buildings! I’m glad that you escorted me back safely."

"I… It was nothing Mutsumi-san."

They sat there in the water, the birds chirping away freely in the background. He heard a sigh to his right and looked at the elder girl.

"Urashima-kun…" She looked giddy, "Could you take me inside please? I’m feeling a little faint."

"S… Sure."

He stood up slowly, making sure that his towel was still on and hers also before making their way slowly inside. Going into their separate cubicles they emerged a moment later wearing their robes. Wavering a little Keitaro stood by Mutsumi and kept her steady as he walked her back to her room.

"You sure you don’t want me to come in?" He asked again.

"No, it’s okay, I’ll be fine, I just need to lie down for a short while." She replied, her voice straining as if trying to stay awake. She looked to him and smiled again, "I will knock on your door when I am ready to leave." He left her as she closed the door on him and walked back to his room.

He sighed, "What should I do now?"

Looking his bag he remembered the journal he bought and took it out again, flipping through the various pages. Taking a pen from one of the compartments in the bag, he began to write on the first page. He moved quickly over the age, filling it with his thoughts and feelings, not even consciously knowing what he was writing.

15 minutes later

A knocking on his door disturbed him, so he clicked off the pen, shut the journal and returned it to his bag as he stood up. He opened the door of the room to see a restored Mutsumi smiling at him.

"Shall we go?" She asked.

"Yep, I've got all my stuff packed. Let's go check out now."

On the way there they passed a room where two young girls were still sleeping, exhausted from their journey the night before. They both walked to the reception and gave the keys to the landlady, thanking her for their stay. The two ronins left, continuing on their journey.

Hinata-sou

10am

Naru, Mitsune and Naru were sitting in the living room; they were discussing important issues.

"So Suu took Shinobu-chan with her to find Keitaro?" Naru asked again.

"Yes, as was apparent by the note she left on her door." Motoko replied indicating said note that was laid flat on the table.

Mitsune was holding her chin, outwardly in deep thought. "Where would Keitaro go if he wanted to kill himself?"

"K… Kitsune! He wouldn't do that! He's not that desperate…" Naru replied, though there was a hint of doubt in her voice.

"We have no idea of where he went?" Motoko asked.

"Yeah… But when Shinobu spoke to him over the phone it sounded like he was in a train." Naru replied.

"I see…" Motoko said, mostly to herself. *Maybe I can use the family to help us out here…* "Please excuse me, I will retire to my room for the time being."

Motoko stood up and walked out of the room, up the two staircases to her room. Once she entered she closed the door and walked to her small shrine. Reaching underneath it she pulled out a small scroll which had the appearance of a typical questionnaire. She began to write on it:

Requisition: Search and locate missing persons.

Name of person(s): Urashima Keitaro, Maehara Shinobu, Kaorra Suu.

Last seen: Keitaro - Wednesday 10th March 1999, Tokyo University. Phone call later that day gave no indication as to location, but sounded like the inside of a train.

Shinobu and Suu – Last seen Thursday 11th March 1999, a note left by Suu told us that they went to find Keitaro.

Reason(s) for departure: Keitaro - Unknown, possibly shame.

Shinobu and Suu – To find Keitaro.

Action(s) to be taken: Contact sender as soon as possible of location.

Other details: Photos included.

She picked out a photo of Keitaro from her shelf; Suu had left it there when showing off the times he got drunk. She also had one of Shinobu and Suu and removed that from the shelf also. Motoko removed a small cylindrical tube with a screw on lid, her name was engraved on it, and placed the scroll and the photo inside, sealing it carefully. She walked upstairs to the roof and looked out over Hinata City. Removing a whistle from her sleeve, she blew into it in three short bursts, no sound could be heard. A few seconds later an eagle flew around Hinata-sou, attracted by the high pitched sound. Motoko flicked the container up into the air and saw the eagle grab it in its claws and fly away soaring high above the trees and buildings. *It's all a matter of time now…*

One hour later

Hinata-sou was quiet; Naru and Mitsune were watching a television programme on dolphins in the living room. They had no way of knowing how to find the missing people and so were trying to hide the pertinent fact that they were both worried out of their minds by focussing on something else.

Meanwhile, Motoko was seated in her room, looking over the items that she had packed in her bag. She knew that she would receive a reply and so prepared the things she needed to go on the trip. A fluttering at her window disturbed her, making her look up. It was the eagle, the capsule in her mouth. Motoko walked up to the bird and removed the capsule; the eagle left immediately after it had delivered the message. *Strange, it usually takes a day for information, to get it so quick means that they already knew who he was…* Opening it she began to read the contents.

Subject Keitaro was located in Kyoto town centre, Japan. Left a hotel earlier today; Address supplied. Photo included shows him accompanying unknown female.

Subjects' Shinobu and Suu located in Kyoto, Japan. Arrived very early in the morning and have since been sleeping in the same hotel as subject Keitaro.

End message.

Motoko folded up the paper and placed it inside her sleeve, she left her room and walked to the living room where the two other girls were sitting.

"I believe that I have located Keitaro and the others. If you wish you may follow me to help find them." She stated.

"Motoko… How do you know where they are?" Mitsune asked incredulously.

"I have my ways, you have to trust my judgement." She replied firmly.

"Well, I believe you Motoko-chan, we should get ready to pack Kitsune." They both got up and returned to their rooms to start packing.

Ten minutes later

Outside Hinata-sou

"We're ready Motoko-chan!" Naru shouted as they walked down the stairs.

Motoko was waiting with her bag and the three of them left Hinata-sou for their trip. Walking down the stairs at a steady pace they reached the teashop, they all walked in.

"Haruka-san…" Naru began, seeing that there were a few customers drinking there.

"Yes, what's wrong?" The elder woman asked, her arms folded around her apron. Looking over their appearance for a second she realised, "You're off to find Keitaro aren't you?" She smiled, the classic cigarette moved up a little as if amused. "Good luck then, I'll look after Hinata-sou."

"Arigatou Haruka-san." Naru bowed a little and the trio were off.

Haruka stood outside to watch them leave as a strange fog began to cover the ground she stood on. Quirking an eyebrow she angled her head to look behind her, seeing several short figures wearing lavender coloured robes. *The councilmen…* The fog cleared to show the old men who ran Hinata City. Haruka moved so she could see them fully.

"What are you doing here?" She phrased in a derogatory manner. *They interfered with my life enough as it is…*

"The promised ones have met…" One spoke up, ignoring Haruka.

"Promises last a lifetime…" Another interjected.

"However they can be broken…" The third disagreed.

"By another who holds a similar bond of fate…" The fourth said.

"So for the future to be fulfilled, we are here merely to observe…" The fifth one stated.

They were then silent, inviting Haruka to speak.

"Well… I don't care what you do…"

Her eyes became thin and sharp. Removing the cigarette from her mouth she flicked away a bit of ash. Becoming silhouetted by the sun behind the teashop, her entire front was hidden in darkness. Her eyes glowed white, her teeth visible also, the fangs strangely larger than usual.

"However, if you tamper with them in the way you did to me… Mere words won't be able to describe the pain you will receive."

The councilmen slowly bowed and backed away, the fog disappearing with them revealed the bare staircase. Closing her eyes, she breathed a sigh of relief, moving back towards

the teashop before stopping. The upper half of her face was hidden in shadow, but she seemed to be looking far into the distance. A tear streamed down her left cheek that she quickly wiped away before entering the shop, but not before she uttered a single word.

"Seta…"

Meanwhile

Kyoto

Keitaro sighed, he had been away from Hinata-sou for two days and felt lighter, he could move without any worries over where the next attack would come from. However he still felt sadness, one that he could not place, over leaving the place where he made his childhood promise. Looking at the form of a smiling Mutsumi, even her simple act of walking, it was as if she enjoyed living life. She turned to him, noticing his attention.

"Urashima-kun?" She asked inquisitively.

"Oh nothing." He smiled, "I was just thinking… That's all."

She glanced at her watch. "I should be making my way home now… I've been away for a while now."

Keitaro was somewhat sad that she would be leaving him soon. "Where do you live Mutsumi-san? I should help you home what with your health being so poor."

"Ara? Really?" Her eyes widened, "Are you sure? It is very far…"

"It doesn't matter, so long as you get home safely." He replied.

"Well, I live near Okinawa…"

"Okinawa… Okinawa… Okinawa…" Her voice echoed in Keitaro's head as he tried to comprehend how she managed to make it to Toudai, let alone get back from there. He looked at a map usually given to tourists and pictured where he was in comparison to Okinawa. He paled seeing the distance they had to cover. *What! That's…* He measured it roughly using the scale. *That's 1250 kilometres!* He turned to Mutsumi.

"Do you have any idea how to get there?"

"Yes… We take a boat!" She smiled, producing a ticket from her bag.

"I see… Well I'll get one ticket with you also."

Half an hour later

Tokyo train station

"Three tickets for the next train to Kyoto please." Motoko directed towards the ticket seller.

"Adult or child? Is that just a single or a return? And for what train?"

Motoko replied coolly, "One adult, two child tickets, and make them single please."

"Okay… That'll be 16000 yen please."

Motoko looked to the two other girls, who were slyly edging away. Clearing her throat she noticed them freeze and turn slowly to face the kendo girl. Seeing the somewhat angry expression in her eyes, they reluctantly reached into their bags to pull out various bills, and handed them to Motoko, who then withdrew her own money.

"You seats are in coach D, so you will all be able to share a table between the three of you."

"Arigatou." Motoko said, accepting the tickets.

She gave the adult ticket to Mitsune, whose tears flowed down her cheeks seeing the amount she paid for one little ticket which couldn't win her anything. Naru received the second child ticket.

Motoko began to speak, "Our train shall be departing at 12:15. The time is 11:40. I suggest we purchase some food for the journey to Kyoto now instead of waiting until we reach there to eat."

Naru looked around, "Let's go and buy something from that shop then…"

A few minutes later the elder girls emerged with two bags filled with various forms of chocolates and drinks.

"Motoko-chan, are you sure you won't have anything to eat?" Naru asked.

"Arigatou, but no Naru-sempai, I am quite content with my fruit." She replied, having only picked out few fruits from the shop.

"That fruit won't satisfy you for long Motoko, chocolate is the best way to get a figure like mine!" Mitsune remarked, placing her hands on her hips to show off her curves, causing an attendant to walk straight into a pillar.

"Chocolate weighs ones body down, and only supplies energy that I don't need for this voyage. Fruit is the best way to increase my stamina. Besides," She looked at Mitsune, "I eat chocolate rarely, and it's not a given that I would wish to attain a body like yours."

Motoko turned away to find a place to sit, leaving a fuming Mitsune behind her, a visible vein throbbing on her forehead.

"The cheek! She should have more respect for her elders."

Naru just laughed at this, "You're one to talk! You should act more grown-up, sometimes you're so childish."

Mitsune pouted, "That's not always true…"

"However," Naru continued, "Motoko does act older than she is…" Naru looked at the girl in question as she walked towards a faraway bench, "Maybe she's the one that has to stop growing up so fast…"

A while later

Cruise ship Sohryu

The waves lapped repeatedly away from the cruise ship, powering through the deep blue sea at a steady rate of knots. The refreshing sea air was taken into the lungs of Keitaro, his hair being ruffled constantly by the wind. He looked off to the horizon and could see the faraway coast of southern Japan. Some strands of hair moved in front in his face, he averted his gaze to the owner of the long brown hair.

"Ara, this wind is getting stronger…" Mutsumi combed the hair behind her ears and looked down quickly. "Ara…"

Keitaro followed her stare and began to nosebleed again seeing her dress billow up from the updraft of wind. *I… I can see her panties!* He calmed down seeing that she controlled her dress from riding up any further. His glasses fogged over as she apologised to him.

"N… No need to say anything Mutsumi-san… Shall we go inside now?" *I don't want to lose too much blood from seeing any more parts of her body.* Walking into the ship they sat in one of the restaurants by the window, looking over the stern of the ship. People were slowly filling the swimming pool as the rare sunlight showered them in warmth. Keitaro focussed on the person opposite him, who was staring back with equal intensity.

"Mu… Mutsumi-san… Do you think you'll be reapplying for Toudai next year?" He asked.

"Of course!" She replied happily, "No matter how many years it takes I'll reapply until get into Toudai."

"But why Mutsumi-san? Why did you choose Toudai?"

"It's a secret." She put a hand to her lips and giggled.

Keitaro sighed defeated. *It looks like she won't be telling me why any time soon…* He looked up to notice her looking at her watch then at her map.

"Ara… We need to get off here…"

Keitaro looked at the map and only saw a black pen circling blue ocean. "Mutsumi-san, how do we get off? There's no island here for the ship to stop at."

Mutsumi just smiled and packed up the map. "Follow me."

She dragged him outside and to the upper deck where for some reason or other there seemed to be no one there. Keitaro looked around the edge.

"Where is everyone? Usually this area is crowded with people…"

"Urashima-kun!" Shouted Mutsumi.

Keitaro turned around and immediately facefaulted into the ground. Mutsumi had a large basket with sandbags on the side and a large heater was now filling up a large plastic sheeting.

"M… M… Mutsumi-san! What is that!"

"Ara… Don't you recognise it? It's a hot air balloon." A few seconds later and the balloon now hovered evenly above the basket. "Climb in Urashima-kun, it'll be a short journey from here."

Hesitant, Keitaro climbed into the basket as Mutsumi cut the string, making the kanrinrin fall into the basket headfirst. He peeked out over the edge to see the ship now rapidly decreasing in size.

"Someone… HELP ME!" The view pans out to show Keitaro screaming from the hot air balloon high above the ship, moving further and further away from other human contact.

Authors Notes

Well, I must humbly accept your anger at my delay in what is essentially the first anniversary of publishing this writing on the web (1st October). There is nothing much I can say except that there are many events leading to the delay, and the assignment will soon be coming thick and fast…

Sorry again to all of you, and please let this chapter be my penance.

- Jason

Chapter 18

Pursuit of the Ronin / Adventures in Dreams

Train 112

3:54PM

The train had been travelling for a couple of hours. Coach D was relatively peaceful, the three residents of Hinata-sou sitting at a table, Naru and Mitsune sitting next to each other, Mitsune's cheek pressed up against the window whilst her shoulder now supported the head of the new Toudai student. Motoko was also sleeping, simply leaning back into her chair; her hands tucked into the sleeves of the gi, her katana leaning by her side against the window. It has been a relatively quiet journey, their carriage had only a few people in it, and they were mostly businessmen on their way to a meeting. The girls had a few hours of sleep after having their snacks, the stress of finding out where they were getting to them eventually.

The train stopped at some small station and a horde of tourists came on board, mostly single older men, although there were one or two children along with their parents. By the skin tone they seemed to be from California, the accent in their voice confirming this. A large man, his tight trousers and shirt struggling against his mass, looked around the now crowded carriage and chose to sit next to Motoko.

The girl in question didn't notice his presence as her eyes began to move erratically underneath her eyelids.

Half an hour before

Somewhere over the ocean

Keitaro sat in the corner of the basket, his legs flat on the thankfully level floor. Being in the corner with the most shadow, his eyes were hidden behind his glasses, which deflected any stray beam of light. Mutsumi was standing up looking out into the distance serenely, glancing back she noticed Keitaro's position and bent over towards him.

"Are you okay Urashima-kun?" She asked sweetly.

Keitaro looked up, his eyes were closed, "Yes Mutsumi-san… But…" He lowered his face for a second before yelling out in frustration, "I thought you said it would take no time at all!"

"Ara… Well the winds changed, so we need to trust them to ensure we get there." She glanced out to sea, "Why don't you take a look over the edge?" She asked curiously.

He sweatdropped "I… I've never liked heights really…" *I should be used to them by the number of times I've flown over Hinata Springs…*

"Ara… If you say so…" A brief look of disappointment shrouded her face before being replaced with wonder as she saw a flock of gulls flying alongside them.

Keitaro couldn't see them from his position, but he could clearly see the colour of her panties, again, from the crosswind that racked the basket and her dress at the same time. Blushing once more he looked away, not wanting to take advantage of the weaker girl. Seeing her legs begin to sway he looked up to see her head tilted to her left, her pupils vanishing.

"Mutsumi-san!"

Leaping up and making sure not to rock the basket, he managed to grab her before she fell over the edge. Laying her back on the floor he carefully made a comfortable position for her with some of the sandbags that were inside with them. Resting her head against the back of the basket he brush a lock of hair away from her face. He smiled at her.

"Are you okay now Mutsumi-san?"

"Y… Yes…" She smiled back at him.

To Keitaro it seemed that the distance between the two of them began to shrink rapidly before Mutsumi gasped as the basket began to rock.

"What is this!" Keitaro shouted out confused, before looking up to see that the pale blue sky had been replaced with enraged dark grey clouds spouting rain and lightning.

The ronin began to panic; looking over the edge to see the ocean choppy as the lightning illuminated it temporarily. Then the lightning scratched the side of the balloon, a small tear appearing in it leaking air.

"M… M… Mutsumi-san! We're falling!" He shouted above the thunder and rain as they began to plummet down towards the ocean surface.

"Ara ara…" Was her only reply before they landed and were soon engulfed by the waves.

Unknown location

White. Painfully closing his eyes Keitaro got to his feet and slowly reopened them to get accustomed to the light. What he saw was a strange room, a circular dome shape, completely white and bare, save for a door at the far end of the room, from which more light came from around its edges. Confused he walked on towards it before reaching halfway and finally noticing something.

White light… I'm going towards the light… Does this mean I'm dead? He thought about this without realising that his legs were carrying him towards the door, and before he knew it, the door slid open and he was plunged into a white light.

Meanwhile

Hinata Springs

The mist grew until the ground could no longer be seen. The diminutive figures of the councilmen came into view, their eyes closed as if thinking. One opened his eyes and looked up into the sky.

"Dreaming… They are sleeping." He said

Another spoke up, keeping still, "True, but dreams are of the individual…"

"We can make it a dream for them all…" The third said.

"Dreams should not be altered." The second opposed.

The first had made a decision, "He shall see their dreams, but not interfere with them…"

They vanished as the mist grew momentarily, drifting away through the streets. As the somewhat directed mist moved, along its path lay the base of the stairs below Hinata-sou, or the Hinata teahouse, which was even closer. The door slid open with a start as the usually calm figure of Urashima Haruka stood there, glaring at the mist, which oddly noticed her gaze and immediately moved away from her. As it dissipated into the streets Haruka continued to stare at the town. *What are they up to?* Her cigarette burned brighter before she remembered she had customers to serve, so she returned to her job.

A minutes later

Unknown location

Keitaro was lost in a world of white. *Is this what being dead feels like? It's so peaceful…* He closed his eyes for an instant and reopened them to a dark clearing in a forest, a large creature facing his, its harsh breath visible due to the cold chill in the air.

"W… What?"

Keitaro's arms felt heavy and he looked at his paler hands and almost dropped the unsheathed katana. Not only that, he noticed he was wearing a white gi and a dark red hakama, his feet were warm in the socks and sandals. *Am I taller than I used to be?*

"What is going on…?"

He paused and put a hand to his mouth. *My accent has changed! Why!* The monster then spoke to him telepathically.

"You have come to kill me, are you ready to die?"

Keitaro thought about this. *I'm getting a sense of déjà vu.* Without wanting to, he replied.

"You will die at my hands monster," His hands moved around of their own accord into a battle stance, katana at the ready, "Ready to face your end?"

The monster sneered and crouched down, readying a lunge forwards, *"It is you who shall die child!"*

Keitaro began to sweatdrop in fear as both of them jumped towards one another. *What's going on! I can't control my body!* Within a fraction of a second the two bodies had met in the centre of the clearing, sparks flying from clash of the katana and the armoured left hand of the creature.

"Impressive skill you have shown child, were it not for my reinforced claw you would be in two by now. However…"

A white line appeared around chest level for Keitaro as he flew back several metres. Looking at his clothing he noticed the upper part of the clothing was torn in three places revealing several bandages wrapped around his chest. Looking up he saw the monster had shifted position, his right arm perfectly taut and to its side as if it had just sliced at something. Looking down at the wrap on his chest he realised something. *This is Motoko-*

chan's clothing… But where is this, why am I here? He couldn't stop and think about it anymore before he leaped up in the air again.

"Zan Gan Ken!" He yelled out, making the sword's molecular structure grow to the same density as a diamond, the speciality for an attack that could destroy rocks.

Bringing it down upon the turtle-esque creature, he noticed the armoured claw going up again, but this time a loud cracking sound could be heard as the sword plunged into the supposedly impenetrable shield. Widening its eyes as the sword began to break the layer of skin beneath it, it roared in agony as a viscous fluid started to flow from the open wound. Using its right arm, and slicing upwards, it caught Keitaro off-guard. Unable to pull the sword out in time, he turned both avoiding the attempted hit and making the wound larger, only infuriating the creature who then slapped him away brutally. Stunned for now he slammed against one of the trees at the outskirts of the clearing. Now temporarily paralysed from the blow, he looked up to see the creature writing around in pain as he ripped out the sword, throwing it to the ground. Turning to Keitaro it sneered.

"You have broken through my defences, but now you have no weapon to maim me or…" The creature lunged at Keitaro, *"To parry my final attack!"*

Keitaro knew it was hopeless, he could taste the blood building up in his mouth, "I'm going to die…" He lost consciousness before the fatal impact.

At that moment

Unknown location

However it never came, his eyes were open and he was flying through the air. *Huh?* Again his clothing had changed to one of a long material; his darker skinned foot outstretched.

"Oniisan!" He yelled happily.

His foot impacted with the tanned face of someone else who flew back a few metres chuckling away. Despite leaning over, he towered over Keitaro, who controllably continued to beam despite being confused inside.

"How are you imouto-chan?" He asked, his smile visible despite his eyes being in shadow.

"I'm fine, just a little bored…" *I see this must be Suu-chan, her accent is strong.*

"Go outside then, your sister is there so you can play with her." He straightened up making Keitaro feel even smaller, "I have some things to do inside before joining you."

Running as fast as his little feet could go Keitaro ran outside into the garden. The sun blinding him for a second he saw the silhouette of Amara Suu. He began to fear the smirk on her face.

"So Kaorra? Ready?" She said as a small albino crocodile walked out from behind her, its red eyes gleaming.

"Roger!" Keitaro chimed back, surprising himself when he withdrew a small weapon from behind his back. *Not as advanced as the things she's created around Hinata-sou…* The crocodile licked its teeth in anticipation and lunged at Keitaro, who was about to scream.

One second later

Unknown location

"… and so by integrating 1/x we get ln x."

Keitaro kept quiet in time to look around a familiar room. *This can't be Hinata-sou can it? The layout is the same…*

"So, did you understand all that?"

Keitaro looked across him to see a man sitting at the same kotatsu as him, the sunlight casting a shadow over his back, only his rectangular glasses being visible. Keitaro could feel a blush reaching across his face. *Why am I blushing? Who is this person?* Nodding timidly he watched the man reach over to pick up a cup of what looked like coffee, finishing it off in one gulp before closing the textbook in front of him.

"Well, time's up, I'll see you same time tomorrow!" The man stood up and walked off, opening and closing the door to the room.

Who was he? I've never seen him before, and this is Hinata-sou… Keitaro stopped thinking when he realised that his vision became blurry, tear droplets falling from his eyes.

"Why didn't I say it…?"

His head drooped downwards, and Keitaro realised he was wearing a schoolgirl's outfit. His hands were embedded in the skirt, shaking a little as the fingers dug further in.

"Hey Kitsune! Are you going to stay in there all day? Lunch is ready!" A familiar voice rang out from beyond the doorway.

Keitaro started. *That voice!* He quickly rubbed his eyes cleared his throat and replied.

"Yeah yeah, I'll be there soon!" The Osaka accent was obvious as he replied.

Looking at his dress he straightened out the creases in vain, sighed dejectedly and walked to the doorway and opened it.

Instantly

Unknown location

Keitaro blinked to make sure he wasn't imagining things, he had just supposedly walked out into a corridor, but instead he was in a kitchen. Looking around he began to pick out food items from the various cupboards and shelves, and picking out utensils from the drawers. Within minutes he had set out enough food to serve a couple of people.

"Right now to prepare…"

Keitaro watched in fascination as his hand began to move over the food and utensils faster than he could have ever believed, and with such skill. *I wish I could cook like this…* Slipping a little for the first time when cutting up a potato, he grimaced and put the finger to his lips to stem the bleeding. A small yelp escaped through his lips as he tasted the copper of the blood. Holding back his tears he went to another drawer and put a plaster on the affected finger and returned to the chopping.

Several minutes later

A culinary delight had just been prepared. A dozen plates filled up with small exquisite types of food on each. Keitaro marvelled at this as he lifted up the first tray and walked out of the kitchen, and placing a foot on the door sliding it open carefully, he walked into the dining room. Kneeling at a table were two older people who were laughing with one another.

"Otousan, okaasan, dinner is ready!" Keitaro said cheerfully.

"Arigatou Shinobu-chan." The woman replied.

Keitaro smiled again and bowed slightly before returning to the kitchen to get the rest of the plates. Soon all the plates had arrived at the table, and Keitaro sat down to join them.

"Mmm, this is good Shinobu-chan!" The man said happily.

Wiping her mouth with a napkin the woman nodded, "I agree too, marvellous Shinobu-chan."

Keitaro just laughed as the two parents continued to eat.

One second later

Unknown location

"Huh?" Keitaro said to himself.

He was facing a common viewpoint for him, facing Hinata Springs, a foggy day however. His right arm was up in the air, waving to someone walking down the steps. *That's the teacher from earlier!* He looked to his right noticing a glint from the corner of his eyes. *Kitsune!* She was different from before, wearing a school uniform and shorter hair. However her eyes betrayed emotion, there was obvious melancholy pictured as she watched the departing figure.

"Kitsune, are you okay?" Keitaro asked.

A moment went by before her eyes reverted to their usual fox-like state. "What are you talking about Naru-chan? Of course I'm fine!" She seemed to lose some of her laid back attitude though. *I'm not so sure…*

"Okay, I believe you…" He said cautiously.

From behind her, the quiet Haruka appeared with a look similar to one of Mitsune's, but also a sharp edge to the stare she gave to certain portions of the fog. Keitaro couldn't understand this.

"Naru…" Haruka turned to him, "A letter arrived for you earlier today. Hina-obaasan isn't here now so I'm giving it to you now."

Keitaro stared at the front of the letter with a mild curiosity, but his fingers were trembling. *This looks like the official letter I got from Toudai…* Opening the letter meticulously, he pulled out the letter inside.

Reading over he began to smile as it was apparent that Narusegawa had been accepted to take part in the exams for the 1999/2000 period. Smiling to himself he looked out to Hinata Springs and a few tears welled up in his eyes.

He then began to feel light, a feeling of his very being floating up into the sky, the colour that of lavender. As he rose up, he felt the need to break out, and he did so.

5:12pm

Unknown location

"…shima-kun…? Urashima-kun?" Keitaro opened his eyes to see Mutsumi looking down at him with concern on her face.

"What the…?" He lifted his head up and looked around, sitting up carefully. They were on a small island, he was washed up on the beach, the water licking at his bare feet, and the palm trees further in from the beach. He felt his head and could smell the salt from the ocean in his hair. "What was I dreaming of…?" He tried to remember but could only get flashes that made no sense to him.

"Ara… You're okay now!" Mutsumi smiled sitting down next to him.

"Yes I am, arigatou Mutsu…" Keitaro replied before his eyes bugged out at noticing her state of undress.

"Ara…?" She said confused as Keitaro held his nose.

"Mutsumi-san! Why are you wearing just a bikini!" He said pointing to her bulging melons.

"Ara… My clothes were wet and I needed to dry them off the sand." She answered pointing to her dress and top that were resting on her watermelons behind her. "Besides, I was hot also and needed to cool down in the water!" She beamed.

Keitaro blushed and calmed down. "Do you know where we are Mutsumi-san?" He had to force himself to keep his eyes from straying to her chest by slapping his cheek.

"No… I haven't had a good look around yet…" She looked off to the horizon and then her eyes became half-closed before jerking open suddenly.

"Mutsumi-san! Are you okay?" He caught her before she fell back, one hand breaking her fall.

She looked at him and a blush spread across both their cheeks as the distance grew shorter between them, Mutsumi being the one closing the gap. Removing his glasses she planted a kiss on his lips. He could taste the salt crystals on her lips as she pressed harder before releasing him. Sitting there shocked his heart began to pound faster. *My first kiss! From such a beautiful girl!* His joy turned to one of bewilderment. *Why did she kiss me?* He was about to ask her before she finally fell faint, landing softly on the sand, his glasses dropping at her feet.

"Mutsumi-san!"

Keitaro began to shake her slightly to wake her up. The sun rapidly setting behind the horizon, the waves washing more water onto his tattered glasses, sand and salt sticking to the lenses.

Meanwhile

Kyoto

Shinobu cracked an eyelid open and yelped when she saw Kaorra right in her face, but still asleep.

"Suu?" Shinobu began to shake her friend.

"Suu want to sleep more…" The princess pouted, hugging Shinobu closer, forcing more air out of her lungs.

"Suu! We've been sleeping for a long time!" Getting an idea Shinobu followed through, "Aren't you hungry?"

Suu began to drool into Shinobu's pyjamas, "Mmm… Bananas…"

Success! "Yes Suu, but only if you get up!"

"Okay then!" standing up suddenly, she was already dressed in her school uniform, and after rubbing her eyes and a few cat-like yawns, she was her usual hyperactive self.

Shinobu sighed. *This could take getting used to…*

Two minutes later

They walked out of their room into the dining area where the manageress of the inn saw them.

"You two have been sleeping in for a while, given the time you arrived last night, prepared a light meal for when you get up."

"You got any bananas?" Suu asked eagerly, putting on a cute face.

"Well, now that you mention it, we did get a new shipment in this morning…" The owner stopped seeing Suu polish off five in a matter of seconds.

"Gomen nasai… She really likes bananas. Arigatou for tolerating us." Shinobu bowed to the owner.

"Oh don't be silly, so long as you can pay me it's okay."

Shinobu while still bent over paled slightly; straightening up she handed the credit card to the woman. "Please charge our stay and meal on this."

20 minutes later

Outside the inn

The two young girls looked out at the sky; the sun setting created soothing colours across the various cloud formations in the distance.

"It's late Suu… We need to find Keitaro, but we've reached the limit of the credit card." Shinobu sighed. *I've spent all of the money given to me by my parents…* "What do we do now?"

"Hmm…" Suu put a finger to her rosy cheek, pondering serious before moving closer to

Shinobu with an evil glint in her eyes, "I think it's about time we use our bodies to make money…"

Shinobu gasped loudly, "S… Suu… What are you doing?"

She began to cower away as the wall behind her showed a larger shadow holding in each hand a mechanical instrument, a drill in the left and a blowtorch the right. As the head turned to the side, the teeth were shown as thin edges as Suu giggled. Moving closer, the shadow grew darker around Shinobu.

"Nooooo!" She shouted as the sounds of metal scraping, hammering, drilling, wires fizzling, typing and welding were heard, drowning out her cries for help.

Meanwhile

Train 112

The girls were sleeping soundly, their train journey being delayed due to some leaves on the line. Mitsune was snoring fairly loudly, her drool making a mess on her top, her hair becoming matted against the window. Naru was quiet when asleep, her chest moving in and out the only sign of her being alive as she continued to lean against Mitsune's shoulder. Motoko still sat perfectly still, her fringe hiding her facial expression.

The large man next to her cast an eye over the two opposite him and shook his head, for some reason not liking them. Turning to his seating companion, he looked the kendo girl up and down, and began to leer at her, her state of vulnerability appealing to him more. Carefully moving his right hand he placed it lightly on the red hakama of Motoko, and stretched across with his other hand. *Finally, less people! I can do what I've wanted to do for the past two hours!* His left hand then touched the chest area of the gi.

Opening her eyes suddenly, she glared at the man as he began to press more with both hands. Gripping her bokken with her right hand, she landed a cracking blow to his jaw, sending him flying across the alley into another empty booth opposite them. Turning to him, she saw his eyes were swirling around as his jaw now bore a painful purple bruise, which was swelling up rapidly. Returning the bokken to her side she crossed her arms and closed her eyes. However instead of the peace she usually found, she began to shiver. *What is this feeling? Why am I shaking? I'm not cold… Am I… Afraid?* Her mind began to think of the things that the man would've done to her had she not been on guard from him. Although most of these scenarios were nigh on impossible, she couldn't help but feel insecure. *I was almost violated…* The gi stopped the man from having a good feel, but as he pushed in more, she felt it more, eventually worrying her to such an extent that she used an attack on him. Thinking of the two men that she had the most contact with in her life, she shuddered. A shadowy man with a bandanna, his clothing that of a rogue and a distorted image of Keitaro, if he was really a pervert. Calming down her shivers, she had

only one thought in her mind, which she mumbled out loud.

"All men are perverts…"

She spoke as a tear rolled down her cheek.

Author's Notes

Haha… Erm…

puts hand behind head

Will sorry do? I've had so much work to do lately, I couldn't spend any free time on writing, and when I could I didn't spend enough time on it to really focus… So in a way I had writer's block.

Regarding questions, Skyrocket, I like to pronounce Kaolla as Kaorra since, to me, it sounds cuter, and Shinobu does like to call her Kaorra throughout the anime series, the 'r' sound being more prevalent to my ears. That is the only reason why :)

I have also removed the 'knickers' reference and replaced it with 'panties'; it sounds more Japanese, sorry for trying to infiltrate this fic with British terminology. Well, you can't blame me for trying :)

This will be running alongside my other fic, "What Might Have Been - OMAKE!" Keep an eye out for it…

Humblest apologies,

- Jason

Chapter 19

Adventures / Resurgence of the Past

Near Okinawa

7:12pm

Mutsumi awoke to see branches and large leaves high above her. She rose up, making a few leaves fall from her body; she had been covered in them as her legs remained warm from the remaining few that lay there. Holding her head as the dizzy spell from getting up so quickly passed, she began to focus on her surroundings more. Looking off, she could see nothing but forest, the palm trees extended far into the distance. To her left through a break in the trees she could hear the sounds of water, the beach where they were washed up on. Glancing to her right, she jumped slightly at the sight of a slumped Keitaro, snoozing away in a seated position. Smiling a little she placed a hand on his face and stroked his cheek gently. This resulted in him waking up with a start, and he looked at her, and his face changed instantly from one of sleep to one of delight.

"Mutsumi-san! You're alright!" He exclaimed.

"Ara... Gomen nasai..." She put a hand to her head, "I'm fainting more often these days. It must be such a bother for you..."

"No!" Keitaro stopped her, "It's no bother... I just..." Keitaro stopped and blushed, faltering his speech, "I just worry for you..."

:"Ara..." She moved closer to him, "You're so kind to me Urashima-kun!"

This only made him blush more. Mutsumi looked around a bit more, and asked him, turning chibi in the process, "Where are we by the way?"

Keitaro face-faulted into the earth, leaping immediately, his clothing and hair spiking up, "We're stuck on a deserted island! Can't you remember!" He paused and calmed down. *Oh yeah, she did tell me that she forgets things...*

"Are you sure?" She didn't seem convinced, inspecting the area surrounding them, "There might be people living here." She looked at him, "Have you searched?"

Keitaro paled and realised he hadn't, " Umm... Not exactly..."

"Well..." She stood up, showing her curvaceous body to him again, holding a hand out for him, "Shall we go and look Urashima-kun?"

Much to his own amazement, his closed his eyes and stood up with her help. "Okay Mutsumi-san, but first you should put on your clothes, it'll get cold at night."

"Ara, you're right, wait one minute."

She picked up the clothes off the floor and began to put them on her now dry bikini. Keitaro turned away quickly to avoid a nosebleed and for Mutsumi's own innocence. A few minutes had passed and soon he felt the presence of her breasts in the small of his back.

"Shall we go now Urashima-kun?" She spoke as her head appeared over his right shoulder.

A small trickle of blood left his nose as he managed to stammer, "O... Okay then!"

About to move off, he was surprised to find Mutsumi being the one to lead the way, skipping happily between the trees and holding his hand as she did so.

"M... Mutsumi-san! Wait! Don't go so fast!" He pleaded, but she didn't listen, humming a familiar but happy tune to herself.

As they went through the trees, they failed to spot several pairs of eyes glinting at them from behind bushes. Each one then flashed white briefly, a star-like shape appearing in each eye before vanishing into the darkness.

7:30pm

Kyoto

"Hmm... Where are they?"

Naru looked at a map trying to figure where they were. Mitsune and Motoko were behind her.

"According to my sources, they should be located here, Naru-sempai." Motoko indicated a place on the map.

"Okay, we'll go there first then Motoko-chan." Naru cheerfully smiled back.

Motoko continued to walk behind her, but in complete silence, not even keeping an eye out to her surroundings in case there was any danger. Naru was trying to coax Mitsune away from the restaurants, in case they ran out of money before they found everyone. Mitsune looked back to see a troubled Motoko, her eyes strangely glazed over.

"Motoko? You okay?" The girl from Osaka asked.

Motoko jumped, stunning Mitsune to a degree that it made her open her eyes momentarily. Collecting herself together, she replied coolly, "I'm fine Mitsune-san, arigatou."

Unconvinced, she raised an eyebrow, "Whatever you say..." She turned back to Naru, but wanted to raise the issue with Motoko again.

Meanwhile

In another part of Kyoto

A small crowd had gathered around a stall in a main tourist spot. At this table sat the diminutive figure of Maehara Shinobu. Next to her stood an oddly dressed Kaorra Suu, wearing clothes similar to that of a circus ringmaster. She had in her hand a traditional megaphone, that without any electronic enhancement.

Putting it to her mouth she began to speak to the gathered audience, the megaphone punctuating her voice by expanding and contracting at every other syllable. "Welcome ladies and gentlemen! I am here to show you a freak of nature..." Shinobu gasped at this and held her head in her hands in shame, "A girl so strong she could make trees topple over, even by looking at them." She turned to Shinobu, using her arm to show them the 'freak', "I am willing to give the first person that beats her in an game of arm-wrestling the sum of 100000 yen!"

The crowd began to murmur amongst themselves, pointing and chuckling at the now blushing girl hiding her face away from the stares.

Now that Suu was sure that she had their attention, she continued. "The charge is 500 yen per arm-wrestle. Right hand only. The first person to win against her wins the money. So..." She passed her gaze over the crowd for effect, "Who will go first?"

A chorus of people began to chime up, all men. "Okay then, you first sir!"

A large, hulking brute came out from behind the throngs of people, although standing seven foot tall made sure he could be seen. He had tattoos on his arms, the left with the character for 'kill', the right the characters for 'death'. Smiling inanely, showing his yellow teeth he sat down at the table, holding out his right hand to the little girl sitting in front of him, who accepted it reluctantly. *Hmm, her hand is cold...* The man mused. *She must know that she's going to lose to me!* Shinobu looked to Suu, who winked at her.

"Three! Two! One! Begin!" Suu chanted.

For an instant, nothing happened, everyone except for Suu and possibly Shinobu, who was still in two minds about whether or not it would actually work, thought the man would pound the opponents hand into the table. He looked at the girl in astonishment, who seemed to be calm with only the tiniest bit of strain appearing on her face. Placing more power into it his face became redder as the arteries and veins on his forehead and arm became visible. Shinobu's hand only moved a millimetre to the left. Then she began to fight back, and slowly she made a noticeable difference in the angle, now precariously close to her winning. With a sharp push she slammed his hand onto the table, much to the astonishment of everyone watching and the participant involved. Clutching his hand in pain, he stood up carefully and nursing it he left the table mumbling to himself.

Suu smiled, "Any more takers?"

Fewer people started shouting out for their go, but these seemed more skilful than the sheer strength that the first had. Suu began to pick them out and asked for them to form a queue. Shinobu sighed and remembered what Suu told her...

A few hours ago

"What is this Suu?" Shinobu asked, pointing at her new limb which was remarkably human, her old arm hidden behind her jacket.

"It's one of my works in progress." Suu stated, bringing out a blackboard and chalk, magically changing into a black cloak and mortar and some normal clothing underneath, holding a wooden pointer.

"I plan to make a true mecha one day using my skills, so this would be a good time to test some things." She indicated pictures and blueprints of arms and using her pointer before crossing her arms, "Try clenching your fist."

Shinobu did just that, she thought out the instruction and the arm did so with ease. Suu picked up a piece of wood and opened the hand and placed it in there. "Try again." She said.

Once more the hand closed in, but now crushing the wood to pieces, making it fall apart and scare Shinobu. Suu chuckled awkwardly.

"Ahh... I think I need to lower the strength, we don't want you to crush their hands." Suu brought out a screwdriver and opened up the wrist to reveal gears, metallic tendons and other objects, including a little dial. Inserting the flat-headed tip into the dial, she turned it anti-clockwise by one revolution and then closed the hatch.

"How about now?" Suu picked up another piece of wood and placed it within the hand and Shinobu tried her best to break it but it wouldn't. Releasing her grip, the wood had marks where her fingers were breaking into it. "Perfect!" Suu said happily.

Shinobu was amazed, "Suu, you're a genius! Are you sure this will work against normal people?"

"Of course it will!" She replied confident in her creation, "The artificial cartilage and tendons are stronger than any human bones, and can easily overpower them."

"Suu..." Shinobu warily asked, "How can you make these things?"

Suu just winked at her, "It's a secret!" Pulling out a watch she yelped, "Aah! We're running out of time! We need to get some money before we can move on. Let's go Shinobu!"

"Y... Yes..." Shinobu haltingly complied and was being dragged by Suu to where they would earn their money.

Near Okinawa

8pm

They had been walking for a while, Keitaro in front of Mutsumi batting away the bushes and branches that got in their way. Keitaro wiped his forehead. *This is hard work... How big is this island!* He stopped upon hearing a noise in the bushes to his right, a rustling of leaves. He began to regret taking her home if he was going to die in on a lonely island. Holding onto Mutsumi's hand he ran through more undergrowth hearing sounds from all sides upon reaching a clearing. He could only hear the strange noises, almost like giggles and their eyes occasionally glinting in the darkness beneath the bushes. Seeing a spot where there were neither eyes nor noises, he ran there, Mutsumi being tagged along.

"Mutsumi-san!" He yelled, "We have to get out of here!"

He looked back to see her chuckling to herself. Not wanting to stop and ask what she found so funny, he went on, only to receive a flexible branch in his face. Falling back he held onto his face which now bore a red mark across his nose and cheeks. Feeling his back he was aghast at noticing that Mutsumi had fallen underneath him.

"Mutsumi-san!" Her pupils popped back into her eyes.

"Ara? Are we okay sitting on the floor here?"

Keitaro facefaulted, his head twisted at an odd angle before returning to normal. "Yes, I just fell on you, we need to keep moving."

He pulled her up and they continued to move through the trees with difficulty. "Why is it so dense here?" Keitaro rhetorically asked, frustrated at the number of trees in his path.

"Ara, why not use that path there?" Mutsumi said pointing with one finger.

To their right was indeed a constant clearing, and as they walked to it they found themselves on a thin strip of bare earth that wove through the forest, sometimes trees overhanging the path. Keitaro sweatdropped. *I can hear the ocean behind us, we must've just missed the path, and I've been going parallel to it all along...* Mutsumi began to walk on ahead this time, and as Keitaro followed her they could both hear the sounds of footsteps and soon enough, various objects were being thrown at them, coconuts, sticks, and small stones. Keitaro's eyes bugged out as they had reached the gates of a house, the door apparently locked. Keeping Mutsumi closest to the house, lights streaming out from the inside, he shielded her from danger, the several attackers were now closing in on the two, their backs in shadow as Keitaro stood there sweatdropping in fear as he picked up a stick to defend himself.

The view finally pans to the dark sky as his scream echoed around the island.

Meanwhile

Kyoto

"So they left..." Motoko mused.

They were now outside the inn where her sources had stated they would find the other tenants of Hinata-sou. Mystified they all began to walk through the streets of Kyoto for any sign of them, improbable as it may seem. They were walking by an electronics retailer, but Mitsune stopped and ran in.

"Kitsune! We don't have time to be watching TV at a time like this!" Naru berated her.

"Shh, look!" She said regardless.

On several of the different makes of televisions, there were two photos along with the words 'Missing at sea', those of Keitaro and Mutsumi, but they didn't recognise the dual-antennaed girl. Naru picked up a remote control of the 42" plasma screen and increased the volume.

"... For several hours from a cruise ship that departed from Kyoto to Okinawa. Halfway through the journey, some passengers noticed a hot air balloon floating away from their ship, heading due south with the winds. The names of the missing have been confirmed as Urashima Keitaro, 20 years old, and Otohime Mutsumi, 21 years of age, according to the passenger logs. Unfortunately it appears that if they continued in that direction, they would have intercepted Hurricane Tokimi, which was currently over the ocean, threatening all ships with 20' waves and possible tsunami's into mainland Okinawa. The likelihood of their survival is slim, although there are smaller islands around the outskirts of the hurricane. A search and rescue operation is unable to begin due to the present state of Tokimi. All ships are warned to keep away from that area for fear of being caught up in the storm. In other news..."

Naru muted the volume, now a shade paler. "What are we going to do now?"

Motoko answered for all of them, "We look for them." She said simply.

"But how! They are lost in a hurricane!" Mitsune complained.

"We just do." Motoko stated firmly, "It is part of our duty to search for the kanrinrin if he were to go missing."

"Well... I'm not so certain I agree with that..." Mitsune yawned, "Besides, if Keitaro were gone then I wouldn't have to pay off my de..."

"If you end that sentence I will be forced to hurt you in an excruciating manner." Motoko interrupted, her demeanour becoming darker, her eyes wishing pain into Mitsune's now opened ones.

"Wha..." Mitsune began before being interrupted again.

"Never wish for someone's death or passing away." Motoko went on, now standing alone, recounting memories from long ago. "Even I as a warrior never bear any grudge against

an opponent, wanting them to die for some other gain. One rule of the Shinmeiryu is to fight seriously only to defend someone or to test your opponents strength." Her voice became lower, "This only applies to humans of course..."

"Then why do you attack Keitaro?" Naru chimed in.

This had caught out Motoko. *Why?* "I am merely defending my honour, and besides, I rarely attack him with full strength."

"So only in the cases you mention can you kill someone?" Mitsune guessed.

"Correct. However..." Motoko paused for a second, "I have yet to kill a human yet... And nor do I have any wish to do so in the near future. Killing humans with the Shinmeiryu techniques and considered unjust, seeing as these are skills used to fight against demons..."

Naru's and Mitsune's jaws fell open at this point. *"Demons!"* they both thought at the same time.

Motoko went on, "Nevertheless, it has happened in the past, long ago. Only one human has been killed since the formation of the Shinmei-ryu, and he had been possessed by an ancient evil from millennia ago. Only through the co-operation of the entire clan, including the clan that he belonged to, we were able to defeat him..."

Images began to flood Motoko's mind. A scroll depicting the man, completely in shadow save for the glowing eyes and his snarling teeth, appearing to be sharp. His left arm was drawn across his body, and the katana he held in that hand was parallel to the ground, the right arm supporting the left in his odd posture. The katana glinted, and was surrounded by a black aura, oozing off it like heat above boiling water.

Kyoto

1867AD

Fire raged throughout the streets of Kyoto, the Edo period was about to come to an end, the Tokugawa regime soon to fall at the hands of the Imperialists. On the outskirts of the capital lay hundreds of strewn bodies. Surrounded by a circle of samurai was the figure of a young man, his entire guise being twisted into that of something inhuman, his hands contorting into claw-like shapes at random moments. His body would also convulse and jerk into impossible positions in order to kill people. The samurai facing him were mostly of two different kinds, one the familiar white gi and red hakama, all females. The other group was mixed, although there were more men than usual in it. They wore a completely black

outfit, the gi and hakama of the same shade, the extremities of the outfit outlined by a white colour, a white strip being their belt. Each person owned a katana and all but one had them unsheathed.

The person snarled, his breath being seen by all around him before his body vanished, a cloud of smoke the only evidence that he had been standing there.

Three white slashes against a black background, and in an instant three more of their total number were dead. There was no time to react as their carved bodies fell to the ground, the blood seeping into the soil and the blood of the other slain. The katana began to draw its power from the dead before the counterattack came from both sides.

Thrusts, parries, lunges, wide slashes, downward arcs, everyone did their best against him, but he managed to avoid all their hits, even getting a few of them in the process, injuring them lightly. Jumping back he laughed at the state of them, all bloody and panting for breath. The one who had yet to unsheathe her blade spoke to the group, and as if a decision had been made, they began to circle him once again, attacking once they were the same distance from him. The attacks came swift and brutal, forcing the man to parry each one, not being able to get a hit in. The woman jumped into the air and pulled out her blade, the flames of Kyoto reflected in its edge.

The following happened in slow motion, the world went silent. The group around the person had moved back at the last moment as the woman brought down her katana. The man looked up and opened his mouth, his eyes stopping their glow for a split second. The woman's mouth could be seen shouting some words and the world turned white.

The possessed fell to the ground as an ancient scream left his body, the essence flowing back to the katana with the black aura. The man's circular glasses fell next to his body as his hand landed nearby; blood caked around his fingers. The glasses lay there until his blood flowed to it to make the lenses crack, one of them shattering completely. In the other lens, the figure of the woman who defeated moved closer, her hair flowing in the breeze.

The battle had finally ended.

Kyoto

Present day

My sister told me this story... I don't doubt her wisdom... Motoko had replayed the entire battle through her mind once again as Naru waved her hand in front of Motoko, bringing her back to the present.

"Motoko-chan?" Naru asked, concerned, "What's wrong?"

Motoko couldn't hide her sadness over what she was about to say. "The person who killed the possessed man was my great-great-great-grandmother..."

The image of the woman back in the fiery Kyoto came into focus in the lens. She had exactly the same facial structure as Motoko. However some of her hair contained silver strands and a few crows feet were seen by her eyes, the only sign of her true age.

Naru and Mitsune were quiet, rare as it was to see such emotion from Motoko as she lowered head in shame, "Over the past century my family had to live with that label over our heads. The murderer of a man who was supposed to be freed, not killed, in the removal of the evil spirit. For years we have tried to atone for the crime, but blood on one's hands cannot be removed without shedding one's own..."

"Motoko-chan..." Naru said with great sadness in her voice. *I don't know how to console her; this is too much for a girl her age.* "Time heals everything... The only thing you can do is to do your best." She smiled wanly at the heir to the Shinmeiryu.

Motoko looked back up to the new Toudai student, "Naru-sempai..." Genuinely touched by her advice; she graced her with a rare smile.

Meanwhile

Nearby

"After them!" Shouted one man, wearing a black suit and sunglasses.

A group of eight men all dressed the same way started to chase the two young girls through the streets of Kyoto. Suu was laughing leaping about from house to house as Shinobu panted behind her, trying to keep up her pace to stay away from the advancing group. Tripping up she yelped as she fell to the ground, her clothes becoming stained from the dirt in the street. The men had now circled her, one man who was apparently the leader walked forwards.

You do know what it means to be plying your games in our territory. No one should try to outwit us this way." He glared menacingly through his glasses, which now reflected white from the lamps above them.

"Shinobu!" Suu shouted from one of the rooftops. She turned to the man, "You won't hurt her! Take this!" She withdrew a large control panel containing buttons and a direction stick,

"Mecha limb, attack!"

The right arm then pushed itself and Shinobu up off the floor and punched the lead man in the gut, making him double over in pain. Shinobu paled as the arm began to take out most of the gang.

"Shinobu! Escape now!"

Suu pressed the large red button, releasing the arm from Shinobu's shoulder and crawling along the ground, still occupying the men. Taking this chance she ran off down the empty street, shortly being joined by Suu who jumped down beside her. Running on they heard a bang and looked back to see smoke.

"Aah well, looks like the batteries have finally run out." Suu said, disappointed it didn't last longer.

They weren't looking where they were going and bumped into more of the gang, who had come from a different area of Kyoto.

"Well look what we have here..." Said the man the bumped into, "Some little girls are trying to take away our money..."

A flash and two men were down as a figure in white and red appeared. "Gomen, I was late in arriving here. Let me take care of these men first."

Motoko glared at the gang members and took out two more with a swipe from the flat edge of her katana, returning it to its protective covering straight after. Naru surprised one of the men and punched him under the chin, sending him into a wall. Mitsune grinned at the last remaining member and unbuttoned her top and the view pans to behind her as she opened it out fully for only him to see. His face turned from one of fury to incredible luck, then a massive blush as his nosebleed began to flow out in torrents, sending him back a few metres and lying unconscious on the floor. Knowing that it was not over, Motoko turned in the direction the girls came from and saw the incoming gang that had fought the mecha limb. Ready to fight, she pulled out her katana a centimetre or two, enough for the blade to be seen.

What she wasn't prepared for was the sound of gunfire, from behind the gang. Two of them fell to the ground as the other five stopped and faced their opponents. The sound of a quick reload and two more went down. From what the girls could see, a solitary man stood there, his black jeans and shirt were visible as his left arm with a pistol were seen pointing at the gang, the barrel still smoking. A leather jacket was on the floor behind him, presumably his. He was with his side to them, his eyes glaring at the enemy. Replacing his gun into the holster he had underneath his shirt he faced them all. His face was fairly

round, yet his eyes looked like those of a hunter, piercing the bodies of the gang members with hatred. His mouth was turned down in disdain, only provoking the gangsters.

"What, you want to die now? You've run out of bullets, and there's five of us here." The leader said somewhat nervously.

Moving into a battle posture the stranger just grinned, "You must be an amateur if you believe that someone you have never met before relies only upon his gun."

"Shut up you fool!" The leader spat, "Kill him!" He yelled.

The four men in black growled and ran at the stranger, who dodged them by skipping to the side, landing a roundhouse kick to the one on the right, knocking him onto the ground, out cold. Launching into a variant of kenpo he punched and kicked the others in the stomach as they turned, ducking to the ground he sweeped their legs, two of them fell to the floor as the other jumped and kicked him in the face. Smirking as the man fell forward due to his forward centre of gravity, the stranger palmed him in the chest, slamming him against the wall. Letting go the gang member slumped to the ground, breathing with difficulty.

A laughing led to the stranger facing the boss. "I see you have a few skills, but you'll more than them to defeat me!" Throwing off his jacket, the leader had changed into a black sleeveless vest and he now held nunchakas in his hands.

"So you plan to attack an unarmed man using that toy?" He smirked, "I guess I'll have to up my ante also."

He held his hands out in front of him, similar to a boxing pose but with his hands open. The boss began to sweat more as the stranger's hands began to glow, then an aura began to form around it, yellow, orange and red flames emanating from it. His stance changed to a more offensive one.

"Shall we begin?" He asked.

The gang leader roared at this display and ran forwards, manipulating the nunchakas between his hands and arms. His formidable opposition began his movements and launched towards the leader. Before Motoko could rush in to intervene, the two met and the sounds of wood hitting flesh and fists making contact were heard. Blow by blow the gang leader was being defeated, and less than a minute later a right palm to the cheek sent him flying in the air, spinning around until he hit the floor in pain, unable to move his battered muscles.

"Pathetic... We should have been called earlier to remove your influence a while ago." The stranger walked off and picked up his leather jacket.

Motoko deeply offended shouted out, "You used your superior skills against humans?"

The stranger turned his face to see her, "Against scum like this we need to punish them severely." Putting on the jacket he removed a walkie-talkie and spoke into it before jumping away around the corner.

"Motoko-chan! Who was that man?" Naru ran up to her, but noticed the fearful look in her eyes.

He has skills equal to that of my sister... But who is he? Motoko walked up to the men he defeated and felt for a pulse, they were all alive. The ones who were shot were still, but had white feathers sticking out of one point on each of them, pulling on out, Motoko noted that it was a dart, used for tranquillisation since their pulses were weak but not life threatening. *So he didn't kill them...* She thought about it for a moment longer and realised one thing. His clothing was black, and she recalled seeing a faint white edging on most of the seams, easily noticeable on the leather jacket, the ends of it were white. *Is he a member of that clan? It cannot be... They disbanded that time...* Beginning to doubt her history lessons she only now noticed someone hugging her. Looking down she saw a teary Shinobu.

"Arigatou Motoko-san! You saved us from them! I... thought they were going to kill us!" She continued to sob whilst holding onto her gi.

Motoko, stunned momentarily by the younger girl's behaviour, did what she thought was best, and patted her on the head, resulting in her looking up in wonder. Shinobu blushed rapidly, even her eyes seemed to hide behind it, and she put her hands to her face. *What did I do? I hugged Motoko-san... What must she think of me?* Her thoughts were cut off as Motoko spoke.

"It's okay, I'm glad I arrived when I did. I heard the commotion from two streets away and ran here. You have nothing to fear now that I am with you." Motoko smiled to reassure the girl.

"Moootoko!" Suu shouted before jumping on her back, "We had fun in Kyoto!"

"Yes, I can see that, but your idea of fun is different to most people Suu-chan." Motoko reprimanded her, "You ran off worrying all of us at Hinata-sou. We had no idea where you were!" Suu looked down, pouting for a second, "However now that you are with us we can all go and look for Keitaro together."

Suu's face changed immediately, "Okay Motoko!" Her face became a tad confused, "But we don't know where he is..."

Motoko began to recount everything they had heard in the news broadcast, and Suu put a hand to her chin thinking. "So they're lost at sea but there's several islands there..." Changing her attitude completely she beamed at them, "I know what I'll do! Follow me everyone!"

The followed the foreign girl through the streets of Kyoto, Suu had picked out a mobile phone with three eyes on the back of the fascia talking in a language they never heard before. Just as they had reached a main road a limousine pulled up to them, the door opening.

"Everyone get in!" She shouted.

Complying quickly they went in and sat down in the comfortable chairs happy for a chance to put their feet up for once. Non-alcoholic refreshments were provided, as were some snacks. Suu was nibbling on a banana whilst still talking on the phone. A minute passed and she flipped it closed.

"All done!" She spoke, happy that something was completed without any hitches.

"Suu?" Shinobu asked meekly, "What exactly is 'done'?"

She just winked at her friend, "You'll see Shinobu." Putting one hand around her friend she cheered for their success, and Shinobu joined in a few seconds later. Soon even Naru and Mitsune joined in the fun as music began to pound through the vast vehicle. Motoko relaxed also, having a few drinks and sighing after finishing them.

The view changing to one of the driver, a dark skinned man wearing a chauffeurs uniform and cap, moving out of the window to the top of the limousine which also bore the three eyes as it sped through the streets of Kyoto, eventually moving out of the city boundaries.

Osaka Port

1 hour later

The vehicle stopped. "We're here!" Shouted the hopping Suu, who leapt out of the car door that was being held open by the driver.

Everyone followed her bemused, and were shocked at seeing they were in a dock, and were stood in front of a magnificent ship, fit for a princess. Once everyone was out, the driver shut the door, bowed to Suu, who merely beamed and saluted him, and he left, driving back into Osaka.

"Well, all on board now! We need to leave to get ahead of the storm!"

Suu bounded up the steps as the staff she passed bowed deeply to her. Going by her lead, they walked up the steps as the staff again bowed, but to a lesser degree to them. Within minutes they had set sail for the open ocean, in search for Keitaro.

Suu stood on the stern, and pointed out to sea, the others stood behind her watching, "Keitaro! We'll find you if it's the last thing we do!" She shouted, as the three eyes painted on the front of the ship became drenched by the waves.

Ominously, the distant flash of lightning closely tailed by the loud boom of thunder made them all sweatdrop, jumping a little by the sound. A klaxon started to echo around the ship.

"All hands report to red alert status! Storm level five precautions underway! Will all guests please return indoors to the safety of the lounge! Lock down of all windows in two minutes, and protective barriers to be erected in five minutes! ETA to breach of storm perimeter in fifteen minutes!"

Suu laughed half-heartedly to herself, "Oops, didn't make it... Let's enjoy the food though!" She ran into the cabins as the others walked slightly faster than necessary, a shade greener than before.

"I have a bad feeling about this..." Mitsune said out loud as another thunder strike made itself heard.

The eyes at the front glowed green and began to hum as the ship began to transform into the equivalent of an armoured battlecruiser, extra metal deploying to the sides of the ship. Another burst of speed and the view pans away to show the ship heading straight into the storm ahead, the lightning flashing across the sky.

Author's Notes

Ooh, 14 pages! I'm surprised at myself :)

Hope you like the mythology I brought in on this chapter, the pain was researching and finding that Kyoto HAD no port, so they needed to drive to Osaka to get to one. I also needed to check out the Meiji Restoration date and calculate the relation to Motoko. Having recently watched most of Kenshin, I'm quite surprised to find that Saitou Hajime did actually exist, and that the scenes that were included in the series were good history-wise (such as Okita being ill). Still, I thought the past was very interesting and I really enjoyed writing that part out.

Hoping that I haven't made any enemies with the past being shown etc. Review/crits welcome as usual.

- Jason

Chapter 20

When destinies meet…

On the same island

8:15pm

Keitaro stared in disbelief, in front of him were eight children, each with rather dark skin and some had two antennae sprouting from their scalps above their normal hair. They were all smiling mischievously and holding various fruits and shrubbery in their hands.

"Ara ara..." Mutsumi looked to Keitaro, "I forgot Urashima-kun... These are my brothers and sisters, and this island is my home!"

Keitaro stared at her for five seconds before finally giving in and melting to the ground, exhausted both mentally and physically. *How could she forget where she lives!* His mind went blank as he closed his eyes, trying to make sense of everything he had learned.

10pm

Opening his eyes at what he thought was a few seconds later he found himself lying on a bed with several pairs of eyes staring at him.

"Yaaah!" He yelled, moving away from them before noticing Mutsumi's face coming into view.

"Urashima-kun..." She smiled, "How do you feel?"

Keitaro felt his head, which was still spinning, but managed to shake it off temporarily. "I... I'm fine Mutsumi-san..."

She became happier, "That's good to hear, I can explain more then!" She indicated her brothers and sisters, "Sometimes when I'm home we like to play hide and seek; I think it was my turn to hide."

One of the brothers spoke up, "Yeah! Only she hid from us for several days!"

A sister joined in, "We didn't know she went to Kyoto see her exam results!"

"Ara... That's Tokyo, Tatsuki. Toookyo!" Mutsumi corrected, holding one finger up looking at her little sister.

Tatsuki nodded eagerly, "Okay! Toookyo!" She cried, her arm up in the air, fist clenched.

"Ara ara, what's all this noise?"

Another figure, this time much taller walked into the room. Keitaro could see two antennae and a face came into view, much like the companion he had for the past two days. Her face defied ageing, but her eyes contained a wistful, deeper look.

Noticing she was being stared at, she put a hand to her, much like her daughter, "Ara... I forgot to introduce myself, I'm Mutsumi-chan's mother..." She paused, the wind whistling in the background, "Ara, what was my name again?" She asked, looking to her children.

Keitaro was sitting up meet her properly, and promptly flumped back on the bed. Mutsumi helped her, "Natsumi, it's Natsumi okaasan!"

"H... Hello Natsumi-san." He looked to her, sitting up against the side of the bed. "Gomen nasai, we must've woken you up."

She sat down to his left and Mutsumi to his right as the younger children jumped about and knelt in front of them. She waved her hand at him giggling, "Oh no, I was just somewhere else in the house and didn't hear you come in."

Keitaro didn't know what to think as Natsumi moved closer to him; he glanced at the siblings noticing they were leaning forwards, anticipating something. Hearing a light tap and a small weight on his left shoulder he turned and came face to head with Mutsumi's mother. Getting a nosebleed, his eyes burst through his lenses, making them crack, again. Frantic with worry he began to shake her shoulders softly.

"Natsumi-san!"

"Ara...?" She perked up straightaway scaring him, "I fainted again... Gomen Urashima-san. This happens occasionally, but not as often as when I was a child."

Like mother like daughter... She is very young looking for her age; they look just like sisters. He smiled unconsciously looking at Natsumi.

She put a hand to her chin, "Urashima... Where have I heard that name before...?" Keitaro furrowed his brow in confusion, waiting for her to remember, "Ara... Do you know an old lady called Hina?"

Keitaro's heart skipped a beat, "Y... Yes... She's my obaasan. H... How did you know her?"

Natsumi opened her eyes and smiled nostalgically, more of her wisdom coming through in her words and actions, "I met her in Hinata-sou, where I hear you came from. Many years ago she gave me a job working there... She gave me a chance..."

Looking off past Keitaro to a faded photo on the wall behind him she smiled rapturously as she remembered the past.

22 years ago

Hinata-sou

Summer. The day lazily hovered in the sky, spreading its warmth to those on the small planet. It was a hot day in Japan, Kanagawa prefecture, not a cloud to be seen. This had not gone unnoticed by those living there. T-shirts, shorts and even the occasional bikini were seen as people took advantage of the heat, going to swimming pools and sunbathing on rooftops. As a result, the hot springs were not a popular choice that day, since the sweltering condition would make sitting in a pool that had steam rising was unappealing, at least during the daytime.

Running, or trying to at least, up the steps was a girl, carrying a rucksack in her hands and a large bag around both shoulder, making her tilt to one side. She was smiling and panting at the same time. Her large straw hat created a light shadow on her face, but still she had beads of sweat on her forehead. The dress she wore was unsuitable for the weather, it was long, red and green tartan with short sleeves, and reached to just above her ankles. It looked very old-fashioned along with her shoes that were unremarkable save for the gold buckle on them.

Finally arriving at the top she weaved her way to the entrance of the inn, the weight of the bag carrying her off course at times. The front door was open to let some air into the old house, keeping the residents cool. Smiling that she made it, she took one step into Hinata-sou, and one second later fainted, still in the doorway where the shoes were.

"Hey, wake up you!"

Blearily opening her eyes, they latched onto a figure clad in black, staring at her in a bored fashion, a white stick moving from one side of her mouth to her other. There was another

older lady to her left that smiled sympathetically.

"Ara... Where am I?" Natsumi asked.

She had been moved to a sofa in where there was a television with the volume off in the background. The old lady chuckled to herself while young brown haired girl sweatdropped but retained the same expression. She spoke calmly.

"You're in Hinata-sou, you were found in the entrance lying on the floor." She moved closer, her face becoming darker, "Now who are you?" Natsumi sweatdropped and began to move away from the scary girl.

"Now, now Haruka-chan, no need to get hostile. Let the girl explain herself." The old lady said without any malice in her voice.

A loud pop was heard as Haruka took the lollipop out of her mouth, "Okay Hina-obaasan, but don't call me Haruka-chan!" She said, almost in a whiney voice.

Natsumi took this as the moment to speak, sitting up slowly. "Ara... My name is Nakimura Natsumi, I come from Okinawa and I would like to find a job!" She spoke enthusiastically.

"I see." Grandma Hina pondered over this. "Do you have any qualifications that could be used in an inn Nakimura-san?"

"Oh please call me Natsumi!" She replied quickly.

"Okay, Natsumi-chan then." The manageress smiled.

"Well... I don't have any professional qualifications, I failed to get into university." She said, looking down for once before beaming again, "But I am a hard worker and know many recipes I am sure you would like. I can do the cleaning, washing and anything else around the inn for you!"

"Why here? You came all the way from Okinawa..." Haruka said confused.

"Well Haruka-chan..."

"It's Haruka!" An anger cross flared up on her hand as she twirled the lollipop stick around in her mouth.

"Gomen. Haruka. Otousan told me that I should get a job here and that I would be well looked after."

"Who's your father Natsumi-chan?" Hina asked sweetly.

"He's Nakimura Taro." Natsumi replied.

I thought so, our distant cousin has decided to send her here to that I could take care of her. Looking at Natsumi she smiled. *She's a sweet girl and would do wonders as an employee if I trained her properly, I could do with some help around.*

"Okay then!" Hina declared, "You can work here then Natsumi-chan..." She paused, realising something, "Do you have anywhere to live?"

Natsumi sweatdropped and laughed guiltily.

"No problem, you can just live in the employees room. You can be my assistant to help everyone have a better time in Hinata-sou." Hina said proudly.

"Aah!" Natsumi's eyes glistened with emotion, "Arigatou! I promise to help you any way I can!" She stood up and began to bow deeply before fainting onto the sofa, but with a satisfied smile on her face.

Haruka looked at all this and took this in as Grandma Hina placed a blanket over the girl from Okinawa. Without even glancing over her shoulder she began to walk towards the entrance.

"Come with me Seta-chan, let's play a game."

From behind her, coming down the staircase, out of the rooms that are rented out to clients, a young boy about her age came doggedly to her side, tears streaming from his eyes.

He didn't seem too willing, "Y... Yes Haruka-chan... Let's play a game please."

She knocked him on the head with her fist and glared at the smoking body on the ground. "It's Haruka."

Otohime Island

Present day

Keitaro had been waving his hands in front of Natsumi's face for several minutes, with no reaction on her side. Looking to Mutsumi for help she just smiled and waved it off.

"Don't worry Urashima-kun, she does that often when she's reminded of the past."

Worried he replied quickly, "You mean I reminded her of something bad?"

Mutsumi shook her head, "No, nothing like that, she only remembers the times when she was very happy."

Breathing a sigh of relief he smiled, "That's good to hear... Sometimes I wish I could recall everything of my past, like the name of the pro-"

"Ara! Did I go into flashback mode again?" Natsumi had snapped out of it.

One of the boys spoke up, pressing a button on his watch, "Yes! This time it was six minutes, 32 seconds. A record!"

The children including Mutsumi all clapped, which mystified Keitaro further. *How can they be happy about their mother forgetting where she is for that long!* Seeing how they all laughed light-heartedly, Natsumi joined in the laughter. Keitaro knew then why they were so happy. *They're so carefree! It's like they don't have any worries at all. Even Mutsumi, who didn't get into Toudai, doesn't mind it much. She's probably forgotten all about it...*

"Ara... Why did I go to Tokyo? Aah yes!" She turned to her mother who looked back at her, "Okaasan, I didn't get into Tokyo University, I failed, again."

Keitaro sweatdropped. *Well at least she remembered to tell her.*

Somewhere in the ocean

10pm

Suu was loving the journey, "Aah, nothing like the sea air to get your lungs freshened up, isn't it?"

She turned to the other female residents of Hinata-sou, who were sprawled over the furniture in the room, dazed. In unison they shouted, "NO!"

Four ascending chimes were heard, similar to those in an airport, in the lounge where they were sat or lay. A loud crackle and the same voice as earlier followed, although the sounds of other crewmen shouting in the background were apparent, as well as the rain.

"All passengers and staff, this is your captain speaking, we are passing through a difficult spot of Hurricane Tokimi." A loud boom signified the closeness of a lightning bolt as he continued, "External wind speed has reached 200 miles per hour, and it is moving off in an easterly direction at a rate of..." His voice changed immediately, more commanding and duller as if moving away from the microphone, "Hard to starboard now!" The girls screamed as the turning made them fly from one end of the room to the other, "Sorry for the interruption, Tokimi is moving at 30 miles an hour. ETA until breaching the eye is in 10 minutes; the edge of the storm is an hour away. Please remain indoors and strap yourselves down to avoid any injury. That will be all, enjoy your journey." As the microphone was being replaced the sounds of him again shouting at the bridge crew was heard, "Turn 10 degrees port, full steam ahead, we need to make that time-window or else..." The loudspeaker went off, ending the one-way communication with the ship.

"See!" Suu pointed out to the speakers in the lounge, "Nothing to worry about!"

"Nothing to worry about!" Mitsune yelled, "What was that last comment he said? 'We need to make that time-window or else...' Or else what? What will happen to us!" She was incensed.

"Aah, forget about that," Suu just laughed it off, "he's always strict when it comes to making deadlines. I have faith in him!"

Mitsune grit her teeth and took a step forward before Naru stopped her from going any further.

"Easy Kitsune... We have to trust them. Besides," She shrugged, "It's not like you can steer a ship now is it?"

Mitsune looked to her, her eyes still shut, her forehead still bearing the distinct signs of frustration. "Why do you say that? Is it because you think I'm a layabout with nothing better to do than to drink sleep and drink more?"

Naru became concerned. *I've upset her...* Holding her hands out in front of her, waving them about frantically, she spoke fearfully, "No no no no, it's not like that Kitsune!"

"Oh really? Her fox eyes returned to their normal way, "Maybe I should force it out of you using this!"

She stuck her hand out and yellow and red beams of colour became the background with the large bottle of sake she held in her hand as its centre. The colours alternated with each other constantly. Looking dumbfounded she lowered the hand,

"Huh?"

Naru had continued on without stopping. "... I mean you're not like that all the time..." She emphasised the word 'all' for effect, "You do some work once in a while, but then we need to redo whatever you did since you didn't do them properly... We can even iron clothes when you're in bed by putting clothes under your mattress! By the end of the day they would be done without any hassle." Naru stopped and cheekily winked at her old friend.

"Why you..." Her fist displayed an anger cross as she glared at Naru, "You weren't supposed to answer that question!"

Naru laughed, sticking her tongue out at her.

"I'll get you and force this sake down your throat! Come here and respect your elders!"

Mitsune then began to chase Naru around the room, the latter laughing and enjoying herself for once. Shinobu, concerned for the wellbeing of everyone began to follow them about, asking them to stop fighting. Suu thought this was fun, and brought out two guns that were then fired upon the girls. Thankfully she used playful ammunition, and it wasn't long before Naru and Mitsune were covered in soapy foam, flicking bubbles around the room.

Motoko however refused to join in the festivities, instead staying to one side against the wall, peering through the barrier to see the storm outside. The chaos outside resembled the disorder in her mind. *Why did I let that man touch me? I knew he was trouble when I heard him sit down... Why are men like that? Is Keitaro like that? He does try to peek in on us when we bathe in the hot springs...* Far from the reality around her, she was surprised to be blasted with the foam gun. Still angry from her thoughts, she retaliated without thinking, her eyes narrowing once more.

"Hiken Zan Kuu Sen!"

The white streak left her blade and travelled across the floor of the room, narrowly missing Shinobu and Suu, who were both frightened and laughing respectively, before slamming into the bar, pulverising it. Realising her actions she stood up and ran to the two who were

on the floor.

"Suu! Shinobu! Are you okay?" She asked, worry creeping into her voice.

Suu was feeling her back but still beaming, "Motoko was angry! I shot you by accident..."

Shinobu was unharmed but shivering. *Sc... Scary... Now I know what sempai feels like...* She looked to Motoko with fear in her eyes as they began to flood with tears. Naru and Mitsune had run up now from their foam fight, seeing what had happened from across the room. Shinobu then bawled loudly, moving to Naru and hugging her. Naru stroked Shinobu's hair and looked at where the attack had landed. The bar was devastated, wood, glass and alcohol lay across the ground.

"Motoko-chan! What were you thinking?" Naru scolded the warrior. "You could've hurt them! They're not like Keitaro..."

Motoko was still, her hair covering the upper portion of her face in shadow. "I understand Naru-sempai... I will take my leave now and retire to my room to meditate."

"Motoko-chan..." Naru whispered.

She stood up and walked past them into the lower decks, going down the stairs to her assigned room.

Suu watched her go off and looked sad, "Motoko..."

Several minutes later

Motoko's room

The room was dark; the armour to prevent any leaking into the room had covered the portholes. The lamp was off also as a rustling could be heard; the ambient light from underneath the door allows enough to see Motoko lying on her bed facing the ceiling.

It's been a long time since I tried to relax my senses... Her hair was splayed about the pillow as she moved her hand to inside her gi to pick out her first ever gift from a man. Clutching the dagger in her hands she opened it up an inch or two and peered closely at the blade. *The first time a man gave me a gift... Of all the perverts in the world it had to be Keitaro...* She sat up and removed it completely from the sheath. *I've looked over this edge for weeks, and I still can't figure out something...* Standing up she walked over to the

elaborate dresser she had at the foot of the bed. She brought the dagger up and slowly brought it down on the corner of the old furniture. It passed through it without any friction. A second passed and a chunk of the dresser fell to the ground, leaving the corner now completely gone and being replaced with a clean cut wood, showing the grain and gluing in it. *It was like he said... Nothing will stop the blade once it begins to move...* Placing it against her finger, she pressed lightly and sure enough a small trickle of blood flowed from the cut. Removing the blade she put the finger in her mouth as she fumbled around in her gi again to pick out a jar filled with cream. Applying some to the wound she sat on the bed and watched as the healing powers of the cream fuse the skin back together within minutes.

The blade glinted from the corridor light. *What did he mean by 'I would see for myself one day'?* Remembering the lessons on swords produced she knew that the only case in which this dagger would be used is when in dire straits in close quarters, or to retain some honour by taking their own life. Her heart slowed down as she tried to put some things together in her mind. *Did he imply that I would use this in that manner...!* She stared long and hard at the edge, her eyes becoming more manic, even insane. *I could do it... No one would miss my existence... I bring nothing but pain and hurt to those around me... I've failed my sister and my dojo... I bring nothing to Hinata-sou... Maybe it would be for the best…*

She moved into the centre of the bed, kneeling formally. Holding it with both hands, the tip pointed straight at her stomach, she was on the verge of lancing it into her before a memory came back to her. Her hand shook from the intensity of the motions she experienced.

"Motoko-chan... I want you to inherit the Shinmei-ryu... You have to be strong... Many who feel they are weak lose the will to live… However those who take their own life are destroying their only chance on repentance… Don't be one of the weak… Live on…"

She dropped the dagger onto the bed. *Ane-ue... You were right... I have to be strong... Taking one's life is easy, but living on takes the most courage.* Sure of herself she took the dagger and placed it fully into the ebony cover, clicking it shut.

"I will live on." She spoke out loud, her voice remaining steady and with conviction.

A rapid knocking was heard as she did this. *Only Suu would knock like that...* Returning the dagger to its rightful place, she turned on the lamp and walked slowly to the door, sliding it open.

"Motoko..." The usually cheerful and carefree child had a sad look on her face, "Are you okay? I didn't mean to hit you with that gun..."

"It okay now Suu... I was..." Motoko paused, thinking of how to phrase what she felt then,

"...distracted. I wasn't expecting to be hit and I too am wrong in striking back." She bowed a little, "Please forgive me."

Suu smiled, a sincere one that meant she understood what her friend had said. "It's okay, I'll always forgive you."

Suu jumped into Motoko and hugged her and the elder girl hugged her back. They held each other for a few minutes before Suu clambered onto Motoko's back and played with her long dark hair.

"Let's go back upstairs Motoko, the captain has told me that he has located an island that isn't affected by the storm."

Motoko was intrigued, "How can that be?"

"We don't know as yet, the island is still half an hour away and we've changed course to go there."

"Curious..." Motoko pondered as she walked up the corridor to the staircase into the lounge.

The others were sat at one of the small tables with dark skinned and blonde haired people serving them food and drink from what remained of the bar. As Motoko approached the others looked to her and Shinobu. Suu jumped off Motoko and into an empty space grabbing the bananas in front of her and stuffing them down her mouth. The youngest member stared at the kendo expert with a look of hope.

Motoko bowed deeply. "Shinobu-chan please forgive my actions, I was not aware of my actions until afterwards. Gomen nasai."

Shinobu perked up, smiling, "I... It's okay Motoko-san... I knew you meant nothing by it. I was just a little scared, that's all..."

Motoko, glad that she wasn't hated by the junior high student, stood up and smiled, "Arigatou Shinobu-chan... And we are friends so call me Motoko."

Shinobu nodded eagerly, "O... Okay then!"

"Motoko! Stop standing around and eat! This food won't around for long!" Suu shouted, managing to cover Naru and Mitsune, who were sat opposite her, in half-chewed banana

and other foodstuffs.

"Suu..." Mitsune and Naru said together, glaring evilly at her after wiping away the goop from their eyes. Anger crosses flared up again on their foreheads.

"Now, now Naru-sempai." Shinobu said meekly, "Let's just eat for now."

They both sighed and used towels given to them by the waiters to wipe themselves clean. "Fine, if Shinobu-chan says so..." Naru said nonchalantly.

Shinobu saw this and began to giggle, then laugh out loud, something that made everyone look at her. Soon they all joined in the heartfelt moment, laughing merrily, although Motoko didn't laugh except keeping the smile on her face for a longer period of time, glancing at Shinobu. *She's so innocent... The way she laughs makes everyone feel welcome...*

The room filled with laughter as the view panned out to the outside of ship, showing silent, frantic activity in the bridge, then showing an island covered with greenery in the far distance through the rain, the lightning cracking across the sky once more.

Otohime Island

10:25pm

Having taken his leave from the Otohime mansion, he called it a mansion because he got lost getting out, he followed the path from the entrance and walked out towards the beach. Sitting on a fallen palm tree there he looked into the crisp night sky, the stars winking at him behind the dark veil of space and the half moon gazing over the silent Earth. The horizon was dark, save for the lightning flashing between the clouds far away from him. He sighed. *What am I doing here? I have to make a choice about my life now... It isn't the time to be visiting strangers on a small island...* So into his thoughts he didn't sense the presence of a person sitting next to him until she spoke.

"Ara..." Keitaro jumped and looked to his right to see Mutsumi, head tilted forwards trying to see his face, eyes closed and a smile on her face.

"Mutsumi-san!" Keitaro said shocked. "How long have you been there for!"

She opened her eyes, "Long enough to know that you're missing your home."

Keitaro blushed and looked away, "I... It's not like that!" He looked forwards, his glasses

reflecting the stars, "I... I just wonder how they're doing... And what to do about my future..."

A hand was placed on his shoulder, "The future isn't planned out yet." She said, "Don't let it worry you and enjoy the present." She removed her hand, "I once thought that way too, but now I know that worrying makes no difference…"

Keitaro turned to her and couldn't help but become sadder at the cheerless look in her face.

"Mutsumi-san…"

Keitaro moved closer to her before hearing a loud sound from the sea. Turning to face the horizon, his eyes bugged out as a monstrous ship approached their island.

Mutsumi noticed this also, "Ara…"

A klaxon resounded on the deck as a male voice spoke. "All hands! Brace for impact!"

"Impact?" Keitaro wondered, as it closed in on his position rapidly. "Wait a second… IMPACT!" The glow of the ship's eyes cast him in a pale green tone. "Mutsumi-san! We've got to get out o-" He looked to where she was sat.

Or supposed to be at least, seeing as she now watched him from afar underneath a palm tree. She waved to him giddily. Swallowing deeply, Keitaro faced the ship and to his inevitable moment of pain. Running aground, sand piling up in front of the fore hull, Keitaro was flung up into the air, the pain being worse than one of Naru's punches. Spinning around wildly, he couldn't stop himself from landing in a palm tree. Sighing to himself, he put his hands behind his head and began to relax, before the tree sprung back into its original shape and propelled straight back into the hull, rebounding into the sand headfirst.

"Urashima-kun!" Mutsumi gasped, jogging over to him.

Keitaro had popped his head out of the beach, spitting out copious amounts of sand and shells, before hearing a voice above him, making him crane his neck upwards.

"Lower anchor!"

That sounds like Suu… A shadow darkened above him, pausing his thoughts. *Oh no…* Sure enough, the anchor was heading in his direction. "Why does it have to be me!" He

screamed, before being buried in the sand further, his arms and legs sticking out from under the anchor.

A door opened up and a staircase fell out of it near the anchor. "We're here!" Suu chanted, jumping out of the door, running fast down the stairs.

The others followed, Naru looked warily around her and began to descend the steps, Motoko kept her arms hidden inside her sleeves, her katana by her side as she stepped slowly down. Mitsune yawned and stretched her arms lazily taking her time strolling down the steps. Shinobu was last, looking around sheepishly before Suu shouted up to her to hurry up. Replying uncertainly she carefully went down and walked onto the sand.

"We're here!" Suu shouted excitedly.

Everyone else looked at the island in general, until Shinobu was the first to notice someone.

"Who are you?" She asked.

Everyone turned to the new person. "Ara… I'm Otohime Mutsumi." She returned to the anchor and seemed to be moving it, "Could you help my lift this up? Urashima-kun is under it."

"Sempai!" Shinobu cried out, before her eyes became swirls and she fainted.

Suu looked up, "Raise anchor!"

It did so, and the twitching arms and legs were shortening in their duration.

"Keitaro!" Naru shouted, "Are you okay?" She ran over and pulled on one of the limp arms.

Bursting out of the sand, struggling for breath, he threw himself forwards, landing on Naru. "Narusegawa…" He coughed out some sand, and then felt a squishy pressure under his right palm.

Two seconds later he was embedded in the hull of the ship, a clenched fist with pulsating artery viewable. *Pervert…* She turned; wiping her hands on each other and could see the emotion in one girl's eyes.

"Otohime Mutsumi?" The girl in question turned to the new Toudai student, "Did he touch you in any way? He is a pervert…"

"No he didn't, he just helped me home." She smiled, "He's very nice…"

The group stood there, stunned, except for Suu who was poking away at Keitaro. "What is so good about him!" Naru asked.

"He's kind and took care of me when I fainted…" She closed her eyes, recalling all the events. "He helped me around Kyoto and in getting here. If it weren't for him, I probably wouldn't have made it home."

A fwump was heard as Suu kicked Keitaro in the head, making him land on the sand and waking him up instantly. "Huh? Everyone? How did you get here?"

"We went to find you!" Suu said, bouncing about.

"Sempai… we were worried about you…" Shinobu spoke up, her expression hidden beneath her fringe.

"Shinobu-chan…" Keitaro focussed on the young girl with his face reddening.

"Well, where would we be without our kanrinrin?" Mitsune added, "Besides, I'm a little low on money…"

"I'm not a cash point Kitsune!" He cried, tears flying out of the sides of his glasses.

"Did you fail to get into Toudai?" Motoko asked, speaking for the first time.

Keitaro started. *Motoko looks disappointed in me…* "Well… Yes… I didn't. My mind went blank in the exam hall…"

"I see…" She said, taking this in, "And you felt so ashamed that you needed to run away." Her voice increased in volume subtly, but everyone could tell, "To take us on a wild goose chase around Japan! What were you thinking!" She stopped for a breath, her emotions getting the better of her for a minuscule amount of time. She spoke again clearly, her emotions once again buried, "At one point we thought you were dead…" Keitaro faltered and stepped back at this knowledge, "The likelihood of you being alive was slim, but we continued regardless…" She stared into his eyes, another feeling being conveyed, "Finally we find you here alive and well…"

Keitaro was dumbstruck; he had no way to reply to that, coherently at least. "Erm… Well… I didn't… I guess…"

"While I should be happy for you to be safe and well…" Motoko stopped him in his tracks, "I'm not." The group looked at her, "It's satisfactory that you survived, but the fact that you could not trust us to be more understanding is what upsets me the most…" She angled her face away from his, her bangs covering her features, "Do you wish to return to Hinata-sou? Or to remain here with Otohime-san?"

Keitaro paused, looking between the fainting-prone woman and the residents of Hinata-sou, each of whom except Motoko who were eager to hear his answer. A few minutes later he came to a decision. "I'll go home for now… So that I can think up what to do for the future… If that's okay with everyone."

Everyone nodded their approval, but only Motoko spoke, "I will abide by the majority vote." She turned to the dark skinned girl, "Suu, how long until departure?"

Communicating via a small microphone she began to babble on in another language before beaming again, "Repairs to the ship will take a day, so midday tomorrow!"

Everyone sighed; they would be able to stay a night without travelling in the ship.

"Ara…" Mutsumi mused, "Would you like to stay in my house? It should be okay if you stay with us for one night…"

"Us?" Mitsune asked.

Immediately eight other children came out, the girls all having two antennae sticking out the top of their head, three boys with scruffy looking dark hair, and on with blonde. They all jumped on Keitaro and started tickling him.

"Yaaah! Noooo!" He cried before falling down from intense laughter.

"Well, it wouldn't do us harm to stay here one night… " Naru wondered.

"The it's settled!" A new voice said.

"Okaasan!" Mutsumi cried, as did the children, who paused with their torment of Keitaro.

"You are all welcome, people who lived in Hinata-sou are like family to me." Natsumi smiled wholeheartedly.

Suu cheered and Shinobu smiled, "Follow me and I'll show you your rooms."

Suu spoke into the radio to tell the captain that they would be staying in the Otohime house, and they could stay in the ship. Keitaro walked alongside Mutsumi as the kids scrambled around him. Watching his banter between him and Mutsumi were the residents, none more so than Motoko. *What is doing! Why is so friendly with that woman?* She lowered her eyes and chose not to keep her eyes on him the whole night.

Author's Notes

Ho hum, another update. Hope you like it. The final chapter for Book 2, leading us nicely into Book 3 (with hopefully a nice cliffhanger for most of you out there). Delays are inevitable but c'est la vie.

Let me know what you think, about the chapter, the Book(s) in general, or how you think the story is progressing. An update on how you think this series is developing is always good to have.

My shoujo-ai hint has not been implemented yet sadly, but will do so in the next chapter. Apologies to the person(s) I've mentioned this to at one point or another.

Still, such is fanfiction… You never know what might happen until it does.

Until later

- Jason