

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 page, 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.

"Your 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