

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 him, 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 writhing 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