

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. Toookyoo!" Mutsumi corrected, holding one finger up looking at her little sister.

Tatsuki nodded eagerly, "Okay! Toookyoo!" 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 to 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 face 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 one 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