

Chapter 21
Renewed Friendships; Renewed Grudges
Otohime Island
11:03pm

"Ara, here we are. Welcome to my home!"

The girls were stunned by the size of Natsumi's mansion, looking up at the roof and then towards the right, where scattered lights showed the rest of the home, stretching off into the night.

"I know it's a little small, but it's all we have..." Natsumi said, in an apologetic fashion. No one said anything, their jaws dropping more as they walked inside. The lavish entrance hall was gleaming, not that there was anything particularly valuable, but everything was so lovingly placed, the girls couldn't help but feel emotional at standing in that room. The aura given off was one of pure love and happiness.

"It's... so beautiful..." Shinobu sniffed, her strong emotions getting the better of her, a few tears sneaking down her cheeks.

"Suu feel happy here!" The Indian girl bounded up and down, settling besides Shinobu.

"Ara... Thank you... I hope this will be okay for you to stay here..." Natsumi began before being interrupted by Naru.

"This is too much! Are you sure we can stay here?" She asked incredulously.

"Yes, would you like me to show you your rooms?" She replied sweetly, smiling while leaning slightly to one side.

The girls nodded and followed Natsumi through the corridors of their home. It was deceptively large inside; the sense of space grew when they thought they were entering the smaller section of the house.

"Here we are now." Natsumi opened a door and they were led into a plain and simple room with twin beds. "We have a few rooms from this point on that we don't use anymore, you're more than welcome to use them." She looked down behind them to see one of her sons running towards her.

"Okaasan!" He cried out, "Tsutantai-oniichan has fallen over again!"

"Ara..." Putting one hand to her head she sighed, "He's always like that, tripping up on things and getting hurt. I'll see to him now and you can decide which rooms to sleep in."

Natsumi scampered off with her son in tow, leaving the Hinata residents alone once again.

"Right... Well... Any preferences?" Keitaro began, nervous from the awkward silence.

"Hmph! Well I'm not sleeping in the same room as you!" Naru said, folding her arms and turning around. "I guess I'll sleep in the same room as Kitsune."

"No." The fox lady replied.

"Huh!" Naru turned around, bemused, "Why not!"

"I..." She blushed, much to the shock and disbelief of everyone, "I want to be in the same room as Keitaro...-san."

Lightning flashed through the windows and a loud thunder boom echoed in the house.

"Please..." Naru began, edging closer to her in a jittery manner, "Repeat what you said, I think the thunder broke my eardrums."

"Oh I can't!" Mitsune angled away, covering her face, "I'm too embarrassed!" Amidst the confused emotions, she grinned beneath her hands.

Naru, quickly changing into her angry face, grew redder in the face. "Fine then! I'm going to stay in this room alone then!" She opened another door and found a double bed. "Goodnight!" She slammed the door before anyone could reply.

Mitsune opened her eyes and looked at the door. *Gomen Naru... I have to do this, or I won't know...* Closing them again, she smiled mischievously, "Come, come Keitaro-san! Let's sleep now!" She dragged him into the room next to Naru's, the one that was opened for them.

"W... Wait Kitsune! I... I don't..." He protested, unable to free himself from her grip.

"Hey, it's not like it's your first time... You'll be fine!" She grinned even further and she pulled him completely into the room.

"Someone, help me!" Looking at the remainder he didn't get much confidence that he would actually receive any help. Suu was giving a thumbs-up, Shinobu was lying on the floor foaming at the mouth with swirling eyes, Motoko stood with her eyes closed and arms folded, and finally Mutsumi with a hand on her cheek beaming at him.

The door slid shut and the girls outside could hear a lock being latched from the inside and the sound of male whimpering.

"Ara... Sounds like fun." Mutsumi spoke, only making Shinobu gurgle more.

"Shinobu!" Suu shouted energetically, picking up the younger girl and shaking her, "Let's stay in the same room together!"

Her head still lolling around, she nodded, "Okay then Suu..." She turned to Motoko and Mutsumi, her eyes becoming normal once more, "Goodnight Motoko-sempai, Mutsumi-san."

"Goodnight you two!" Mutsumi waved to them as she opened the door to the room on the other side of Naru's room.

"I think I too shall retire to a room, goodnight Mutsumi-san."

"Ara? Are you okay being alone Motoko-san?"

"Yes... I'll be fine..." Motoko paused for a second and spoke facing away from the anaemic woman, "Mutsumi-san, did Urashima... touch you... in any way?"

Not sensing the seriousness of her tone, Mutsumi replied in a happy manner, "Yes he did! Many times in fact!" Even Motoko at this time faltered off centre, her equivalent of a facefault. Mutsumi continued, "I fainted a lot but he always caught me." Moving closer she peered at the warriors face, "Why so interested Motoko-san?" She grinned as the faint outlines of a blush took hold on the kendo expert, Mutsumi moved closer grinning with a child-like innocence.

Motoko jolted away and opened the nearest unoccupied room as her blush took on atomic proportions. Locking herself inside she could breathe again. Mutsumi smiled outside in the corridor. *What a cute girl... Oh well back to my room now...* She twisted around and then flopped onto the ground, chibi-angel versions of her hovering above her head as she fainted again.

Half an hour later Keitaro and Mitsune's room

"Kitsune!" He cried, tears streaming, "Untie me!" He was wrapped up in his duvet with rope around him, Mitsune now straddling his waist holding more rope in her hands.

"Now I've got you, you can't get away now..." Her eyes glinted in the dark, and she moved closer to his face.

Keitaro winced and turned his face away. "I... I'm not ready for this Kitsune!"

She stopped a mere inch away from his lips, her breath caressing his cheeks. "Ready for what?" She asked seriously. Keitaro looked to her to see her eyes glinting, this time with tears.

"K... Kitsune..."

She rolled off him and lay by his side, facing away from him, sniffing quietly. "Why does everyone think that way of me? I'm just a girl..."

Keitaro rolled over so he could face her. "Kitsune, it's not like that!" He struggled to think of something, "It was just because you were on top of me and tied me up! What was I supposed to think?"

Mitsune turned to him, "You mean that? It wasn't because of... my reputation?"

Keitaro nodded, "I know you Kitsune, you wouldn't do anything like that."

She wiped her eyes and scoffed in a derisory manner, "You don't know me..." She sighed and then looked at him again, "But this isn't about me, I want to know what happened."

"What do you mean?" Keitaro asked, genuinely confused.

She got straight to the point, "Between you and Motoko."

He felt his heart skip a beat, "N... Nothing happened..."

"Oh come off it Keitaro!" Mitsune butted in, "We could all tell, the day your results were posted, she wasn't there to see you off." She stopped to let this sink in, "She's lived with us for a long while now, and she always saw you two out when you had exams." She paused, "It was strange when she didn't turn up that day."

Keitaro wasn't listening to her; he only remembered the last thing he said to Motoko before meeting her on the island.

"Leave before I say something I regret, Motoko!"

Keitaro was sweating, looking down at his guilty heart. *Why did I say that? How could I be so cruel...?*

"Are you listening to me!" Mitsune blared into his ear.

Wincing at his inability to massage his eardrums he glanced at the girl next to him, displaying a clearer expression.

"Well, what do you have to say?" She inquired.

Keitaro started, "I... I don't know what came over me..." He relayed the details of what happened that night, not stopping for a moment.

All this left Mitsune nodding with understanding, "And she felt hurt and didn't want to see you that day. This is beginning to make sense now..."

Keitaro sighed, "I never got to apologise to her about it, I left for Kyoto later and haven't seen her until now."

"That's why she was angry... Oh well..." She waved her hand at him, "It's all in the past now, how was your trip with that girl...?"

"Her name's Otohime Mutsumi. It was okay..." Keitaro didn't backup his comment with his expression. *Motoko-chan was angry? Well, I suppose I am a man... She does hate men, especially me most of all now...*

"Good that you had fun Keitaro." Mitsune got up and walked over to her bed, "You made us all worry about you though..." She yawned, "But now we have you back... Goodnight Keitaro..." Within seconds an unfeminine guttural snore could be heard from her.

"W... Wait! Don't leave me tied up here!" Keitaro shouted, though the snoring drowned him out. He gave up and decided to try to sleep, rolling over on his favourite side.

Ten minutes ago Naru's Room

"What is that?"

Naru struggled with the glass pressed against the wall. She could hear signs of a struggle and pleading.

"Is he taking advantage of her?" She drew away from the wall as images of an oddly innocent Mitsune being pounced upon by an equally bizarre guise of a perverted Keitaro ran through her mind. "No, no, no!" She shook her head rapidly, "That can't be happening!" She began hitting herself in the head to clear her mind of those thoughts. *But... Why do I care what that pervert does? He annoys me all the time!*

Naru gave up trying to listen in, the neighbouring room suddenly becoming quiet. Stifling a yawn she moved into the centre of the bed and covered herself with the sheets, dropping off into a deep sleep half an hour later. Due to this, she didn't hear the door to her room open, a pair of eyes watching her.

Shinobu and Suu's room 11:40pm

"Suu! We have to sleep...!" Shinobu said before being muffled by a pillow thrown in her face.

"Shinobu! Let's play!" Suu energetically bounced up and down on her bed.

"Auuu..." Shinobu surveyed the room, the mess from feathers was everywhere. She inwardly moaned. *This will take me hours to clean!* "Suu! Stop it!"

Suu began to pout and crawled up to Shinobu on her bed, "Shinobu doesn't want to play?" She said, her eyes welling up.

Shinobu took one look at her and her hard gaze melted, "Well... I'd like to... But we really need to sleep." She tried to cheer up the blonde girl, "Let's play tomorrow."

"Roger!" Suu backflipped into the other bed, having changed into her pyjamas in mid-air.

Shinobu sighed. *I'm glad that's over...* She yawned and turned on her side and began to think about everything that happened. She sniffed. *Why am I here? Sempai has Naru-sempai, Motoko-sempai and Kitsune-san. He was with Mutsumi-san as well...*

She sobbed, her tears moistening the pillow. "He doesn't need me here..."

She stiffened when she felt arms surrounding her from behind, peeking at the person she saw it was... *Suu!*

"Suu doesn't want Shinobu to cry." She said, her smile losing its shine. "Keitaro needs you, he needs all of us!" She continued, in a happier tone. To make sure Shinobu realised, Suu gripped her tighter.

Shinobu yelped, and wiped her tears away. "Thank you Suu..." Shinobu turned around and they fell asleep hugging each other face to face.

Motoko's Room Midnight

Why can I not sleep?

In the bedroom, where two beds lay, the sole occupant was lying on her back, facing the ceiling. Her hair was splayed in every direction, covering most of the pillows, her hands clasped above the sheets.

Motoko was troubled; her brow furrowed now and then, her eyes very much used to seeing the faint outlines of objects having not closed them once for sleep.

Why is my body not requiring sleep? It has been a long journey today... I should need sleep... Something must be stopping me from my rest. My mind must be clouded with thoughts... What of?

In front of her eyes, the television static of pale darkness morphed into the smiling visage of a certain ronin manager. Shocked, she rubbed her eyes but this time it was a laughing face. Infuriated, she leapt out of bed to her katana in a flash. She didn't unsheathe it due to the particles of light now flitting about randomly, only the outlines of the furniture could be seen. Her entire face in shadow, she gripped the handle firmer, so much so that the pain stretched up her arm. Tears started to pour down her cheeks, glistening with the ambient light from streetlamps outside. Frustrated with herself, she clenched her teeth tighter, making her jaw ache. Unwilling sounds of anger in her throat were heard.

Why do I keep thinking of him! He means nothing to me! Nothing! She pulled out the katana and swung it at the bed. A crack confirmed that it had struck something; it was embedded in the headboard. Sweating profusely, she pulled the katana from the wood and sheathed it again. *I mustn't lose my wits like that again, it is unbecoming of a warrior.* She rested the katana against the side of the bed, and went under the covers.

Calming down, she puzzled over events on the journey they had. *How did the Shinmeiryu know about Keitaro so quick?* Flashes of the time when the eagle arrived at her window appeared in her mind. *The time it took to process that request was beyond efficient. It was almost as if... as if he was already being tracked.* She shook her head, dismissing the thought. *No, that can't be it... Surely not...?* Doubt forming in her mind, she left that issue for later. *That man... He displayed superior fighting skills than the normal human.* Another flash of the person in the alley passed by her. *Who was he? Why was he fighting? And that outfit... It couldn't be... A still image of the legend of Kyoto, the fires in the background with a sole figure in front. Is that clan still around from that time?*

Sighing deeply, she turned onto her side. *I see, these things are affecting me... and all thanks to Urashima...* Having expressed her thoughts and figuring out what had been stopping her, the waves of drowsiness washed over her, and her eyelids grew heavier by the second.

"Urashima..." She said underneath her breath, "I hate you..."

The gentle sound of deep breathing could be heard moments later.

**Saturday 14th March
1:00am
Hinata-sou**

A lone figure walked up the steps and outside the main entrance to Hinata-sou, where a light was on showering the area outside in a yellow halo. She was an average girl, were it

not for her dark green hair and blue framed glasses. Her outfit was casual, but thick to reflect the cold around her.

"Can I help you?" A voice said from behind. Haruka walked up to the girl.

The girl turned around and smiled thinly, bowing first before replying, "Nothing, I was just taking a look at this building, I've heard it's very old."

Haruka, dubious by this apparent reason, answered cautiously, "Really? This isn't the time of day to see it from the outside though..." Haruka narrowed her eyes at the girl, focusing on the eyes. *Could it be...?*

Quickly averting her eyes, the girl bowed again, "Oh my! I didn't realise the time, I must be off now!" She skipped off down the stairs.

Haruka watched the girl leave from the top step, her cigarette ash falling to the ground. *It has to be her... I could see it in her eyes...*

At that moment The bottom of the stairs

Haruka's thoughts could still be heard. *Kanako...*

Smirking, the girl took her glasses off and closing them in a case. She put her hand around her face and ripped it off, indeed revealing the enigmatic adopted sister of Keitaro. She rounded the corner out of sight from the stairs and pulled off the wig. She closed her eyes and sighed, reopening them a second later. *Haruka got too close. She knows I'm here now... This shouldn't interfere with my plans though...* She looked back up at the top of the hill where the inn lay. *I'll be coming back soon oniisan...*

She turned and held her arm out to a bush. After a small amount of rustling, a black cat appeared and went up her arm to her shoulder.

"There, there Kuro." She whispered, stroking the cat's head making her ears fold back, "Did you miss me?"

"I found some mice and chased them-nya." Kuro replied, her tail curling around Kanako's arm, the bell making a small noise, "They were too fast-nya." She settled into the shoulder more, purring more when Kanako held her close.

"Well, we just need to go back to the hotel now, I'll feed you there." Kanako said, looking up at the stars. "Soon we'll be living somewhere better..."

7:09am Naru's room

The comfy double bed was warm. Naru nuzzled against something. Her brain hadn't quite figured out that there wasn't supposed to be something there. In fact her dreams were about her childhood, hugging her Liddo-kun; unconsciously she did so in real life, hugging the thing next to her.

What was bizarre was that the thing itself had dreams, and it also chose to rub Naru's head a lot, thinking it to be a large round object. This is what woke Naru up; she wasn't used to having her head probed by unknown fingers. She opened her eyes, and they nearly popped out of her skull.

Mu... Mutsumi-san! Why is she...? Why am I...? She could tell that Mutsumi was fast asleep, her relaxed face in a soft smile as she continued to rub Naru's head. Mutsumi was sweating slightly, and Naru realised it was because she tightened her hug seconds earlier. Immediately she released most of the hold, just having her arms loosely around Mutsumi, who was oblivious to everything.

Naru blushed. *Mutsumi-san is really warm...* Naru began to yawn more from the cosy hug, and she smiled before dozing off again, not fully conscious as to the unusual nature of it all.

Suu and Shinobu's room 7:44am

Shinobu woke up, the front was very cold, and she saw that Suu had somehow turned away from her in sleep, and was now on the edge of the bed. Shinobu could also hear the sniffing sounds from the girl she had got used to when travelling with her.

Smiling with loving affection, as a mother would her child, Shinobu shifted forwards on the bed, and brought Suu into a cradling hug, after placing the sheets back over the two of them. She whispered soothing tones into Suu's ear, stroked her hair and even tickled her under the chin. This calmed the princess down a little, and she relaxed further into Shinobu's embrace.

Keitaro and Mitsune's room 8:01am

Mitsune was now lying on her back, the sheet covering her now twisted up many times, only keeping her belly warm. She was still snoring, this time more quietly than before.

The only other presence in the room was wide-awake; Keitaro opened his eyes for what seemed like the umpteenth time. They were red rimmed; he hadn't been able to sleep. He groaned. *What time does everyone get up at...? I'm so tired...*

Otohime Household 9:00am

The birds were chirping away, the sunshine after the storm welcome on their feathers. However, the peace was soon to be disrupted.

The opening chimes of Big Ben could be heard around the mansion, before the following. "It's nine in the morning, and time for everyone to get up!" A collective groan from the family side could be heard, along with startled sounds and even screams from the visitor side, "Ara... What next...? Ah yes, breakfast will be served at half past nine in the kitchen area. I hope you all slept well!" A click and the voice vanished.

The family, being used to this got straight to getting dressed, whereas the Hinata-sou residents took a little more time to get ready...

Keitaro and Mitsune's room

9:01am

Keitaro was the one who screamed, and also fell off the bed. Mitsune merely sat up slowly, her eyes squinting around her as she rubbed them half-heartedly.

"Is it morning already?" She asked.

"Of course it is!" Keitaro shouted from the floor. "Didn't you hear the announcement?"

Mitsune remained neutral, "Announcement?"

"Yeah... Didn't that wake you up?" Keitaro said, picking himself up with difficulty.

"Nah, I finally got over all the drink I had yesterday in Suu's boat." She stretched her arms out.

"You didn't look drunk..." Keitaro pondered, thinking back to when they arrived.

"Well, alcohol always knocks me out, I have a nice sleep afterwards..." *Though the hangovers aren't nice.* "Right, guess I'd better go change now..." She got up and walked to her bag.

"At least untie me first!" Keitaro cried.

Naru and Mutsumi's room

9:01am

Naru bolted awake, not expecting the tannoy. She awoke facing Mutsumi, who casually opened her eyes.

"Ara... Naru-san...?" She asked, "What am I doing here?"

Naru held back the disbelief, "I'm not sure..." She began, "I think you sleepwalked into my bed..."

"Mmm," Mutsumi nodded, "I do that sometimes..." She sniffed Naru's hair, much to the latter's shock.

"What are you doing Mutsumi-san!" She asked, aghast.

"Heehee..." Mutsumi giggled, "You smell like sleep!"

Naru, curious, sniffed her own hair, and it did faintly remind her of what most people smell like after sleep. Nostalgia crept into her mind as she recalled something similar happening in her childhood. Closing her eyes, she peered into her cloudy past, only to be forcibly removed from it.

"Naru-san... We have to get dressed now..." Mutsumi whispered in her ear.

"Wha..." Naru complained, then gave up, "Okay, fine..."

They both got up, Naru blushing when she realised how sheer Mutsumi's clothing was. *I was hugging her like this? What kind of a pervert am I!* Naru looked at her hands in fear of what she had done. Soon, the weight of what had transpired filled her mind. *I slept with a woman... What am I! Does that make me...*

Mutsumi interrupted her thoughts by holding her hands, which were still in front of Naru in horror. "Ara... You have nice fingers..." She looked closer, "But the nails are bitten badly, you must've been stressed..."

Reacting finally, Naru drew back from Mutsumi, looking at her with alarm. She held onto her hands, and blanched. *What is happening to me! Why am I acting this way? It was an accident... She sleepwalked into my bed...* Mutsumi continued to smile at Naru with her eyes closed.

"I think I scared you, Naru-san. Gomen." She turned, "I'll leave you now."

Naru, forever irrational, felt that she had offended Mutsumi, and thus didn't want to leave things that way. She walked to the elder woman.

"Umm..." This caught her attention, and she faced Naru, who became shy quickly, her hands clutched behind her back, "Don't take this the wrong way... It shook me a little, but... it felt good..." Naru felt half the blood in her body reach her head as the innuendo in the words made their effect, "No...! I meant that... It was nice... At least you didn't walk off somewhere dangerous..."

Mutsumi smiled back, "I never go far... And it was nice staying with you last night..." She beamed, her smile radiant once more, "See you at breakfast."

Naru watched as she closed the door behind her. Her hands went to her chest as she lowered her head. She began to sob quietly, tears falling from her eyelids onto her pyjamas and the floor. *Why am I getting so emotional? Who are you, Mutsumi-san...?*

Motoko's Room 9:01am

The kendo warrior opened her eyes as she lay on her side. *Curses, I didn't get much sleep in the end.* The view panned out to show the sheets, all crumpled and twisted, as if someone had been moving about constantly. Motoko sat up quickly, and remained still as the dizzy spell passed her by. *I must get dressed for breakfast...*

She stood up and proceeded to peel off the clothes she slept in, as the view panned to the doorway, where a dark gap was shown between the bottom of the door and the floor. Two star shaped objects twirled around for a second there, indicating that something was watching her.

Otohime Kitchen 9:32am

Everyone had arrived for breakfast. The family sat at one table while the Hinata-sou residents sat at another.

"Ara... Here you go, help yourself!" Mutsumi said as she laid down two trays with toast, butter, jam, various cereals with milk and fruit.

"Mmm! Bananas!" Suu leaped excitedly, and immediately grabbed three of them.

Mutsumi looked at Naru and smiled broader at her. Naru looked down and blushed again, her hands in her lap, under the table.

Keitaro noticed her shy demeanour, "Naru? You okay?"

Anger flaring up, she elbowed him in the ribs, "Course I am, and don't look at a girl's face if she's hiding it!"

Clutching his side, he could hear Mitsune snigger across the other side of Naru. Looking opposite, he was faced with a lethargic Motoko; her eyes were red, as were his but he couldn't tell.

"Couldn't sleep Motoko-chan?" He nervously opened the lines of communication.

She glared at him, "I see you weren't able to rest either..." She retorted.

"I guess you're right..." He put a hand behind his head, laughing weakly. "I couldn't thanks to a certain person tying me up." He narrowed his eyes off to his right, where Mitsune lay in its path. He picked up a piece of toast and spread butter on it thinly.

Motoko didn't continue the conversation, much to Keitaro's disappointment. Suu and Shinobu were talking among themselves, as were Naru and Mitsune. He lazily bit off pieces of the bread while looking about the kitchen. It was a large open-plan work area, very little clutter and plenty of counter space. A large patio was outside, and the French windows were open allowing a fresh sea breeze into the room as well as sunlight that warmed everyone.

As Keitaro appreciated the home, Motoko carried on thinking. *What is Urashima trying to do? Does he think that with mere words he can regain my trust? She bit into some toast. He is a fool.*

"Motoko-chan?" Keitaro tried to get her attention. Once Motoko looked in his direction, he went on. "You have some crumbs on your lips..."

Once he said those words, he knew he would feel pain again. The last time he said that to Motoko he recalled that the kettle had a new resting spot, embedded in his skull. Her blush only confirmed his fears. He grimaced, waiting for anything.

Yet there was no punishment, in fact it seemed that no one heard him. Motoko stood up and declared, "I'm done eating." She then stalked off to her room.

Naru stared at Keitaro, "What did you say to her?"

He became scared again, "No... Nothing! I just said there were crumbs on her lips!"

Naru cracked her knuckles and stood up, making Keitaro too stand up, "You think she likes perverts like you looking at her lips?" She pulled her fist back, "You IDIOT!"

The Naru-punch took him out into the patio and through the palm trees outside. Suu cheered. "Yay! Keitaro is normal again!" Shinobu looked worried, but given previous experience, she knew he would come back alive. Mitsune just ate more cereal.

"Ara... Naru-san is so violent..." Mutsumi said from the other table, hand on her mouth giggling.

Naru jumped at this, and relaxed once she sat down. *Mutsumi-san thinks I'm weird for acting like that to him...* Mitsune kept a close eye on this and wrote down something in a tiny book she kept in her back pocket, after flipping to a section entitled 'Naru'.

Motoko's room A minute later

The bed was neatly made; the bag Motoko carried was on it now, open with clothes and other objects. Folding her night clothing in it, she closed the bag, securing the strings to keep it all in. She wiped her lips furiously and was trying her best to hold back more anger. *Urashima... Again you have humiliated me...* She remembered his concerned face and his sadness when she was angry with him. *You act well for a pervert; you have everyone convinced except for Naru-sempai and I...*

She walked over to the side of the bed where her katana lay. She picked it up and latched it onto her belt. *I shall punish you...*

Northern beach 15 minutes later

Keitaro trudged out of the water; he was soaked thoroughly, making his clothes stick to him. Picking a starfish off his forehead he placed it on a rock near the water. Waving his arms about, he managed to get rid of most of the dampness. He sighed. *Naru is still the same way. This time I skimmed the sea four times...*

He lay down and pulled off his glasses, placing them next him to dry them in the morning sun. His hands behind his head, he allowed the warmth to flow through him. Closing his eyes he replayed the events of that meal. *Why did Motoko-chan act that way...? She's changed... The way the she looks and talks to me... Like when I first arrived in Hinata-sou...*

He winced, scrunching his eyes up. He sat up and began rubbing his eyes. Opening them slowly, tears started to leak out. *Damn, now I have sand in my eyes... What else could go wrong...?*

At that moment Several metres away

Motoko had her hand ready to remove her katana to strike him, but she stopped seeing his tears. She stood there, hidden in the shadow of the trees and bushes, in stunned silence. *Why cry now...? When I'm about to attack...* Motoko fell onto her knees. *What is it about you? Why do you affect me so...?* She heard a noise and saw Keitaro standing up, looking into the sky. Mesmerised for a short time Motoko kept staring at him, until she regained her senses. Clutching her katana close to her, she slipped away into the darkness of the trees.

One second later
The beach edge

Not knowing anyone was watching him, Keitaro wringed out the base of his T-shirt, from which only a little bit of water poured out. He sighed once more. *Guess I'd better change again...* He picked up his glasses and put them on, then taking them off to clean against the T-shirt. Finally adjusting them onto the bridge of his nose he turned in the direction of the house and started walking.

Otohime household
10:20am

The rest, having retired from breakfast earlier, were now in their respective rooms, packing up what little they had to leave. Suu and Shinobu were the first finished, leaving the rooms with their bags and putting them by the entrance doorway. Naru took a bit more time, making the bed neat again, and recalling the incident that morning. Mitsune took her time in putting all her things away. Motoko's bag was already at the exit. Keitaro had just arrived back at the house, and was panicking, throwing everything into the bag he had with him after changing into dry clothes.

The mood was one of happiness, Suu was jabbering on into the radio to the captain of the ship. Clicking off, she spoke loudly, "We can depart in fifteen minutes!"

Naru sighed. *Finally we can go...* She looked to the doorway where their bags lay. *Where's Keitaro? He's late...* A loud crash came from within the house. Running in, the residents saw Keitaro lying on the floor, eyes swirling, and his arms in front of him carrying a bag. Beneath his legs was the prone figure of Mutsumi.

"Mutsumi-san!" Naru shouted, dragging Keitaro off her by pulling his ears. Ignoring his cries of pain, she moved Mutsumi's body so that she lay on her back. Cradling Mutsumi's head in her arms, Naru looked concerned at the elder woman. "Mutsumi-san! Are you okay!"

She sounded overly anxious, getting the attention of Mitsune. Keitaro and Shinobu were distracted, the former crying with the pain, the latter giving him some help standing up. Mitsune brought out her book and quickly jotted down something in it. Suu just went 'Ooh'.

Mutsumi opened her eyes, "Ara... Naru-san... Did I faint again?"

Naru was close to tears, "F... Fainted?" *Of course... She told us that when we arrived!*

"Ara..." Mutsumi began, blushing slightly, "Naru-san, can I get up now?"

Naru grew redder, "S... Sure..." Pulling herself up, she helped Mutsumi to her feet.

Suu was puzzled. "Where's Motoko?" She started to rummage through the entrance room, in case she happened to be under the sofa or table.

"Kaorra!" Shinobu said, embarrassed, "Don't disturb the house!"

Yet it seemed that the Otohime children were joining in. Appearing from different places they began to run about the room, searching much in the same way as Suu.

"Auuu..." Shinobu cried, tears poured down her cheeks.

Suddenly Suu popped up in the middle of the chaos, wearing a military camouflage outfit with a helmet, much like when Keitaro first arrived. She pointed to the corridor where the rest of the house was.

"To the other rooms!" The children stood up and looked down the corridor.

"No Suu!" Shinobu began.

"Suu!" Naru shouted.

Keitaro gasped, as Suu took in a long breath, "CHARGE!"

Sure enough, the stampede started, the eight children screamed down the corridor, crashing into the rooms to search. The rest of the Hinata-sou residents ran after Suu, who followed her private army, now hidden in a cloud from their running.

Naru was last to go, before Mutsumi held onto her hand. "This looks like fun." Mutsumi laughed, "I'll join in too!" Dragging Naru, she went to find the others.

Meanwhile Northern beach

The person everyone was looking for was sitting in a tree on a low branch. Leaning against the trunk, her legs flat against the branch, she looked out to the sea. *It has been a while since I went away from Hinata-sou... The last time was the training for the kendo school... She stared off beyond the horizon. The year is going by so quickly. Ane-ue... Motoko's eyes narrowed. Her deadline is getting closer by the day... Looking to her katana, which was alone at the base of the tree, wedged in the roots her expression grew sterner. My duties at the dojo cannot be overlooked any more. They will be coming for me one day... I must train my hardest to repel them.*

A gust of wind made her hair whip about. Birds were chirping elsewhere in the surrounding shrubbery, singing their happy tunes. Relaxing into the tree, she nodded off, the distant sound of the sea lapping on the beach soothing her.

Five minutes later

Motoko was still napping, when the sound of rustling bushes brought her back to her senses. Fully alert, she jumped down and put her hand on her handle of her weapon. In an instant she was set upon.

"ATTACK!" Cried a familiar voice, and then eight children jumped on her. Confused, Motoko did nothing as they fell on her.

"Suu!" Keitaro scolded, finding the foreign girl on top of a tree, "Get them off her!"

Putting a mock sad face on, she complied, "Pull back!"

The children did as she said getting up and jumping back into formation. Motoko was flattened by their weight.

"Motoko-chan!" Keitaro cried, "Are you okay?"

He bent down to help her up, yet she rebuffed him with the back of her hand, and releasing her katana she slammed him into a tree opposite her, making the leaves fall from the harsh impact.

"Sensei..." Shinobu said in a distressed state. She picked his glasses up for him.

Mitsune saw he was out for the count, and hefted him to his feet. "Naru, help me carry him to the ship."

Reluctantly the new Toudai student agreed, pulling her hand free from Mutsumi's, who still held onto hers since the chase. She looked back once more at Mutsumi who smiled.

"I'd help," She said, "But I'm very weak, so I'd faint again..." She brightened up though, "I can still watch you go!"

"If you can..." Naru smiled back, "I'd like that."

Taking the other shoulder of Keitaro, so he was now resting on both of them, Naru and Mitsune dragged him off along the beach, with Shinobu tagging along closeby. Motoko watched them and closed her eyes, sealing away her katana. Suu meanwhile had instantly changed into her normal clothing, and was handing out medals to the children with a picture of Motoko on them. They saluted one last time to their commander and ran off into the forest. Suu jumped on Motoko's back

"Shall we go Motoko?" She asked eagerly.

"Yes." She answered, "Let's go."

The two of them walked to follow the others, Mutsumi tagged along.

10:38am Armada Defender

The ship looked more gallant and lavish in the light. Suu smirked when saw it.

"That's the ship that protects my family!" She spoke out loud.

Everyone stopped to look at her and the same thought echoed in all their minds. *"Who IS her family!"*

Natsumi and her eldest daughter were there to say goodbye to the visitors. Natsumi had a summer hat on and was waving a hanky at them. Shinobu bowed politely, said many thanks and went into the ship. Suu bounced by and said she loved their house, saying it reminded her of home. Naru, Mitsune and a now conscious Keitaro were next. Mitsune winked and said it was fun, Keitaro thanked them for their hospitality, whilst Naru remained mute, blushing.

Mutsumi went up to Keitaro, who didn't have his glasses on. Moving in closer, much to the reddening of Keitaro's cheeks, she kissed him on the lips. Frozen by disbelief and fear from the others, he could say no more.

"Arigatou... You helped me get home safely Urashima-kun..." She turned to Naru, "Naru-san..."

She gave her a kiss on the lips too, resulting in the same reaction as Keitaro.

"That was for last night..." Mutsumi winked mischievously, Keitaro was able to nosebleed without anyone taking a blind bit of notice. Mitsune had to push the both of them away towards the ship; their legs still locked at the knees.

Motoko was last; she bowed down and said she was grateful for the stay and the hospitality. She moved off before Mutsumi gasped.

"What is it?" Motoko asked, curious.

"Ara... I forgot to give Urashima-kun a present..." She picked it up off the floor, "Could you give it to him when you get the time Motoko-san?"

Motoko looked at the gift, a cube with a large ribbon and minuscule holes in the sides. "Okay then, I shall do so later."

"Arigatou Motoko-san." Mutsumi smiled pleasantly, "Safe trip, and take care of Urashima-kun." Motoko paled at this, "He's insecure since he failed. Cheer him up." Mutsumi waved at her, "I'll probably see you soon..."

Motoko took her leave and walked briskly into the ship, the entrance hatch closing after she entered. A klaxon sounded on the ship.

"All crew to their seats, guests must remain in their seats during departure." The voice of the captain said.

Power could be heard surging through the hull of the ship, the front eyes glowing green. As if it was natural, two large arms moved out of the hull into the sand, and literally pushed the ship off. The arms kept pushing under the water, extending to reach the bed until the ship was in deep water, so that it could run under its own power. Mutsumi waved goodbye, beaming at them; Natsumi waved the hanky at them, crying for some reason. The residents waved back through the portholes, though they weren't sure if they could be seen outside. For a moment, Naru swore that Mutsumi looked straight at her and gave her a special smile, different to the one she gave all the others.

The captain's voice sounded again, "Initiating hydrofoil drive."

The ship gurgled, making the guests a tad nervy, Suu just laying back and enjoying the ride. Two large portions of the hull at the front broke off and landed in the water. After a minute, sure enough the ship now had hydrofoils needed for high-speed travel.

"Destination... Tokyo. ETA One hour."

"One hour...?" Keitaro wondered, "How does... AAAAH."

He wasn't alone, everyone else screamed and fell over, except Suu, who was snoozing away, the ship had now accelerated to full speed, hurtling along the sea at a stomach-churning rate. The island could no longer be seen after five minutes.

Meanwhile Hinata-sou

The sun was shining, and Haruka had just walked up to the inn to pick up mail. After standing up from getting it, she spoke.

"What are you doing here?" She growled beneath her breath.

The fog grew behind her; a voice came from within, "The chosen are returning." Another voice spoke up, "There are renewed friendships, and renewed grudges."

"That nice..." Haruka said in a bored voice, "Now go away." She flicked her cigarette into the fog, where it glimmered after hitting someone.

"Violence is not the answer." One voice in pain groaned. Another said, "The past is returning to you too." The fog dissipated as quickly as it came.

Haruka furrowed her brow. *My past...?* She opened her eyes further, understanding finally. *Could it be... him...?*

----- **Author's Notes**

My longest chapter to date, at 7043 words. Hope you enjoy it. I trust you will review this, as it has been a long time since Chapter 20 (January 31st).

Unfortunately things haven't been going too well with me, I've failed my university degree, thus I am repeating my final year again. My chance to prove myself is this coming year.

In other news, I'm off to Spain on the 6th, coming back on the 24th, thus no more updates until afterwards, where I shall hopefully have two chapters, one for the 28 Days Later crossover, and the other for the FLCL/NGE one. I believe this chapter will be enough to pacify you for that long.

PS, nice reviews are expected :D Of course, if you have any criticism, please let me know.

- Jason