

Chapter 16

Secrets Revealed II: Maehara Shinobu

Tokyo train station

The same day

Late afternoon

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Two train tickets to Kyoto please."

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

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

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

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

"Sign here please."

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

"Have a safe trip." He said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, okay then, bye now!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Train 253 to Sendai is departing now."

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

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

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

Train 112

Destination Kyoto

Exact time unknown

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Four years ago

Hinata Springs

Maehara restaurant

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't know, we'll have to see..."

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

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

"Shh, you might wake Shinobu-chan..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The mother gasped, "But... why!"

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

"And Shinobu-chan?"

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

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

Present Day

Train 112

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

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

"It happened a year ago..."

One year ago

Maehara Restaurant

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Present Day

Train 112

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

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

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

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

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

Kyoto station

Very very late

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So this is what Kitsune-san meant... Shinobu struggled but eventually managed to breathe. Looking down to her friend, she saw her tears at the edge of her eyelids. Overwhelmed with compassion Shinobu patted her head and wiped away her tears, sleeping like that the entire night.

Meanwhile

Two rooms away

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

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

Author's Notes

Well, sorry for the delay, my computer was recently upgraded to an incredible system; it's beautiful, really. However as you get with such high powered systems, there were problems, and thus it had to be repaired, leading to a lack of access to my fics. Hopefully this chapter didn't bore you too much, and if I'm lucky then I might avoid the recent

problems I've had with uploading things to Word XP seems to enjoy placing another line when I leave a paragraph, so dialogue is horribly spaced out, I'll try and fix it soon if it doesn't work.

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

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

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

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

Until the next chapter,

- Jason