

Living in a World of Strangers

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The Sohma main house had been set ablaze and some of the Sohma family need a place to stay. Tohru asks her cousin if they could stay at his place. Hitsoku agrees, but his hope of keeping up a single lifestyle as an artist is also burned away. In the meanwhile, Akito is having problems of her own with Shigure, along with her mother, Ren. Akito female x OC male

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Preface

Hilo everyone! Guess what? I edited and added on to every chapter! Basically, the paragraphs of text in italics are in Akito's point of view. I didn't want to put "Akito's POV" because that would have disrupted the flow of the story. I felt bad because I couldn't show you what Akito was thinking, so I decided to do that. Plus, the transition would be easier once I switch completely into her perspective much, much later into the story. In addition, no one told me I had miscounted on the number of guests! I slapped my forehead because I realized that only a week ago. Anyways, please reread the story, and I hope you like the new and improved version.

"Why does mineral water that 'has trickled through mountains for centuries' have a 'use by' date?"

...

"Hello? Hii-kun? This is Tohru Honda... I know it has been a while, but I was wondering if you could help." She sounded unsure of herself.

"Hey Tohru-chan. Yeah, how can I help?" I was a little nervous talking to her.

"Oh, thank you so much!" She said loudly, which made me wince. "Do you have room at your house?"

"Do you need to stay over?" I was mildly confused. The last I had heard of her was that she was staying at a few of her guy friends' house which was fine with me. Of course as long as they were trustworthy and responsible.

"No... My friends' home caught on fire and so some of their family needs a place to stay during the reconstruction. Do you think you have enough room?"

"How many people?"

Tohru quietly counted and came up with an answer within a few seconds. "Um, about six, I think?"

"Yeah, that's okay. Are you coming over today? Tomorrow?"

"Will today be fine?"

"Yes."

"Oh, thank you Hii-kun! We'll come over immediately. Um, can I have your address?"

I had a sweat drop in the back of my head. Yup, that's Tohru, I thought. I recited the address slowly so she had enough time to write it down. I even gave her directions from a certain point. "See you later," I said lamely as I hung up the phone. It's going to be noisy for a while, I thought as I started to neaten up my house including the guest rooms.

I hadn't talked to Tohru since a few years before Kyoko-sama past away so it had indeed been a while. Six years, in fact. I was at least eager to help her out as long as I could give my condolences. My parents forbade me to even go to her grave since it was Kyoko-sama's, so I couldn't even see Tohru. I hated my parents after that, especially my father. Unfortunately, or fortunately (I hadn't decided which), my uncle past away and gave me this house along with money from his insurance. I immediately got a job as a tattoo artist and moved in as soon as I turned eighteen. By that time, I was afraid to call her because I thought I was too late to say anything.

After I thought everything was suitable, I waited by the stairs so I could open the door when they arrived. Just as I sat down, there were knocks on the door.

The fire had chased us out of our homes, and even though no one had gotten hurt, I would never be the same. Even though Tohru had

told us the good news of a new temporary home, I wasn't sure if it would be a good thing to go. What if his home became another victim of arsen?

...

Not much was added to this chapter, but it was needed. I hope the italics don't get messed up, I really hate it when that happens. Same with the non-appearing line-breaks. I'll try and keep a close eye on that.

"Why is it called Alcoholics Anonymous when the first thing you do is stand up and say, 'My name is Bob and I am an alcoholic.'"

Chapter 2

Hilo. Just letting you know that I'm not going to put Hitsoku's thoughts in italics. It even confused me when I reread it. Also, I decided to not put a title in the chapters. It saves me the trouble of thinking of them, and they weren't very good anyway.

"If you let someone kick you once, they'll kick you once. If you let someone kick you three times, they'll kick you three times, but if you reach out and break the guy's foot, ain't no more kickin' gonna be goin' on."

...

The white Western-style house was bigger than even Tohru thought. It was still only two floors, but it was visibly wider than the house Shigure was staying in, and we could see an attic window that was blocked off with a curtain. It was perched on a hill that was surrounded by trees. It was a good mile before we got to a neighbor's house.

"Wow, your cousin lives in this big house alone?" Satsuki inquired.

'Alone' was a good word for this place. It seemed to be a good place to hide.

That must be them, I thought as I stood up and went to the door. When I opened the door the only one that caught my eye was Tohru. She had indeed grown into the beautiful woman Kyoko-sama wanted. Her brown eyes looked really happy instead of filled up with nervousness like mine probably were. It was only after when I confirmed that ever-forgiving Tohru wasn't disappointed in me that I saw the other people.

There was a lot more than six! There were two teenage girls, five teenage boys, three men, two women and one of them had a baby in

her arms. About thirteen! I had a big sweat drop behind my head.

"Konichiwa Hii-kun!" She greeted enthusiastically.

"Hello Tohru-chan," I mumbled. It was a lot more nerve-racking with all the people around. I opened the door wider and moved out of the way. "Please, come in."

The man Tohru called Hii-kun, almost smiled at Tohru before he saw us. He was pale, with long brown hair and dark brown weary, watchful, eyes. He had a very light stubble on his chin and upper lip. His voice was quiet, but deep with a light rasp. He wore the casual T-shirt and old jeans. Tohru had told him there would be six, but she forgot to tell him that other people would come to say good-bye, and be safe. I hoped we would be safe here.

As soon as everyone was in, I quietly shut the door. I had no idea how to start, but Tohru took care of that. "This is my cousin, Hitsoku Honda-kun," she said in her usual enthusiastic way. "Hii-kun, this is Kyo-"

"Gomen, Tohru-chan, but I'll just forget their names as soon as you give them out." It was more truth than being rude. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and said, "I'll show you to your rooms now." I led them upstairs to the hallway of four bedrooms. "Will the ones who are going to be staying with me please step forward?" I asked, raising my voice a bit so everyone could hear me.

The two grown women stepped forward along with two men, and three teenage boys. It looked as if the mother and one of the men were together along with one of the younger looking teenage boy so I had to be mindful of that when I split them up. Tohru had miscounted, there was seven plus a baby, but it was last minute after all. After a few minutes of thought I had come up with a way to split them up for now.

"Okay, the two women and the baby will sleep in this room," I said pointing to the door and giving them the key. I pointed to the two

men and gave them a key. "You two," I was pointing to the grown men, "will have the room across from them, and you three," the teenagers, "can have the last room, which is across from my room. Please don't make copies of the keys or lose them."

"That's biased," said the younger teen. He had short sand colored hair and dark brown eyes.

"It's just easier, it will probably change later. I just don't want to mix genders and this seemed to be the best. If anyone has any suggestions, then let me know later." I really didn't want to deal with all of this right now. Maybe I should have insisted on doing this tomorrow.

The doorbell rang as soon as I finished the thought. "Hitsoku! I know you're home! You're always home so answer the door already!"

My right eye was twitching as I groaned. Why is he here? Why now? "Um, go ahead and unpack and I'll be right back," I said as I maneuvered through the crowd and walked down stairs to answer the door.

When I opened the door a blur of bright neon orange came up and wrapped itself around my body. "Ah, Hitsoku! I knew you were home! Do you have another painting for me?" He loosened his grip and looked at me eagerly with his brown eyes behind his thick black framed glasses. His short black hair was neatly combed and parted on his left side. His smile never faltered even as I gave him an annoyed glare. He wore a really bright orange sweater with a brown button-up shirt under it with black jeans. He never had much sense in style or fashion.

I sighed and mumbled, "Yeah, but I'm kind of busy right now. Come over later when things have cooled down a-"

"Wow, you have guests over? You never have guests over." He asked excitedly. He rushed up stairs to meet everyone before I could

tell him not to. He then proceeded to ignore me and meet everyone face-to-face.

I closed the front door and took my time climbing up the stairs. I saw that he was already talking to Tohru who was telling him what happened and why they were here. It looked like they were already friends, but it wasn't surprising since they were both friendly. It looked as though he had already shook hands with everyone and exchanged names. I couldn't remember his name today, I couldn't remember most days, but I knew we were best friends because he never gave up on me even though I wanted him to.

"Hitsoku-kun, this is really amazing! You having so many people over," he said. "I really hope you aren't going to let them take advantage of you and stay for free."

If I could remember his name then I would have scolded him, but I merely looked off to the side.

A man in a business suit came up to me. He had short black hair that was a lot neater and parted on his right side. His hair covered one of his light violet eyes and he had fair skin. "I wanted to ask you about that. My name is Hatori Sohma and we would all like to thank you for your hospitality."

"It's no problem at all. The only thing I request is that you pay for your own food and to pay for some of the water and electricity."

He looked at me as if I was crazy. I looked around and most of the other people looked at me as if I had some sort of mental illness. "What about the rooms you're letting us stay in?" Hatori asked.

Another man came toward us. "Surely you'll want some sort of payment for the rooms," he said. He had short brown hair and black eyes with lightly tanned skin. He was wearing a neat polo shirt and dress pants. He was that kid's father. "I don't think it would be fair if we leave it at that."

"Um," I said, "why don't you just let me know what's fair after you talk to everyone else and when you come to an agreement."

"Hitsoku!" My friend scolded at me. "You are way too generous for your own good."

"It's not that. I just, um, um.... What was I talking about?" I mumbled. It wasn't that I had forgotten, I just didn't know how to word it right.

"Do you have brain damage'r something?" The kid asked. He looked mad.

The girl beside him cringed. "Hiro-kun," she said, more to herself than anything. She had orange hair that framed her growing face.

"What person would forget what they were just talking about especially when it had to do with the people who are paying you to stay in your home? Are you stupid or are you retarded?"

"Hiro!" The blond teen said with a thick German accent. "That's not nice! He's being very gracious for us to be living here, and for cheap." He seemed a bit childish for his age. I didn't know what to do about them at all.

I had been paying for this house just fine without them so I really didn't see the point with the whole renting situation. It wasn't as if I used the extra rooms anyway. To be honest, I didn't really care, anyway. I just want to be able to repay... What's her name again? I took the photo out of my pocket and looked at the back where it said:

Tohru Honda (7) and Hitsoku Honda (10)

Tohru Honda, I thought. That's right. That's her name. I put the photo in my pocket, repeating Tohru's name over and over again so I wouldn't forget anytime soon.

The phone started to ring for the second time today. It was probably that curator guy again. I climbed down the stairs and answered the

phone. "Hello? Honda residence, Hitsoku speaking." It was a good thing I had just looked at the photo.

"Ah, hello Honda-san. This is Masuyo Nobu and I need a mural done for our museum."

"Is it the one that was just built? Alright, could you describe what you want?" I got the pad of lined paper and a pen that was on the table next to the phone. I saw that everyone was talking to my still nameless friend. He was probably explaining a few things like my profession. Or maybe he was just talking about himself.

Masuyo Nobu owns many museums and frequently asks me to paint murals for him. Sometimes he even wants some of my paintings for his home as well. He's my best customer and he always pays a high price so he's my main source of income. After I hang up the phone I usually end up forgetting his name so I made sure to write his name at the very top of the paper.

"Is that all you want on your mural Masuyo-san? May I suggest a red and black mist as a sort of a decorative border?" I asked. The first thing I learned about Masuyo-san is the more I suggested things and the more detail I put in his mural, the higher he would pay me.

"Perhaps you'll want a chain on the guardian's spear?"

"Oh, that's excellent! Go right on ahead and put in whatever you like!" He always seemed to like my suggestions and ideas.

"I just don't want to misconstrue the meaning you want to incorporate into the mural."

"You don't have to worry about that Honda-san. I trust you completely."

"Thank you, uh, Masuyo-san. I'll bring a sketch over tomorrow morning."

"Excellent. See you tomorrow!" He hung up right after he said that.

I climbed back up stairs to see one of the young women come out of the room. She had short black hair and black eyes with fair skin. She wore a slightly faded black turtleneck shirt with black slacks. Apparently my friend didn't get a chance to meet her yet.

"Hello, my name's Takumi Michi," he said.

That's right. That's his name. Michi. It means "pathway" and Takumi means "open sea." I really need to remember his name.

"Sohma. Akito Sohma," she said. "Are you his friend?"

Michi smiled. "I'm his best friend and I visit a lot so you'll be seeing me quite often."

"Michi-kun," I said. "I think you said that you wanted a painting?"

His eyes shined. He probably thought I remembered his name on my own. How wrong he was. "Yeah! It's my birthday and you promised, remember?"

"You're a painter!" The blond yelled. He came right up to me, hardly leaving me any room. "Are you famous? Is that why you live in this big house?" He looked amazed and was smiling. I could feel his breath on my face as he spoke. "Can I see?"

I didn't know what to tell him or what to do about him. I was practically sharing air with him. I was sharing air with a stranger. I was going to be sharing air with all of these strangers. What was I thinking? It was too late to change my mind though. "Uh, um, could you please step back?"

The man with the business suit, whom I had forgotten his name already, pulled at the back of the kid's shirt.

I walked around everyone and headed towards my door. Retrieving the key from my pocket, I unlocked the door and went in, closing the door behind me. I took a deep breath and slowly let it out. They were

already exhausting, and they hadn't even been here for a single hour. I climbed up the ladder to my studio (or in other words, my attic) and placed the pad of paper I wrote the descriptions for the mural on the table. I looked around for the painting I had painted specifically for Michi. When I found it I carefully took it off of the easel and climbed down the ladder.

It was a simple painting of a meadow with green blossoms, red grass, orange sky and black clouds. The trees were white, and the far away mountains were a dull bronze yellow. This was my specialty. Painting realistic landscapes or portraits, but using other out-of-the-norm colors to replace nature's gift.

I paused at the door, preparing myself to see the strangers again, even though I would probably faint later for deep breathing so many times, I took another deep breath and slowly let it out. I was nervous again, but despite that I opened the door and saw everyone. "Here you go-," I said, realizing I had forgotten his name again. "Happy birthday." I barely covered my little mistake, hoping no one noticed.

"You forgot, didn't you?" Michi asked, referring to his name and not the date.

"Yeah, I did."

"You forgot you friend's birthday? What kind of friend are you?" The little kid said. He was really getting on my nerves.

They were both strange, but they were nice. Even though it was obvious that Hitsoku wasn't used to people, and used his notepad as a shield against Momiji, he did his best, awkwardly.

Shigure let out a low chuckle next to me. "What a weird guy." It didn't seem mean spirited, and I had thought along the same lines, so there was no reason to correct him.

When he came out with the painting, it seemed like everyone was surprised. Who knew a weird hermit had talent? Before Momiji

launched himself in Hitsoku's personal space again and tell him that he liked it, Hitsoku went back in his room, and locked his door with a distinct click.

" Uh, don't worry about that too much," Michi assured us. "He's not used to having people over so it's pretty weird for him. He'll probably be in his room a lot. Please don't think of it as rudeness, and just ignore it. For the most part, you can think of this as your home."

There were small creaks above us.

" The attic is his studio so don't be alarmed to hear those footsteps. I'm sure he'll try his best to be as quiet as possible since he likes to work until late at night. Despite his avoidant personality, he's actually quite polite."

...

"My school was so tough the school newspaper had an Obituary section."- Norm Crosby

Chapter 3

Hilo. Because the line breaks don't work every time I want them to, I'm going to use three periods in bold. Just letting you know.

"A guy walks into a bar... Ouch."

...

I woke up with a sudden bolt when I heard my alarm clock ring from the bedside table and slapped my hand on top of it to cease the bells. I pushed the snooze button and turned it over to turn it off. Oh how I hated this alarm clock, but oh how well it works. Besides, I don't think anyone is supposed to like the sound of anything that is supposed to tell you to get up, so what would be the point in getting anything else? I sat on my bed and rubbed my face to get rid of the drowsiness of wanted sleep. I looked at my window and saw that the sun wasn't even up and moaned a little.

Today I have to show the sketch to... Ugh, I can't remember, I thought. Um, my name is... My name is... It's... Damn, I can't remember.

This is what happened every morning. I wake up, review what I needed to do for the day and try to remember my name without having to look at my I.D. So far, it hasn't worked. Every morning I was disappointed in myself for not even being able to remember my own name.

I heard a baby crying and that jogged my memory about my seven guests. Seven strangers and a baby. seven strangers who don't know me and probably don't care about me; only that I was giving them a place to stay until their home is rebuilt. Seven people whom I don't really care about but only agreed so I could see Tohru again. Seven people who I don't see the point in trying to get to know.

I flipped over the blankets so I could get out of bed without getting entangled (it wouldn't be the first time it happened), and put on a shirt and a pair of sweat pants that were on the floor that were discarded during the night because it was too hot. I crept out of my room and stood near the women's door listening. The mother was cooing her baby. Because of the whimpering, I could tell that the baby was a girl; I never learned of the gender or even let anyone introduce themselves to me.

In fact, as soon as I gave my friend the painting I went back in my room and locked the door. I claimed that I had work to do, which was true, but I easily finished it before five hours. I even went to sleep at eleven instead of the usual one in the morning. I heard that kid's complaining from my studio and a lot of mumbling from the other people, but I knew my friend would explain a few things. Frankly, I really didn't care what those people thought of me.

I took a deep breath and gently knocked on the door. I hoped that the knocking didn't stir up another round of crying from the baby or, if she wasn't awake by that point, wake up the other woman. The door opened to reveal a very pissed off looking woman, and it wasn't the mother. "Yes?" She asked with an angry undertone.

Not that I could blame her. Who in there right mind would wake up at five thirty every morning? Oh, me. "I'm sorry, I was wondering if it was my alarm clock that woke up... the baby," I whispered. I was trying to not set the woman off.

"In fact, yes," she said. "It did. Why anyone wakes up this early, I'll never know," she mumbled before she closed the door. The crying got quieter after a few seconds and I heard the women talk to each other.

I'll have to find a quieter alarm, I thought. I wasn't accustomed to having small children in my house for more than a few hours, but that was rare as well. I knew it was going to be rough when I accepted Tohru's request so I just have to figure out how to live as normally as I can without bugging the guests, I thought. I looked to

my left and saw one of the teenagers staring at me. To my relief it was the blond German kid and not the sand-haired kid because I didn't feel the need to hear his complaining that early in the morning. "I'm sorry if I woke you all up."

He smiled and said, "It's okay. Akito-san definitely doesn't like it though so I'd be a little more careful around her."

"Thanks," I said awkwardly.

"Why do you wake up this early? Are you going to paint? I really liked your painting yesterday," he said quietly. He was tired.

Do you like asking so many questions so early in the morning or do you have candy stashed somewhere in your room? I inwardly inquired. "Yes," I said. "This is the best time to paint for me, even if I don't like waking up so early." I was wondering if the men were up since they were right next to me. It was most likely. "You can go back to sleep," I said, heading back to my room.

I could tell that he was a little confused. Who would wake up so early just to paint a stupid picture even though they didn't like to wake up early? That's just how I was. My best inspiration came from drowsiness and lack of sleep. It really did suck sometimes.

I climbed the ladder to my studio and hoped that I didn't bother anyone or step on a squeaky spot. It was definitely going to be a while before I got used to the guests being in my home. I reviewed the sketch of the mural that I was going to paint for that guy that owned the museums and tried to improve it. Highlight a bit here, darken it here. Add just a little bit more detail and make sure it looks right.

It wasn't his fault. I hadn't gotten any sleep because everything was new, and every creak the house made kept me up. Did someone sneak in the house? Or was it just the wind? When I finally did fall asleep, his alarm was just background noise, so it didn't wake me up, but it did wake up Satsuki's baby, Hinata. I wasn't mad at Hinata,

or him, I was more mad at myself for not getting a grip and just go to sleep. I hadn't meant to snap at him, it just came out. Should I apologize?

Before I knew it, it was already seven in the morning and I usually met him at eight. I hurried and combed my hair, brushed my teeth, deodorant, etc. I got dressed in an old brown T-shirt and old blue jeans that had holes in them. They were clothes that I could get dirty in without wearing a smock that usually got in the way. I do wash them, but I usually use acrylic paint so it doesn't get out of clothes.

I grabbed my box of black chalk and stepped down stairs to see the mother coming up. "Ohayo, Honda-kun. Would you like something to eat? I'm fixing up some eggs. I know you said-."

"It's fine, I understand," I said. "Thank you for the offer, but I'm good. I'm sorry about this morning."

"It's okay," she said with a smile.

"I'm going to work now so I'll see you later, I guess." I hoped I would be able to sneak in after without running into them. I went out the door and to my surprise, someone was there. With the sudden startle, I had shirked against the door and hit the back of my head.

It was that guy from in a business suit yesterday. He was in a yukata and he was smoking. He turned and looked at me when he heard the door clicked closed. "I wasn't sure if you allowed smoking inside," he said. He was looking at the clothes that I was wearing and I could tell that he was a little curious.

"Gomen, I don't allow that," I said. "Thank you for considering it." I sat down a few feet away from him to grab my dirt covered white running shoes. I put on one shoe after the other and tightened the laces. "I'm sorry if I woke you up this morning," I said.

"Oh. Okay," he said. He narrowed his eyes a little. "What exactly do you do for a living? Your friend, Takumi-san wasn't too specific."

I was a little nervous talking to him. He was very analytical and, aside from him wearing a yukata, he appeared very professional. "I, uh, I usually paint murals for certain people. Sometimes I sell some of my paintings or, if there is a temporary opening, I work at a tattoo parlor." I could tell that he was looking at my skin for any evidence of a tattoo, but he didn't find what he was looking for. "I'll see you later," I said, standing up to leave.

I walked quickly without it looking like I was purposely avoiding him, which I was. I wasn't sure if I succeeded in making it look inconspicuous. I headed to the bus station and looked at the map before deciding on a bus. If I was right I was probably going to be a little early, which was great. The bus came ten minutes later and it only had about ten other people on board.

I looked at the top left corner of the sketch and read the name to myself. Masuyo. That was the name I needed to remember for the day. Masuyo. Masuyo.

I arrived at my stop twenty minutes later and walked two more blocks to the museum. Masuyo-san had just gotten there as well because he was getting out of a cab, so we were both late. He quickly spotted me and the paper in my hand. He got excited.

"Good morning Honda-san!" He said with a wide smile. His thin grey mustache stretched across his upper lip and his dark brown eyes crinkled. His thin dark grey hair was combed neatly and he wore a brown suit and black dress shoes.

"Good morning Masuyo-san," I said. "Here's the sketch." I handed the paper to him and he seemed even happier. "If there is anything that you would like for me to improve on or to add, I'll be happy to make those additions."

He looked at me with his smile never leaving his face. He shook his head before saying, "You need to trust yourself more. I leave the descriptions vague so you can have as much room as possible to put a little of yourself into the murals. I chose you specifically

because I like your work and your style suits this museum." He winked and then continued. "Although, your work is my favorite whether it's macabre or not." He gave the sketch back. "I look forward to seeing the progress as well as the final result."

"Thank you, er, Sir," I said. I had forgotten his name during his little speech. He didn't seem to mind and kept walking inside his museum. I went around back and asked the janitor for a ladder, which he provided without hesitation, and went to work immediately, outlining the basic shapes that I had on my sketch. It was all that I was going to do today. Luckily, it wasn't the rainy season yet.

Even if it was just the basic shapes, it took all day. People often walked by, curious at what I was doing and wondering what it would look like in the end. I didn't stop for a break or even to eat because I just wanted to get step one done. Besides, my hands were black from the chalk and I had forgotten my wallet so I couldn't buy myself something to eat. I climbed down the steps of the metal ladder and looked at the light sketch on the wall and the colored sketch in my hand and decided that I was finished for the day.

I put the ladder back and went to find Masuyo Nobu. When I found him I let him know that I was done for the day. He smiled as usual and patted me on the shoulder. Poor guy, I thought. He puts his complete trust in me without question. He trusts someone who can't even remember the name of the guy who pays him, much less his own name.

Because I had forgotten my name, I didn't have my I.D. so I didn't even have a clue as to what my first name was. My usual option was to wait for someone to say it, but everyone today only referred to my last name. Today was really shaky for me on the inside even though it went by rather smoothly. I sighed in relief when I got home.

When I stepped through my front door, I smelled fried rice and vegetables with chicken stir fry that hit me like a slap across the face. It made me remember that I didn't have anything to eat today, I didn't eat anything yesterday, and all I ate the day before was an

omelet sometime in the afternoon. The mother came out because she heard the door click and said, "Welcome home." She had a smile as usual. "There's plenty to eat if you want some." She continued to stand there and stare at me with that smile of hers, which made me all-the-more nervous.

As much as I was tempted to accept the offer (and trust me I was very tempted) I had to decline. It was food that they bought with their own money (I didn't have any ingredients to make any kind of stir fry, not that I knew how to make it), so I felt like I didn't have any right to eat it, even if she had some of my eggs (it was the first official day so I didn't mind). "No, but thank you for the offer. I'm just going to go to bed."

I didn't look at her as I walked past her and climbed up the stairs. I really was tired from climbing up the ladder so many times and I had to walk a few blocks so my legs were sore. In addition, because I was shaken up from not having my name with me, so I was exhausted mentally. I really wasn't lying to her. It wasn't as if I said, "I'm not hungry." When I got to my room, I flopped on the bed and rested for a bit. I reached over to my bedside table and got my wallet.

Hitsoku Honda. Hitsoku Honda is my name. That's my name. After I kept repeating my name a few times, I reached down below my bed and searched blindly for a bag of unopened kettle-baked potato chips that I stashed away so I wouldn't have to walk all the way down to the kitchen while I was working, when there was a knock at my door. It startled me so badly that I nearly jumped off of the bed and land painfully on the wooden floors.

...

"After twelve years of therapy, my psychiatrist said something that brought tears to my eyes. He said, 'No hablo ingles.' "

Chapter 4

"I like you, when I rule the world, your death will be quick."

...

"Um, yes?" I said, opening the door. It was that sand-colored hair kid's father. "Is there something you need?" I stood in my room with the door opened just enough for him to see my entire face. I admit, I did feel a little intimidated, because he sought me out right to my room; the only place where I truly felt safe whether these people were here or not. I only came to his chin and he wore a grey suit with a silver tie.

"Well, no, I don't need anything. My name is Akemi Sohma and we all thought and discussed about the payment and came to an agreement," he said with a soft smile. I smelled something and noticed a tray of food in his hands. The chicken stir-fry with various vegetables and a large serving of white rice with a cup of hot tea. "Also, my wife, Satsuki, would like you to eat this." He raised the tray a bit to show the food. "She noticed that the only things you have in your kitchen are eggs and well, she was worried that you weren't eating because it looked as if your kitchen isn't used often."

It isn't, I thought with a sweat drop forming in the back of my head. I can't cook to save my life. Well, besides various forms of omelets and anything that was simple. "She's very kind," I said, "and it's not like I'm ungrateful of the offer, but, really, I'm tired and would like to sleep." I was hoping he would just take the tray back, because I could feel my mouth salivate under my tongue. I wanted to show them that I didn't need anything from them and that I wouldn't be dependent on them. Maybe to also hint that I didn't want to involve myself with people who would always be strangers to me.

"Just take the food already!" The kid said. "What? Is the food not good enough for you, Mr. High-and-mighty? Are you too good to

even talk to us or stand our presence for more than five minutes?"

"Hiro," his father said. "That's enough. Apologize to him now." He was being stern, like a father should be, but it was too much.

"It's okay, he doesn't have to," I said.

"Oh! Is it because you wouldn't accept it even if I did?"

"Hiro!"

I calmly shut the door. It was obvious that me just standing there wasn't going to help much. That kid, Hiro, just plain didn't like me and I didn't want him to apologize for not liking me. I could tell that he was smart, smart enough to probably figure out that I just didn't want to waste my time getting to know them. We were both strangers, but he's staying in *my* home, so he must feel that he's at a disadvantage of some sort. I could understand that. Plus, it wasn't as if I had ever made an effort to even ask their names or to even greet them properly in the morning.

"Hiro, that was very rude!" The father said. He was chastising his child for a reason I didn't think he quite understood. "When you see Honda-san, I want you to apologize. Plus you're grounded for one week."

There were low grumbles and stomps that were going down the stairs. Then Hiro's father (I forgot his name) sighed and stepped down stairs. I listened carefully through the door and heard the father say something. Then I heard Satsuki sigh and say something else.

She sounds disappointed, I thought. I do feel a little guilty, but I just felt that it wasn't my place. Heck, now that all of these people are here, I feel very out of place in my own house! I banged my forehead on the door at my sudden realization. I didn't even listen to the family's decision on their payment to stay in my house! "I'm so stupid," I mumbled to myself.

We all waited to see if Akemi would be successful to give the tray to the hermit. After some scorning towards Hiro, it was obvious that Hitsoku hadn't accepted the food. Satsuki was extremely worried about his health, especially when Michi had told us that he had an accident a few years ago, and it still affected him. He was extremely vague on the details, probably because he wasn't sure if he should have been telling a bunch of strangers. It was more to just let us know than to blab. After a few minutes I heard the creaking above our heads again.

I went back for my bed and found my bag of potato chip and opened them. I could smell the saltiness from its contents. I knew my diet wasn't healthy at all, especially for me, but I felt I just couldn't afford to think about food. I mean, it's not unusual for me to forget a meal but I was a little stressed out and didn't eat for two days because I was working through it. Plus now that I have strangers over that will be staying for a long while... I just didn't feel comfortable eating around them.

Eating as a family, I thought, placing the crunchy baked chip in my mouth. I felt my saliva being absorbed into the chip as I munched on it. My mom and dad only did that when I was younger, and it was always quiet and tense. Then, there wasn't a family dinner. It was just me taking food up to my room to eat as I did my homework. The Sohmas though. They seem different than my parents. They seem more tight-knit. Maybe they actually discuss how their day went or if anything new happened.

The idea that that actually happened in real life seemed stupid to me, but the more I imagined it, the more I felt the heat in my stomach. I didn't like the feeling I was getting so I took my potato chips and climbed upstairs to my studio and picked out a clean white canvas that was already made and stood propped up on a wall. I put it on my wooden H-frame easel and stared at it. Deciding what to paint was never really easy. I had to be completely relaxed, which was why I woke up at an ungodly hour. I was usually so tired that I didn't think at all and acted more like a zombie than anything else. I

sat down in a chair and got my iPod and listened for a while. The music I chose was chaotic sounding, but I only listened to them because the lyrics were inspiring.

After an hour or two of listening and being patient I finally got an idea of what I felt like painting. I went to my little desk with palettes, brushes and paints, and chose the colors that I would need. The theme was mainly of contrasting colors, which wasn't my usual style of painting, but I didn't really put any thoughts into that. I just wanted to paint. I dipped my thin paintbrush into the black and mixed it with the green on my palette, and then took the new color and stained the crisp blank whiteness of the canvas. I forced every thought from my mind and painted what I thought would represent how I felt. Whatever looked right to me. Whatever felt right.

When I started to yawn repeatedly within five minutes I looked at my watch and saw that it was two in the morning. "Aw crap," I mumbled. "Didn't think it was that late." I yawned again, hearing the joints in my jaw crack and feeling the tears collect in my eyes. I looked at my painting.

I wanted to finish it, but I wanted to sleep-and needed it badly. After thinking about it really hard, for a split second, I decided that I needed a shower and then sleep. I could always finish it some other time, like in three and a half hours, the time I usually got up. I was sure to act like a real zombie then.

"Aw no," I said to myself. "I was going to buy a new alarm clock so I wouldn't wake up the baby and everyone else-especially that woman. What's her name again? Akemi? No, that was that kid's father. Akihito? Oh, I don't know! Why am I even trying to guess?" I sighed. "I'm tired."

I turned off the light, staggered down the ladder, and closed the little door as I came down. I went to my bathroom and shrugged off my paint-worn clothes and tested the water. When I thought that the water was just right, I got in with my back facing the shower-head. I rubbed at my shoulders, trying to loosen the muscles, but to no

success. I sighed at the thought of accidentally waking anyone up because of the shower. If I had thought of that earlier, I wouldn't have taken it and gone straight to bed, but since I had already started my shower there was no sense in getting out.

After I was finished washing all of the paint off of my hands, arms, face and even hair, I got out of the shower and grabbed a light blue towel to dry myself with. I propped my elbows on the white ceramic sink and towel-dried my hair. When I finished and looked up I was very dizzy so I grabbed on to the sink. I always got dizzy when I dried my hair that way which was why I was standing next to the sink. I looked up at my reflection in the mirror in pure curiosity since I hadn't in a long while since I never felt the need to.

Even when I was brushing my teeth and hair in the bathroom, the thought to look in the mirror had never occurred to me. It was stuff like that that made my best friend say that I was weird. What I saw made me a little disappointed. I saw a person with pasty looking skin and dull brown hair that came about the shoulders and dull, lifeless dark brown eyes with dark circles under them. I sighed and looked down, shaking my head slowly.

I just remembered why I never wanted to look at my reflection. Even though it was *my* reflection, I never recognized who it was. Each time that I took a look at it, I just couldn't fully believe that it was me. It just looked like another nameless stranger to me that did everything that I did at the same time. I was my own nameless stranger.

I faintly heard voices through the darkness that my eyelids provided. They were hushed voices, but I didn't dare open my eyes. I wanted to sleep at least a few more hours. I turned on my side, away from the voices. I then felt a little weight shifting the bed from behind, but I didn't care enough to really do anything... until that something blew in my ear.

I yelled. I got entangled in the blankets and fell off of the bed and landed on my bare chest with my arms stretched out beside me, but

landing on my chest wasn't the unfortunate part. The unfortunate part was that my legs were still on the bed, tangled in the blankets which meant that my back was bending too far backwards for my liking and it was getting very hard to breathe.

Someone came over to help me and flipped my upper body so I was lying on my back and then untangled my legs and let them flop onto the wooden floors. I hadn't even opened my eyes until at that point and I definitely didn't like what I saw. "Hi Hitsoku-kun!" My so-called 'best friend' said cheerfully.

Oh, god, I thought. Who let you in?

"Honda-kun?" I looked over and saw the mother with the baby in her arms and the woman standing in my doorway on the other side of the bed. "Are you alright?" The mother asked that was filled with concern, but looked as if she was about to laugh. The other woman was leaning on the doorframe, looking at me with a raised brow.

"Yes," I mumbled. I looked to the side so I couldn't see them. I felt the heat on my cheeks. (1) I was so startled that I fell off the bed, (2) they saw, and (3) the only article of clothing I had on were my grey boxers. Yeah, this isn't embarrassing at all, I thought sarcastically.

"Oh, good, you're okay," my friend said with only a hint of relief. "Hey, guess what?"

"Don't care," I said, reaching for my pillow and taking the blanket off of the bed. I snuggled into it on the floor, not feeling like getting up this morning. "I'm tired. Please go away."

I heard a grunt and then the blankets were ripped away from my fists. I wasn't about to give up on my sleep so wrapped my arms around my chest and brought my knees up. "Okay, that's it." He grabbed my upper arms and sat me up. "Wake up."

I opened my eyes and gave him a flat stare. "What the hell do you want from me?"

"Today is your doctor's appointment, remember?"

I groaned loudly. "You woke me up for that? I can skip it, I feel fine." I tried to lie back down on the pillow, but he wouldn't let me.

"Satsuki-chan said that she didn't see you eat breakfast or dinner and I know that you usually forget to eat lunch since you get so absorbed in your murals. So that means that you haven't eaten at all."

"That's not-," I interrupted myself. I knew 'a bag of potato chips' wasn't a sufficient answer. It wouldn't be for him, or the doctors, or anyone that I knew. "Never mind." I sighed, at my pathetic attempt of defending myself. "What time is the appointment?"

"Nine A.M."

"What time is it now?"

"Seven-thirty."

I groaned even louder.

"What? What's wrong with you this morning?"

"I went to sleep at three in the morning, you asshole," I said, mumbling the last part so Satsuki didn't hear.

He smirked in amusement, but it then quickly disappeared and turned into a frown. "God, now you're turning into an insomniac? Hitsoku, you need to get more sleep if you want to improve. You also need to eat more. You're so skinny that you remind me of a girl." It was a joke, but I didn't like it.

At that, the young woman left and then the mother left following her, closing the door quietly behind her.

"Stupid," I mumbled. "Why can't you devote more time, like now, to your girlfriend? Or did she finally dump you?"

"She didn't dump me, and she won't," he retorted. "We are very much in love, but she knows that I care deeply for you and I want you to get better. So she understands." He smiled at me. It wasn't a happy smile, but it wasn't one of those sad smiles.

"Yeah, I fully understand," I said with no inflection in my voice. I remembered a beautiful woman with thick, glossy brown hair that rippled in thick curls down her back. I remembered that her skin was a perfect shade of pale peach and blush pink on her cheeks. Her thin lips were covered with a liquid pink gloss and her thin straight nose was just perfect. Her black eyes were always filled with happiness whenever I thought of her, but what I remember the most about her was the way she smelled. It was a flowery smell but it was a sweet, almost a sugary kind of smell. It reminded me of the plum blossoms when they were in bloom.

"Hey, don't be like that," my friend said. "Just forget about that. She's not worth it." He always seemed to know when I thought of her. "Now, get dressed before I dress you up."

Now that got me moving. I didn't want someone who didn't have any more fashion sense than a dung beetle dressing me up. I at least cared enough to look presentable. What made his girlfriend even want to talk to him in the first place was a complete mystery to me. I only met her once, and she was nice, I liked her, but I made it obvious to her that I didn't want to get to know her. For a while he was mad at me, but they both dropped it in the end. They were good people, but I also felt sorry for them.

...

"If one of the synchronized swimmers drown, do the rest have to drown too?"

Chapter 5

"Who says nothing is impossible. I've been doing nothing for years."

...

"I cannot believe you let yourself get this bad!" Michi yelled at me. I unlocked my front door and stepped through, leaving it open for him. Michi was going to come in anyway. He was mad. "What have you been doing to yourself?" He asked, slamming the door behind him. "'I can skip it, I feel fine,' my foot! You're seven pounds underweight!"

"Are you really only concerned about my weight?" I asked. I was getting really annoyed and angry with him today. "Quit acting like my mother."

"I may as well be considering how you don't take care of yourself and how much I end up worrying about you."

"I would be so ashamed to have been given birth by you. If I was, because, knowing you, you would be wearing a neon yellow bonnet."

"You're so selfish!" He was turning red with anger.

I suddenly turned around to face him. "Why do you-why are you even still around? I thought I asked you to leave me alone years ago! Go ho-!" I suddenly started to see sparkling and flashing right in front of my eyes, and my fingers started to get numb. I couldn't remember what we were just yelling about, like my mind just tumbled over the edge of a cliff.

I placed my hand over my forehead to wade it out. I felt like the floor was being dragged out from under me. I tried to regain my balance, but I had to get on my hands and knees. My eyes were rolling in my skull so I closed them and I lied down on my side on the mat floor.

I heard echoing footsteps through the floor. The other people must have come to see the scene, to see just how much of a wreck I really was. I felt weak. If only I hadn't agreed to let those people in. No, it wouldn't have mattered. They had only been here for a day, it couldn't have possibly been their fault. I did this to myself.

"Hitsoku?" A voice said, he sounded worried. He was next to me, holding my hand loosely with one hand and placed the other on my shoulder. "Hey Hitsoku? You alright?" I gently squeezed his hand; it felt numb, and I couldn't feel it moving at all. Every part of me was numb. "You scared me," he said, taking it as a sign that I was at least conscious. "You alright now?"

I didn't want to open my eyes. I didn't even want to speak. I just wanted to lay there for a few hours. I was afraid that if I sat up I would vomit up whatever I had that morning plus the sports drink I just had (I refused to have the I.V. drip). I could feel the nausea creeping up on me. I started to feel pins and needles in my fingertips and my head started to hurt really badly.

"Should we call the hospital?" A deep voice asked. I couldn't even recognize who was talking. It seemed like I was hearing everything with cotton-balls stuffed in my ears.

"No, no," said the first voice. "He'll be fine after a while."

"What happened to him?" Another completely different voice asked. Her voice sounded foremost confused, but there was a lot of worry weaved into it. It was deeper than most women's, but it was obvious that it was certainly a woman's. It drew me in, I wanted to keep listening to that voice. If I kept hearing it, I would calm down.

"Probably a mild seizure," the first voice said. "I won't know for sure until he gets up. Gosh, he hasn't had one of these in a long time. I must have riled him up too much." He sounded very remorseful.

"We should at least put him in the recovery position," the deep voice said. My arms and legs were moved and my chin was tilted up over

my arms. It was a lot easier to breathe, but the nausea wasn't merciful. I felt the sting of the bile and the incredible bad tasting ooze spill itself out of my mouth. I felt too warm and it seemed as though I was sweating, making me shiver a little.

"There are towels in the compartment under the stairs and could someone get a wash cloth wet in warm water?" The first voice asked. I heard the words, but I couldn't comprehend anything. I had no clue what was going on. There were more echoes through the floor and then I heard a baby crying. Someone moved my head back after I tried tilting it down so I wouldn't throw up again.

"Oh, Akito-san?" Another voice asked. Her light airy voice was seized with panic. "Could you get the cloth and water?" I felt vomit come up and out again.

"Okay," said the voice that I had wanted to hear. After a few minutes, the baby quieted down some, but it was still sobbing a little. "Here," she said. She was a lot closer.

"Thanks," the first voice said. My head was moved on top of something softer, and someone wiped my mouth to clean off the fresh vomit. "Hitsoku? Can you hear me? Can you try and open your eyes?"

I could just barely understand the questions at that point. I didn't really want to, but I knew I had to. Slowly, I opened my fluttery lids to see everything blurry. "What's going on?" I asked, but I wasn't sure if anyone could decipher through the mumbling. "My head hurts."

"At least you're conscious," the first person said. "Hey, can you move anything right now?"

I tried moving my fingers and hands, but I wasn't sure if I could move them. I felt totally messed up, like I was drugged, or lethargic.

"That's good, Hitsoku. Do you think it would be okay if we transferred him the couch?"

"Yeah, I think that would be fine," the deep voice said.

"Hitsoku? Do you want to lie on the couch for a while?"

I heaved a breathy yes. I felt like vomiting again and I did. Someone wiped my mouth again.

When they decided to lift me up, my arms were around two separate bodies as my upper torso was slowly being lifted. "Could you get his legs?" Almost immediately, my legs were elevated and I was carefully moved to the couch. They sat me up against one of the cushioned arms. "Could you help me find his medicine? I know he has something, but I don't know which kind of pills is for this kind of thing."

"Yeah," the deep voiced person said.

"Can you watch him? Just keep talking to him and make sure he doesn't fall asleep. If he has to vomit again, there's a bowl on the table. If he starts convulsing, don't touch him and yell for us. Uh, what else? Ah, if anything else happens just call us." There were loud footsteps that were in a hurry.

There was silence for a few seconds. "Hitsoku?" It was that woman's voice again.

I slowly moved my head toward the voice. Everything was still blurry, and shapes were moving when they weren't supposed to, but I could feel it clearing up.

"Are you alright?"

I didn't exactly know how to answer that question. My throat felt raw, I still felt a little of the pins and needles, my vision was blurred, and my head was in pain, but I knew I was going to live. I was still conscious, even if it was just barely. It could have been a lot worse. Besides, even if I did speak, I didn't think that she would be able to understand.

"Do you think you need to throw up again?"

Since I was sitting up, the bile seemed to me staying in my stomach where it belonged. I shook my head a little. My head would hurt if I used wide motions. I tried to say 'no' too, but I wasn't sure if she heard me, since I couldn't even hear myself. I really just wanted to go to sleep.

"Hitsoku, stay awake." She sounded a little more urgent that time. She gently pushed against my shoulder, and kept it there.

I brought my hand up and rested my fingertips on her hand. They were really cold, but I couldn't tell if it was her or just me. She couldn't be that cold, could she? Who is this? Who's with me right now? Stay? Please, stay with me? Don't leave.

"It's okay, I'm not going to leave right now." Her voice was strong. She didn't sound frightened. She sounded rather calm; it soothed me. I didn't feel as frightened or panicked. "Just... just don't... just stay calm." She sounded a little uncomfortable, probably because I was touching her, but I wasn't in my right mind at that time.

By then, I could make out the person sitting next to me, but the edges were still slightly blurred. I saw short black hair, her skin was pale and she had very dark eyes. I moved my other hand to her shoulder and felt at her dark clothes. The pins and needles and the numbness were wearing off. The clothes felt kind of grainy. Cotton, maybe? I moved my hand closer and felt her light soft hair and then lightly grazed her cheek. She shook a little and her cheek started to get a little warmer, just a little.

"What are you doing?" She asked softly. I felt her warm breaths spill over on the inside of my wrist when she spoke.

I love you.

"Okay, we found it," someone said.

The woman quickly moved away from me and took her hand and calming presence with her.

The someone who had found whatever it was sat me up, and put a glass of water in one hand and a small pill in my other hand. "Take this," he said.

I did as I was told and put the pill in my mouth and sipped at the water. The water felt good going down my throat. I sipped a little more of the water.

It had happened so suddenly. There was yelling and then he had just collapsed. Hitsoku was shaking and became sick, vomiting on the floor, and started sweating. His eyelids were fluttering and his breathing became erratic. When he did open his eyes, they were in a daze, like he couldn't see what was in front of him. It was hard to understand what he was saying because his lips weren't moving. What was wrong with him? What kind of sickness was it?

After I helped carry his legs to the couch, with Hatori and Michi carrying his upper body, I had to watch him. I was alone with him. I was alone with him for the first time, and he had to be sick. Satsuki was trying to calm Hinata down in our room, but I was sure she was worried. She always worried. Talking wasn't my strong point, and I wasn't quite sure if he could hear me. I checked by saying his name as soft as I could without it sounding like I was panicking. I was, but I didn't want to show it. I hated showing when I was afraid, or in the least bit vulnerable. He responded by slowly turning his head to me.

I tried to ask him simple yes or no questions, which he barely responded to. I got scared when he closed his eyes, so I pushed his shoulders to wake him up. Michi seemed calm about whatever Hitsoku was going through, but I wasn't so sure. I didn't have a clue to what was going on.

He started mumbling words that I could hardly understand. "Don't leave," was all I could decipher. Hitsoku was probably scared too, more scared than I was, so I told him I wouldn't. The hand on my

wrist was hot, and when he was calmer it shifted to my forearm to keep me in place while his other hand rested on my shoulder. I didn't know what he was doing, but I was too nervous to move. It lightly wandered, feeling and touching what was beneath his sensitive skin. When he got to my cheek, his fingertips were clammy, and sweating. He kept his hand there for longer than he should have. I felt shivers going down my back.

Then he said it.

I love you.

...

"I'm bad with names so I'll just call you dumbass."

Chapter 6

Hilo. I did a lot of editing to this chapter so it wouldn't be as boring, but it probably still is.

"If you can keep your head when all those about you are losing theirs, you probably don't fully understand the situation."

...

When I finally decided to open my eyes, I didn't feel totally awake yet. I just continued to lie down and stare at the ceiling, and after a few minutes, I noticed that the ceiling was higher off of the floor, and was bigger than I last remembered. When I sat up, I realized that I was in my living room on the couch. I lifted up the light blanket and put my bare feet on the cold mat floor.

Why am I in my living room? I thought. How did I even get here? I don't even remember coming home from the doctor's office. I looked around and noticed someone on the other couch that was adjacent to the couch I slept on. I stood up and snuck over to see who it was.

I heard light snoring and saw the upper portion of the person's body move up and down as he or she breathed. I leaned over the body, being very careful not to wake up the person, and rested my hand on the back of the couch. It was just my best friend, Michi. I heaved off of the couch and sat back on my couch at my sudden realization.

Wow, I thought. I actually remembered his name today. "Okay," I whispered. I felt a little confident this morning. I held my hands up in front of my face at arms length (just because I thought that it would help somehow), and continued to whisper, "My name is... My name is... It's..." I kept drawing blanks. "Damn." I rested my head in my hands. "This really sucks," I mumbled.

I occasionally remembered other people's names at the right time and place, but it didn't happen too often. So far, it has only happened with two people. Michi, who has been with me throughout my entire ordeal, which was probably why I remembered his name. And then there was the other person, but it didn't matter if I remembered *her* name or not. It wasn't as if she was ever coming back. I knew that she was never going to come back, but I still had that sliver of hope somewhere deep inside of me. It was so deep that I just couldn't get it out; not with tweezers or a needle.

During my thoughts of depression, my stomach growled loudly. That's right, I haven't eaten a thing in quite a while, I thought. Well, now's my chance before the family gets up. I stood up, folded the blankets, carefully headed for the kitchen, and turned on the light. When I opened the medium-sized refrigerator it was filled with food. It had never been that full since... ever.

It was pretty shocking to me, but I avoided the new food and grabbed my carton of eggs, and closed the door. I grabbed a pan and turned the heat on medium while grabbing a plastic bowl and a fork. I washed my hands under the kitchen sink and cracked in about four eggs and then decided on six. All that cholesterol didn't matter to me. There were two eggs left in the carton and made a mental note to buy eggs on the way home; even though I might not be able to remember later. I whisked it with the fork and made sure that the yolk and the egg whites were well mixed in. I poured it in the hot pan slowly; there was a low hiss as the yellow thick liquid touched the bottom of the pan.

I heard a creak somewhere behind me and looked over my shoulder as I scraped up the last of the egg. "Hello?" I called out in a whisper. I put the bowl on the counter and turned around. "Oh, it's just you." I sighed in relief when I recognized that it was the raven-haired serious woman. "Um, uh, good morning, I think," I said, turning around to investigate my omelet. I poked at it with the fork to see if I could flip it; it wasn't ready for that yet.

I had trouble sleeping again. There were more nightmares of that night when the estate was set ablaze, but it was also what Hitsoku said the day before that kept me up. He was out of his mind, speaking gibberish. So saying those three words shouldn't have meaning to them at all, but it still affected me somehow. It was the look in his eyes, all the sadness, anxiety, need, they were all there welling up and overflowing. What created all of those feelings inside of him? I was worried for a complete stranger. It was strange. I decided to just check on him, to make sure he was at least breathing. Even though Michi said he would be okay, it still didn't ease my concerns.

"Morning," she said quietly. I heard her sink in on the cushioned stool at the counter somewhere behind me on my right side. "A-are you alright?" She asked. She seemed uncomfortable and nervous, which was a little weird since she didn't seem to be that way normally.

"Yeah, did something happen?"

"You had a seizure," she said in a half dull half sarcastic way. As if it was the most obvious thing that could have happened... and it kind of was in my case.

"Oh," I said for a lack of a better word. "That explains a lot."

"You don't remember?"

"No, I just remember being lectured at by Michi on the way home. I don't even remember walking through the front door." I poked at the omelet again and it was almost ready to be flipped. I looked back at her; she slouched over the counter with her head resting in one of her hands. She wore a light cream colored yukata with a deep red sash. As a light joke, I asked, "Did I make it through the front door?"

She looked at me with narrowed eyes and I regretted the question instantly. "Yes, you did, and then you collapsed in front of it a minute afterward!" She said in a loud whisper. She looked angry again, but I didn't get the feeling that it was about the whole seizure thing. I

couldn't imagine her caring about someone she knew absolutely nothing about. Maybe it was because she was awake when she should be sleeping.

I snapped again. I didn't mean to, it just slipped, but I wouldn't take it back. How could he joke about something so serious? Did Hiro have a point? Did he really have brain damage? I was almost grateful that he didn't remember what he said.

"Sorry I asked," I said. I didn't want to look at her anymore. I flipped the omelet with the fork and a little shaking of the pan. "Um, do you want tea?" I asked, hoping she wouldn't get any madder. "I'm sure I have some lemon herbal tea somewhere."

"No thank you," she said. She sounded a little calmer, but I didn't want to look to make sure.

There was silence that I, for once, was uncomfortable with. "Um, did I do something to make you mad? Whatever it was, I didn't mean it. Honest."

"It's nothing."

"So I did do something?"

"I didn't say that."

"If I really didn't do something, then I think you would have said, 'No, you didn't,' but you didn't. You didn't deny it either. 'It's nothing' probably either means that it's a subject you don't want to talk about or that it's so insignificant that it really is nothing; perhaps even a little of both."

"Don't act like you know me," she said lowly. She was getting mad again.

Whoops. "No, no, it's not like that. I didn't mean it like that. Sorry. I-I just was putting myself in your situation. Really, though, if I did do

something, I really do apologize."

"What makes you think you did anything?"

"Well, you seemed mad since the morning my alarm clock woke up the baby and well I just got the feeling you didn't like me. By the way, why are you up and what time is it?"

"I couldn't sleep and it's three thirty in the morning." She was calmer again.

"Nightmare?"

How did he know?

"Why are you asking so many questions?"

"Sorry," I mumbled. The silence devoured the air around us. I liked quiet, whether I was alone or with a group of people, but when one of the people is mad, I get nervous and want to break the silence. I reached in the cabinet for a plate and slid the finished omelet on it. I was thinking of how I could have made her mad and then I remembered Michi saying something a few days after I had a seizure about half a year ago. "I know you don't want me asking anymore questions, but just one more."

"What?" She asked in an exasperated whisper.

I put the pan and the bowl in the sink so I would wash it later and took a seat a couple seats away from her. I sat forward in the seat and I didn't look in her direction at all. "Did I say something, during the time of my seizure to make you feel uncomfortable?"

There was silence. I must have hit the nail on the head. "Yes, you did," she said monotonously. I cut a small piece of the omelet with the fork and took the first bite. "You said you loved me."

I nearly inhaled the cooked egg and stood up and went over to the sink just in case I spat it out whilst choking. I didn't so I swallowed it

down the right tube and then I looked at her. "I- What? I said- I- No- I didn't mean that! I mean, I say a lot of stuff I don't mean when I'm like that!"

"I know that." She looked at me, but it wasn't so much in anger. "Why don't you take care of yourself more? Aren't you afraid that you'll die?"

I didn't exactly know how to answer that, but she seemed curious enough so I tried (it wasn't as if it was a private matter to me). "I wouldn't say no, but I'm not exactly afraid of it either. I guess I just wish I knew *when* I was going to die." I went back to my seat at the counter. I sat with one elbow resting on the counter, making my body face her, but I still couldn't look at her in the eyes. I stared at her hair as I continued. "It's not as if it was my first seizure and I know it won't be my last, so I just want to know which one will end up ending it all." I took another bite of the omelet, not letting my eyes stray. After I swallowed, I continued. "And in all honesty, eating isn't really my top priority, so I just forget to eat or buy more food. It was these past few weeks that have been a problem, so I just didn't eat like I should." When I thought I was finished, I turned my body to my food and continued to eat. I finally noticed that it tasted rather plain so I sprinkled a little salt on it.

I hadn't expected him to answer those questions, but when he did, I didn't know what to feel. Angered for lying, or saddened that he didn't think much of his life. I was sure he's had battles, and maybe he was still fighting them, like I was. Either way, I was sure if Tohru had heard his answer, she wouldn't like it.

There was another round of silence. "I'm going back to bed," she sighed.

"Okay, see you later then." When she was out of sight, I moved the plate to the side and rested my forehead on the edge. I can not believe I said that, I thought. I've said a lot of things that I don't remember, but 'I love you?' Damn. That's worse than when I said that Michi was 'so pretty.' I winced when I remembered when Michi relayed that part to me in the hospital with the nurses and doctors

around. I wanted to bang my head against the wall for a few hours after that. Even now I never can remember what happens when I have my little seizure attacks.

I sat back up and continued eating when my stomach gurgled and bubbled up inside of me. When I finished I washed the dirty dishes and utensil and went back to the living room to grab the blanket and put it in the compartment under the stairs. I then headed upstairs to my room to finish my painting. I remembered that I also had to start painting Masuyo-san's mural soon, or else the chalk will smudge and wear. Before that, I had to mix the paint to the right shades of certain colors (Masuyo-san holds my cans of paints for me since I don't have a car). Of course, for now I just needed the basic colors, which was practically the easiest part of my painting process.

After a few more hours, I was finally happy with the painting to where I could call it 'mostly complete.' I sometimes would add on to paintings that I would 'finish.' I even have urges to add on to paintings that already I gave to Michi when I see them hanging on his walls, but he never lets me. After I cleaned up all of my brushes, the palette and my hands, I went on my computer to look at my email. I usually have people send me emails if they want something done and promise to check it every week. I usually get headaches when I look at the screen for too long, but luckily hardly anyone emails me because I get repeat customers so they usually have my telephone number. I wrote down the information on a pad of paper and quickly turned off my computer. I already felt a headache coming around.

I looked at my digital clock on my little drawer next to my bed and saw that it was almost seven. I also saw that my medication was next to it which made me realize that Michi must have given me a pill to prevent another attack happening immediately. I put it back in my drawer and headed down stairs for a glass of water. I changed into fresh clothes, brushed my teeth and hair, and when I came out, I saw that the teens were coming out too, dressed in their school uniforms.

The German blond and the punk-looking kid with black and white hair were of a different school than the sand-haired kid.

"Hey," the punk kid said. He didn't seem to care much, I noticed. He didn't smile often whenever I saw him, but he seemed totally relaxed. I wished I was like that.

The German gasped and said, "Ha'ari said that you had a seizure yesterday and that's why you were sleeping on the couch when we got home! Are you okay?" He was crowding me again. "I called Tohru to tell her what happened and that you would be alright, but she was shocked. Why didn't you tell Tohru that you had seizures?"

"I-I'm fine now," I mumbled. I felt my face heat up a little. "Tell Tohru-chan not to worry either. I don't want people worrying about me."

He stepped closer to me. "Michi-kun said that you used to have seizures all the time." He was so amazed at my situation, but he also seemed concerned and curious.

My face heated up a little more. "What else did he say?"

He leaned back a bit and put his hand on his chin as if he was thinking. "Mmm, just that it was a big problem and that it took you a really long time to heal enough to where you could be at home." He looked at me and gave me another smile.

I was relieved that he didn't tell them anything really important while that I was incapacitated. I decided that talking to Michi was one of the top priorities, but work always came first. "Okay, I'm going to head off to work now. See you guys later."

"Bye," the blond said with a bright smile on his face.

"See ya," the punk kid said. He had been contentedly listening to the chitchat next to the sandy haired kid.

"Bye," the sandy kid said. He still didn't like me whether I had the seizure or not, which I was glad for.

I don't ever want people to feel sorry for me just because of the seizures and the memory lapses. That's exactly why I didn't want anyone to know anything and that I purposely try to avoid people. I went to the front door and saw that my jacket was on the hook. I fished around the pockets to make sure that my wallet was in there so I could buy myself lunch later, and then headed out to the museum. Luckily, that serious man wasn't out there that morning; I wouldn't have known what to do if he was.

When I got to the museum, Masuyo-san saw me and came over to chat as usual. He asked why I didn't come over after my doctor's appointment and I said that I didn't feel so well. I also made sure to apologize for not calling to let him know that I wouldn't be coming. He accepted it with a smile, completely taking in my vague answer. I again felt sorry for him trusting me so much. "You work too hard," he commented, before heading inside his museum.

I disregarded what he said completely and went straight to work. Of course, I had no idea that I was going to have an unexpected visitor.

...

"When things are going badly, they will get worse. When things are as bad as they can possibly get, the impossible will happen. And when things appear to be getting better, you probably overlooked something."

Chapter 7

"In heaven all the interesting people are missing." - Friedrich Nietzsche

...

After I had mixed the paint and primer I hauled the can up the steps and set it on the plastic stand on the other side of the ladder. I dipped my wall brush with the tapered polyester filaments into the dark red paint. It was almost the same shade of blood; it wasn't black or bright red like you would see in movies. It was deeper and seemed to have more texture. I lifted the brush out of the big can of paint and began the first stroke. After that, it felt as natural as breathing; although I wouldn't recommend breathing in too deeply. The paint fumes could be powerful, and at that height... Well, I'd just say that I wouldn't want to die working on my mural.

As I came down the ladder with the paint can in one of my hands, I noticed a few people were actually watching. The museum hadn't officially been opened yet and some of the 'artifacts' were still being unloaded from a number of trucks. Masuyo hadn't unveiled what the museum was going to be about, not even to me, but I bet it was going to be very unusual. The last mural I painted on his museum was all about ritual sacrifices. It was practically from all over the world from every time span; even a few from the modern ages that were still practiced. It was really freaky, but it was strangely inspiring. In some sense, I guessed that my murals were clues to what his museum was going to be about.

The mural for that museum had an underworld guardian looking down on us from the shadows with glowing red eyes and a fanged smile. There were heads on pikes with the eyes and mouths sown shut. There was a lot of fire, blood and the decaying corpses of animals and people alike. It was certainly funny watching the peoples' reaction when they finally figured out what exactly I was

painting. It was as if they had no idea that stuff like that had actually happened. They were ignorant, just like my parents.

I set the paint can down and grabbed another paint can of a different color. It was a sort of yellow-orange; the color of the guardian. With what I had in mind, the guardian was supposed to look sort of like one of the giants from the old cartoon *The Hobbit*. Or at least, that's what it reminded me of. Before I took a step on the ladder someone called my name.

"Hitsoku-kun!" It was that sand-haired kid's mother. She was holding her baby on her hip, to allow her to look around and at me, with the raven-haired woman next to her. She looked impassive at that moment; at least she wasn't mad.

My eyes widened and I was gaping like a fish, trying to find the right words to say. I was surprised to say the least. I walked up to them slowly and I was careful of the paint brush that was tainted with the bright paint. "Um... What are you...? Why are you here?" I finally asked. I looked from one woman to the other.

"Michi-kun told us to keep an eye on you," the mother said. "He was worried when he didn't see you this morning."

Figures, I thought. "Can you tell me his exact words?" I asked in a nonchalant tone.

The mother thought for a few seconds. "I believe he said to watch you to make sure you don't fall off the ladder and to make sure you eat."

"He apparently doesn't trust you enough," the other woman taunted lightly.

Ah crap, I thought. I blew it this time. At least it isn't Michi himself watching me.

I didn't know what to say to them. I wanted them to leave, but I didn't know how to make it sound not so rude. All I knew was that I was going to have a long talk with Michi when I got a hold of him.

"So, it's just for today?" I asked, sounding hopeful.

"No," the mother said. "He said every morning until you finish your mural."

I suddenly felt the need to strangle Michi. "Oh," I said lamely, but I smiled to hide my malevolence. "How *wonderful* ."

"I know! We get to see you paint in person!" The mother said. She didn't catch the sarcasm, but I saw that the other one got it perfectly. She rolled her eyes at the mother and went to sit down by the fountain in front of the museum. She sat down next to the huge bag for the mother's baby. After a couple of seconds the mother followed. I understood why the mother came, but I didn't know why the other woman came. It was so unlike her, but, then again, I didn't know her too well. I went back to painting the mural, hoping that if I did, they would disappear.

During the day Masuyo came out to see the progress. He always got a little more excited when I finally started to paint and even more excited when I started to paint in the crucial details. He certainly seemed pleased this time. I pretended not to notice and kept painting. Luckily he didn't stand there long.

He walked away and I saw that he was headed towards my 'babysitters.' He must have seen me talk to them a few hours ago and decided to meet them. I could only hope that he wouldn't talk about me. That seemed like a fairly small possibility though since, to him, they seemed like my guests. I looked from the corner of my eyes and saw that the mother was giggling and blushing, and the other one was also had a mild blush. The old man had put on the charm. He always flirted and charmed the young women, but he always had a respect for them.

The raven-haired woman looked at me and I quickly went back to painting, hoping she didn't catch me looking. I was actually almost done with the basic colors for the mural. Just a few more hours and I was about done. I was sitting on the middle steps of the ladder, currently working on the rusting chains that hung on the stone dirt walls. From what the descriptions consisted of, I guessed that the museum was about prisons or the religious versions of Hell.

Masuyo came up to me as I came down the ladder. "You're lucky to have such beautiful women living in your home. Make sure you don't let young one go, neh?"

I felt my cheeks redden and my eyes widen. I chuckled half-heartily. "Sorry, I'm not that interested in a relationship right now." I hoped that he would just take it and leave it, but my hope was thrown out of the window.

Masuyo grabbed my wrist and pulled me off of the ladder. He turned and faced me to the women sitting on the marble side of the fountain down at the bottom of the concrete steps. "Look at her Hitsoku. You would be a fool to let such a beautiful raven like that go."

The woman he was speaking about looked up at me. I turned my head to the side, just wishing that he would stop. My face darkened even more. "Please let me go. She's looking."

"So? Look at her back," he said. "You are young and in your prime. These years of your life should be spent with a special woman. Now look at her and tell me if she's ugly or not. If you say that she's ugly, I'll leave you alone about women. Now look!" He jerked my head back towards her.

She was quietly chatting to the mother and looking in the fountain. Her black hair glistened in the sun and made her black eyes seem more relaxed. Her skin held more color to her cheeks than when I first noticed. Her nose wasn't too thin, nor too wide and was straight that rounded off at the end. Her thin mouth was glazed over with pink gloss. Her jaw was relaxed and rounded; something I also didn't

notice until at that moment. She wore a thin, tight, turtleneck that made her neck seem longer and showed off her shapely, thin, figure. She wore black slacks that hugged her hips and flowed loosely down her legs that were crossed over at her ankles.

"She's quite a beauty, isn't she?" Masuyo quietly said behind me.

The women, noticing where we were, looked over at us. The mother smiled and waved, also waving her child's hand at us. The other woman merely looked with slightly narrowed eyes.

Masuyo waved back with his arm over my shoulder. "Tell me, Hitsoku. Is she or is she not ugly?"

This is torture! I thought. I clenched my jaws and said, "I apologize Masuyo-san, but I have to get back to my mural." I wistfully walked by him and dipped my paint brush into the reddish brown paint with a thin brush with badger filaments.

He didn't stop me nor stayed too much longer. He went back to his museum to make sure that everything was in order and that nothing was broken.

I couldn't say it out loud, especially with her looking at me and with Masuyo right behind me. "She really is beautiful," I mumbled to the starving man chained by his wrists with pile of black rats chewing on his ankles. It was the first time in a very long time since I really thought that someone else looked beautiful. Well, she was the only other woman I took time to look at. She was the second person I thought looked beautiful. I began to think of *her* again, for the second time today.

My painting slowed down as I was consumed by these thoughts. I wondered why she couldn't have just stayed with me. I wondered if it was *just* the seizures that scared her away, remembering that every time that I had forgotten her name her eyes would tear up and her voice got shaky when she told me her name. It must have broken

her heart, but I was very sure that I had hurt more. I had *been* hurting ever since she left.

I was so determined to remember her name so I kept repeating it all during the night and all day, when no one was around, for months until it came easily. Unfortunately, she had decided to stop visiting me at the hospital a month before. She was the first to leave. I remembered the pain I felt when Michi and my other best friend came and told me. I remembered that my chest hurt and that I wanted to cry, but I didn't; I held it in. I gripped the blankets in my hands and looked down at my bare knees. My friends put their hands on my shoulders and told me that it would be okay, but I couldn't say anything. I didn't say anything unless I absolutely had to for weeks.

My seizures had acted up even more often and there was always a medical staff in my room just in case so even more of my friends left. The only reason I was out of the hospital was because I didn't want to be in the hospital anymore and I didn't want anymore of my friends to leave. The doctors were even considering to put me in a coma if my seizures acted up more often. My two closest friends brought my tripod easel, small 14" x 16" canvases and my paint supplies. I gradually got better and left the hospital almost two years ago. After a while, everyone just decided to stop seeing me. They left without a word. Maybe they thought that someday, I wouldn't just forget their names. If it wasn't for Michi, I would probably still be hoping that someone would visit.

"Hitsoku-kun?"

I snapped at attention and looked at the two women who were standing a few feet away from the white tarp that was on the ground. I had been spacing out for a couple of hours. "Yes?" I said. My voice cracked and I had to wipe my eyes.

It was the mother who spoke. The other woman was standing beside her, looking at me a little weirdly. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," I said, quickly searching for an excuse. "I-it's the paint fumes. Don't breathe in too deeply. You might want to stand back a little; you have a baby and all. Um, did you need anything?"

"Well, we were wondering if you were hungry. You haven't taken a break at all today."

"Oh, uh. I am, but I'm almost done so probably another hour or so, but if you two are, go on ahead. I'm fine." I sniffed, trying to clear my nose a little. I was wishing that they would leave soon or at least go back to the fountain.

"I think we can wait a little longer," the mother said softly.

"Yeah, sure," the other one said, a little more softly than I expected. I watched them leave as they both went back to the fountain.

I tried to shake off the depressing thoughts and hurried to finish for the day. An hour and a half later, I finished and hurried to clean everything up. I put away the ladder, put the lids on the paint, gathered, washed and hung the brushes and folded and put away the tarp. I wiped my hands with the stained cloth and met up with the women at the fountain. "I'm finished for the day," I said.

"Okay," the mother said with a smile on her face as per usual. The baby was chewing on a half frozen teething ring and patting the mother's cheek. "We need to go shopping first, do you mind?" The raven-haired one looked up from her book, waiting for when she could get up.

"Of course not," I said. "I needed to get more eggs and a few other things anyway." I was thankful that her needing to go shopping jogged my memory and that I remembered my wallet.

The mother reached for the baby bag and slung it on her shoulder. "Okay, let's go then." The other woman stood up with her.

"Do you want me to carry that for you?" I asked. "It looks a little heavy."

She looked at me and said, "Would you please? It really is heavy after a while." She giggled as she said the last few words.

I took the bag and slung it on my shoulders. It must have weighed about twenty pounds, but when I thought about it, it wasn't that surprising that it weighed that much. I guessed that I was more surprised that she carried it all the way to the museum. We arrived at the bus stop and waited for a bus. She, being the enthusiastic mother, tried to make a little conversation, but I only replied with few words. I sat in the middle of the women and I remembered my little chat with Masuyo. I did my best to not look at the younger woman, but I tried to be inconspicuous about it.

The rest of my days were going to be even more awkward than they already were.

It wasn't as if I wanted to just sit and watch a guy paint to make sure he didn't drop dead, I just didn't want to be alone in the house. The curator, Masuyo, though he insisted we call him Nobu, was a rather charming old man, but it was more than obvious he just wanted to know how we knew Hitsoku. It also became obvious that he was trying to get me and Hitsoku together. The concrete steps created an echo effect, so Satsuki and I heard every word. It was awkward for both of us, Hitsoku and I, for sure. I had to make sure Satsuki promised not to tell Shigure about this. He would have made a big deal out of nothing. Besides, Hitsoku apparently cared more about his mural.

...

"If you have to have your weapon, at least put it through the grandma test. Take the weapon and hit your grandma with it. If she dies or writes you out of the will, don't bring it!" - Kent Nichols and Douglas Sarine

Chapter 8

"Buffet: a French word that means: 'Get up and get it yourself.'"

...

Michi was right. Hitsoku was polite. It was as if the weird artistic hermit had read an entire encyclopedia on etiquette and mannerisms, except for his awkward avoidant personality part, hiding behind his hair when he could.

I set the three full bags of groceries on the counter and then went to the living room to set down the baby bag which felt twice its original weight. I rubbed at my shoulder where the strap was resting. During the walk out of the store, the strap had migrated from the comfortable part of my collarbone to rest on the side of my neck and I didn't have any hands to adjust it. I had insisted that I carry the bags of groceries since the mother had a baby in her arms and, well, I felt that it wasn't proper if Akito had carried the bags also. I guess I was trying to be gentlemanly, but treating women (especially mothers) with respect and courtesy was just a habit.

I remember my father telling me to give all females respect, but whenever he would see Kyoko-sama he acted meanly. I was confused, but I knew that it was misplaced anger, even back then, I knew that status meant everything to my parents. So I was forced to respect women at first, but it was Kyoko-sama and Katsuya-sama that showed me why and how I shouldn't be like my father. I remember most of it, but there were some parts that are still hazy and it wasn't just because I was three and a half at the time.

It was early spring, February 17; it was my parents' fifth anniversary and they decided to invite everyone. Actually, they invited all of the family including Katsuya-sama, but they didn't want his wife. I didn't understand it back then like I did now, but it didn't matter to me. I remember that all of the grown-ups (the giants with high heels and

piercing stares with high expectations) weren't paying attention to me at all and there weren't any kids my age so I was bored. Mother and Father had forbade me to go to my room or to dirty my hands with my pencils or stain my clothes with paint, so I decided to just walk around, passing the time away until I figured out what I could do that wouldn't get me into trouble. That's when I saw her. Kyoko Honda.

I had never actually met her or seen her until that early evening, but I saw my mother complain about the picture, saying that she wished she could cut the 'trash' out of it. I did see the picture a few times when I snuck a peak at the album, but I had never seen her in person, so I was a little frightened. I tried to sneak away, but she saw me from where she sat. She wore a cream maternity shirt with elegant ruffles at the neckline and the ends of her sleeves, and light blue slacks that ended at the middle of her calf, trying to look her absolute best. She sat at the end of the porch, just looking outside, while (I figured) Katsuya-sama talked to his family from inside.

She just stared at me for a while; I was frozen from where I stood. After a few measly seconds, she smiled and said, "Well? Are you just going to stand there all day? Come on and sit next to me. I bet you're bored with all of the grown-ups just standing around and talking."

At first, I thought that she was an overgrown kid and it freaked me out at first that an adult would talk that way, but I eventually sat next to her on that porch cross-legged as apposed to her legs dangling over the edge. That's when I saw how big she was. She was pregnant, but my mother and father never even told me how it all worked or that the women would grow so round during it. I couldn't help but stare. I really had no clue.

She caught me. "You wanna feel?"

I looked up at her eyes for the first time. My eyebrows furrowed together. "Feel... what?"

She chuckled and said, "My baby of course."

My eyebrows raised in surprise. I looked around, thinking that she was hiding a baby around. "What baby? And why would I want to feel a baby?"

She openly laughed, as I sunk my head between my shoulders, my cheeks were burning with a dark blush. I wondered what I had said to make her laugh like that. I thought that she was laughing at me. "Right here, silly." She pointed at her swollen abdomen. "The baby is inside my tummy."

My mouth went agape and my eyes widened. "There's a baby in there?" I asked. Oh, how naïve I really was. Or perhaps, it was because my parents were too busy to really give me any details if at all about babies and the birth cycle. Even if it was a white lie or lacked in real details, it would have been something at least.

She laughed harder, covering her mouth femininely with her hand. Her body was shaking with the force of it.

"Why are you laughing at me?" I asked. I was always taught that it was rude to laugh at someone so I was getting mad. Or, at least, I should've been. I was more confused, but I had to act mad for my parents' sake. Pride.

When she calmed down enough, she said, "Kid, I'm not laughing at you. I just find it funny that you don't know anything about babies. The look on your face is priceless." She chuckled a bit more. "Here." She took my hand and brought it under the bottom of her shirt and firmly on the top of her stomach, keeping her hand on top of mine.

I got nervous. I had never touched anyone, let alone a grown pretty woman, that way. I didn't know what I was supposed to be feeling for anyway. Then there was a firm bump right at my fingers. I was so shocked that I ripped my hand away and stared at it. "What-? Was that your baby?" I couldn't help but ask.

She gave me a cheeky smile. "Yup. That's my baby!"

With that fact confirmed, only one question came to mind. "How is it going to come out?"

She didn't laugh that time. She gave me an awkward smile, and then looked a little behind me. "Hi Katsuya! I met a new friend. We were just talking about the baby."

I looked behind me and there indeed was Katsuya, the man that was acceptable in the family only because he was family by blood. He smiled and said with a calm, soothing, deep amused voice, "I heard." He sat right next to me so that I was in between the couple. I got nervous again. "You're Hitsoku, am I right? Your mother was just talking about how well-mannered you are for your age."

I had then realized that I was being rude to his wife by asking all of those questions. "Oh!" I looked back at the pregnant woman. "I'm sorry for asking all of those questions! I-"

"Hey, don't worry about it, kid," she said, patting my head and messing up my hair. When she let up, I fixed it so my mother and father wouldn't be mad. "You just wanted to know. So, Hitsoku, was it? I really hope we get to see more of each other."

I knew right then that I did want to see her again. Sometime after that we all just talked (I don't remember what anymore), but then Mother and Father found me with the 'trash' and dragged me away by the arms. I remember Kyoko-sama and Katsuya-sama looking a little disappointed, but they turned away and left hand in hand. It was several months before I saw Kyoko-sama again. I was waiting outside of my preschool. A car was supposed to pick me up, but every once in a while, they would forget to call a car so I would end up waiting for hours for someone to pick me up.

She came by with a stroller. "Hey Hii-kun!" At first, I didn't recognize her at all, and that she was talking to me since that was the first time I heard my nickname. When I finally did recognize her, I was really

shocked. I actually did get to see her again, that almost more than anything, but it was also because she didn't have that swollen bump on her stomach anymore.

We talked for a bit and that was when I saw my baby cousin sleeping in the stroller under the hood with a light blue pacifier in her mouth. She invited me to her home, which I hesitantly accepted, and saw Katsuya-sama again. He was a little surprised to see me, but he treated me like I was a close member of his family. Soon, Katsuya-sama had arranged so that after preschool I would go to their house until my parents came home. I could tell that they didn't like it one bit, but it was Katsuya-sama's influence that convinced them.

My days after that were a lot brighter, and just seeing Kyoko-sama caring for my baby cousin made me smile and want to help in any way I could. I always enjoyed playing and teaching her how to hold a crayon or teaching her how to use chopsticks or just something I was taught how to do at a young age. I always wanted to stay with my favorite aunt and uncle after that, but I never said that out loud because I knew that my parents didn't like Kyoko-sama. That schedule didn't break until three years later, when Tohru was actually old enough to comprehend simple card games or little kid games like tag or something. Katsuya Honda had passed away.

Without him, I wasn't aloud to visit their house or play with Tohru anymore. My life went back to its miserable state, except it seemed even more morbid because I actually had a taste of what was freedom. I snuck out to visit only months later and kept it up. My parents didn't even know until I turned thirteen, that was when I really felt chained down. They made absolutely sure that I came straight home by calling the house at a certain time, if I didn't answer I would get a harsh interrogation, and take away my art supplies, forcing me to study more and read the 'appropriate' books.

So, overall, I was probably forced to respect women, because that was how I was taught, but Kyoko-sama didn't have to make it feel forced. Mothers didn't make it feel forced. The females that I had known to be my close friends didn't make it feel forced. They all just

made it feel natural, that it didn't mean that I was going to be anything like my parents.

Satsuki (I had learned both of their names on the way home) had set the baby down and went to the kitchen to unload the bags of groceries and prepare lunch and dinner. On the way home she said that the Sohma family wanted to visit, to see if they were all alright. She said that she felt a little guilty for not letting me know, but I eased it by saying that it was completely fine with me. Then Hinata, the baby, started to sob. "Oh! Uh," she was looking around for Akito who was in the living room with the baby, but looked as if she had no clue how to go about it.

"It's okay, Satsuki-san, I'll handle it," I said. I carefully picked the baby girl up from the nest of blankets, making sure to support the head, and very gently rocked her from side to side. Luckily, she immediately calmed down; she just wanted to be held. I sat down on the couch, trying to be as gentle as possible so I didn't panic the baby with so much movement. I sat Hinata up on my knee and handed her a weird stuffed rabbit-thing doll, which she took in her tiny hands and commenced with chewing on its ears. She stared at me with her big brown eyes and occasionally patted what she could reach affectionately.

I couldn't help but notice Akito staring at me from the other side of the couch that we both sat on. "Um, is there a reason for your staring?" I asked meekly. I was always cautious of her temper, but staring always made me slightly uncomfortable.

"I didn't know you were good with babies," she stated. "It seemed as though you are afraid of kids or teenagers."

"Oh." It must have been the whole Satsuki's son not liking me and me doing my best to avoid it all thing. "I used to help my aunt watch my cousin," I said calmly. I carefully reached into my back pocket for my wallet. I got out a picture in one of the pockets and looked at the back to read Tohru's, Kyoko's and Katsuya's name quietly to myself. I had Tohru, who was only a year old (making me five), between my

legs on the stairs outside of their apartment with my aunt and uncle sitting next to me from both sides. Kyoko-sama's hand was on my head, mussing up my hair, and Katsuya-sama put his hand on my shoulder and his other arm protectively in front of Tohru. "See? That's Tohru and I in the middle." I handed her my most treasured picture.

She carefully took the 17 year old photo and looked at it with eyes I didn't recognize. They were softer than I had ever seen her with. The corners of her mouth curved upward slightly into a small, reserved, graceful smile. "You were cute," she said. It was in a quiet and amused tone.

"Yeah," I mumbled with warm cheeks. I looked away from her, using Hinata as a type of shield from the woman's view. "Can I have the picture back?" I asked, holding out my hand. My voice almost cracked from the slight embarrassment in the end.

She gave the picture back and I slid it back in my wallet. Hinata had caught hold of the front of my shirt and dragged her face to it. I decided to turn her around and let her lay on my front, if only to keep her from chewing and drooling on my shirt. I reached for the baby bag and handed her the teething ring which she took graciously, forgetting about the doll. After only an hour, Hinata had fallen asleep on top of me, with the ring still in her tiny hands. I didn't know if I should just set her down on the blankets or just stay still. I certainly didn't want the chance of waking her up, but I was starting to feel uncomfortable in more ways than the position the baby was on me.

Satsuki had came in the living room and cooed at me, wanting a picture, but I made up an excuse, saying that the shuttering sounds and the flash might wake her up. I heard a low chuckling sound coming from Akito. She was probably laughing at my mild suffering of embarrassment. I was relieved when Akito stood up to help Satsuki with the dinner. I heard a lot of giggling from Satsuki which made me even more unnerved. I could only pray that none of this would make it to Michi, but that was highly doubtful.

I was surprised he knew how to take care of babies, especially since he didn't seem to like Hiro or Momiji, and Hinata was usually fussy with strangers. She seemed completely comfortable with him. He showed me an old photograph of him with Tohru and her parents when they were much younger. He wore a uniform, and was well-groomed, unlike currently, which meant he grew up wealthy. It was hard to believe that a bright-eyed happy boy grew up to be the hermit sitting next to me.

When Hinata fell asleep, he was uncomfortable, especially when Satsuki wanted a picture. Even though Hitsoku made an excuse, it didn't stop the twinkle in her eye, showing that she wanted him to watch Hinata more, just for another chance. It was funny, because I knew Hitsoku wouldn't refuse, even if he was suffering under his thick skin. There was no way his friend Michi wasn't going to find out.

...

"Egotism is the anesthetic that dulls the pain of stupidity." - Frank Leahy

Chapter 9

"Don't follow in my footsteps. I run into walls."

...

I was inwardly debating whether I should just set Hinata down and go to my room and work on tattoo sketches, but Akito didn't know how to handle a baby, and Satsuki had her hands full with the big dinner. She had handed me a crab apple and a nori-wrapped rice-ball with cod in the center on a napkin an hour ago during something slow roasting in the oven and fish sizzling in a pan. She went back to cooking after she lightly patted Hinata's head. Akito helped with what she could, but as soon as there wasn't anything left that she could do, she sat back on the couch with me and got out her book to read.

She didn't say anything, not that I had expected her to. She seemed calm, so the silence wasn't tense like early this morning, and I didn't feel the need to break it. Hinata sighed, which almost seemed like a snort, and shifted so that she was lying on her side. I rubbed her back gently so that she wouldn't wake up. The moment was all so strange, but in a good way. I felt the corners of my mouth perk up into a small smile.

I heard the door open and then click shut. "Mom, we're back," Satsuki's son said rather too loudly. There were footsteps calmly, but hurriedly, walking up the stairs to their room, probably to drop off their backpacks.

Hinata's eyes fluttered opened and her face crinkled into a choked sob. Oh no, I thought. I stood up with her in my arms and patted her gently on her back, trying to calm her down and coax her to go back to sleep. After a little while, when she didn't stop crying, I figured that she needed something. "Um, maybe you're hungry?" I asked as if it was to Hinata even if she couldn't answer me. "Is there a bottle already made?" I asked Akito, looking at her.

She looked into the baby bag, and lo and behold, the mother had thought ahead. There was a bottle wrapped in a small hand towel in a small cooler box with ice packets inside that kept the bottle cool. I shook the bottle so the milk fat and the milk would mix some, but I knew that it wouldn't mix all the way no matter how much shaking I did. Hinata didn't seem to mind the cold milk so that was good. I remembered that Kyoko-sama had once worried about nuking the bottle in the microwave (lack of protein or radiation or something) or waiting to warm the bottle with warm water while Tohru was getting fussy, so she got Tohru to tolerate cold breast milk. I didn't even have a chance to sit down with Hinata suckling on the bottle because I saw the sand-haired older brother standing there staring at me. I knew he was about to lecture me, hopefully where it's not yelling since I had Hinata in my arms.

"I know what you're going to say," I said, cutting him off before he even spoke. "I was just helping your mom out while she was busy with the whole big dinner thing." I set Hinata down on her blankets on the couch still holding the bottle at a slight angle so she wouldn't swallow the air bubbles or that the very thin layer of stray fat on top wouldn't clog the rubber nipple. "You can take over now if you want to."

He came right over and sat next to the baby and, as calmly as he could, took the bottle. He still glared at me, but I didn't care. I was just thankful that he didn't yell at me while the baby was in the room. He would probably yell at me later though when it was more private. I could definitely tell that he didn't like me with his baby sister, which I could definitely understand, since I tried protecting Tohru the exact same way when we were little.

I hurried up to my room, mumbling a quick hi to the other teenagers and that guy in the suit on the way up. I really didn't feel like chatting after the look on that kid's maddened face. I hoped that I wouldn't have to help with the care of Hinata again, or at least any time soon. It seemed as though that kid hated me more and more, and I was getting mildly curious as to why. That was a bad thing.

I sighed in relief when I got to my room and locked the door. I hadn't been in the safety of my room all day and it had been unnerving up until right before the group of four came home. Then it became even more tensing. I sat on the side of my bed and rested my face in my hands, trying to stay calm and not get so jittery. When I inhaled deeply through my nose, I had smelled something interesting. I was sniffing at my hands, and then I pulled up the front of my shirt to my nose and took in the scent deeply. It was that baby smell, but I could also smell the old dried in paint that loosely clung to it. I decided I needed a shower more than sketching the tattoos for the other people I had scheduled to take in, in about two or three weeks, depending on when I finished the mural.

I had planned to stay up in my studio for the rest of the night. The Sohma family was having dinner for the sake of those living under my roof, not me, so I figured I had no reason to join. It wasn't as if I really wanted to join anyway, I didn't want to meet the rest of the family with the risk of them asking questions, or be in the light when Satsuki would comment on my baby-caring skills. It would happen eventually, whether I was there or not. From what I could already hear, quite a few people had showed up. I could hear one particular chuckle of a man and a loud argument between a young girl and a teenage boy all the way from my studio.

Then, something dreadful, and something I had least expected came. Unfortunately, my back was facing a wall and not to the little door to my personal room. "Hey Hitsoku! What are you still doing up here?" Michi asked, sneaking up and startling me with his loud voice.

When I got my heart under control, I looked at him with narrowed eyes. "How did you get in here? I know I locked my door this time. I made absolute sure of it." I picked up my sketchpad that I had dropped with the half drawn picture on it. I had finished about fifteen tattoo sketches before Michi had come in.

"The Sohmas want you to join the dinner, you know," he said, tactfully avoiding my question. "Tohru's here too. You should at least say hi."

"We both know you won't let me *just* say hi," I said. "Besides, I don't think that anyone except Satsuki-san would want to join. Maybe her husband and that other guy that is rooming with him too, but that's all."

"You mean, Hatori-san?"

"Yes, him. You can just tell everyone that I'm busy, which I am."

"I know you are not that busy. All you do is paint or draw all day for other people, but that can always wait. Tell you what, either I forcibly drag you down or you comply and join. Either way, you are joining and eating dinner with everyone. You need to eat anyway."

I groaned. He wasn't going to go away without getting what he wanted. "I really don't want to," I mumbled.

"Why? Because there are so many people down stairs?"

"Mostly."

Michi looked at me with his head cocked to the side and his eyes were narrowed. That was his 'didn't-quite-believe-me' face. He probably thought that there being so many people was my sole reason for not wanting to join. "Come on or I'll drag you by the ear," he said after shaking his head slightly.

I sighed, put down my sketchpad and not fully willingly followed him. I could already tell that I was not going to enjoy it. I made sure to keep my door unlocked, just in case I needed to get away fast. When I got down, people were standing around and chatting amongst themselves. Some I recognized as the people who were with my new guests on the first day, and others I didn't recognize at all. Tohru quickly found me.

"Hi Hii-kun!" She greeted cheerfully. Two women about her age came up behind her. "Hii-kun, these are my two best friends, Uo-chan, and Hana-chan. Guys, this is my cousin Hii-kun."

I bowed slightly, showing respect. "It's certainly a pleasure to meet you," I said. That wasn't a complete lie. Anyone who Tohru called best friends had to be very special and unique. Other than that, however, there was nothing else. I would have nothing to do with them.

When Tohru and Uo left to talk to an orange-haired kid, I had no idea where Michi had run off to, the other one spoke to me. "You have very unusual waves," Hana said. She looked at me with an almost glassy look in her black eyes and seemed really serious about whatever these 'waves' were. Her long black hair was in a braid over her shoulder, and she dressed in a fancy black button-up blouse and a long lacy black skirt. "Why is it that I sense that you would rather not see Tohru?" Her expression was so apathetic that it almost scared me.

I could only stare at the young gothic woman. I didn't know how she knew, but I also knew that I didn't want to know. She was right though. When she brought home those people, I didn't want to see her again, because I knew that there would be no use in apologizing if she was just going to forgive me without a second thought. She was just too polite for my approval. I also wondered about a few other things that concerned Tohru, but that didn't matter at the moment. "I'm sorry, but I can't seem to figure out what you mean," I lied. "Enjoy the dinner." I walked out to the hallway just to sit on the bottom steps of the stairs. I hadn't been there for more than half an hour and I already didn't like where everything was headed. I would have gone up to my room, but I knew that Michi would just drag me back down.

Just as I heard that the dinner was ready and set, there was a knock at the door. I got up and answered it to see a middle-aged woman, with long black hair and with black eyes with a certain tint to them that almost seemed familiar. She had fair skin, and not from the contrast from her deep red-violet dress. "Is this the Honda's residence? I'm Ren Sohma."

"Oh, yes it is. My name is Hitsoku Honda," I said. "Please, come in." I bowed a little as she came in, slipping out of her heels gracefully. There was something about her I immediately didn't like. It was the air that she carried around her, the way she kept her chin leveled and the shape of her smile.

I lead her to the living room where the rest of the Sohmas were and immediately, the some of the quiet chatter came to a halt and there were eyes looking in my direction. I had a chill run up my spine. I knew they weren't looking at me, but it made me wonder why the woman a little ways behind me had gathered so much attention so quickly. "Will you sit next to me?" She purred in my ear.

"Uh, sure," I said, a little shakily. I hadn't realized that she was as close as she was. She sat down at the end of the low table with just enough space for me to sit in between her and a tall man that seemed more laid-back than the others. Next to him was Akito, and she seemed the most surprised. To me, she almost looked scared, and that worried me a lot. The food was past around the table, so everyone got a piece of everything. I quietly counted around the table, not including myself, and ended up with seventeen.

Why is she here? How did she know? I was terrified of Ren's appearance. The only thing that kept me from jumping from the table was Shigure's warm hand over mine, giving it a gentle squeeze. He wouldn't let her do anything again.

"So, Hitsoku-kun, you live here all by yourself?" The woman asked. She looked at me with eyes and a smile I most certainly didn't like at all.

"Yes," I said, "but I won't be alone for a while anymore."

"Oh, yes. That is very true." Her deep smooth voice made my insides shiver and my heart beat harder in my chest. "You're a painter, am I correct?" She asked with her tone of voice lighter with the seemingly harmless question.

"Yes, I am," I answered. I looked around the table and everyone was just eating quietly. The only ones providing chatter were Tohru and her friends along with Satsuki and her family and the younger Sohmas, but they were at the other end of the table. It was very unnerving. I noticed that Ren hadn't gotten much food and hadn't touched it yet, as have I. Admittedly, without anyone talking, I was too nervous to eat at that moment, or at least I wanted the woman to leave me alone. I felt like I had just let in a wolf.

"Why isn't there a single piece of your artwork on any of your walls then?" She was leaning in towards me a little. She made arch her back to show her chest.

I looked around. "Oh. It is pretty bare," I said, my voice cracking a bit. "I hadn't really noticed. I haven't really cared for hanging up my paintings in my house."

"Oh that's too bad," she pouted a little. "I'm sure I could give you something to paint that would look great on your wall."

My eyes widened greatly, and I could feel an embarrassed and nervous blush on my face. I quickly looked around and just noticed that Michi was gone. "Um, does anyone know where Michi-kun is?" I asked loudly. I was hoping for someone to speak and delay this woman.

It was Tohru who answered. "He said that he got a call and had to leave."

God damn it! I thought. Just when I really needed him! "Oh," I said with a nervous smile on my face. "Well, if he had to leave, then he had to leave." He just had to leave *now* ? I knew I should have gone to my room.

"You know, you should tie your hair back," the woman next to me said too closely next to me. She picked up a tendril of my hair in her light painted fingertips. She offered a black hair band in her other hand. "You wouldn't want to get hair in your food."

"Thank you," I mumbled. I carefully took it, making sure not to touch her at all, and tied back my hair. She immediately noticed it though, much to my dismay. I had forgotten that I didn't tie my hair back for a reason.

"Oh what happened there?" She asked.

She was referring to my scar that was conveniently hidden when my hair was down. I was so nervous I had almost forgotten about it. It ran right on my hairline from above my right eye to my cheekbone.

"Oh. I-I, it's nothing. An accident."

"What happened?" She was pretending to care.

"I-I, uh, I fell down the stairs," I said. She was getting even closer to me.

"Oh that must have hurt a lot to leave such an ugly scar like that. I'm sure I can make it feel better though." Her chest was grazing over my arm, causing me to flinch, and bump into the other man.

"That's enough Ren," the man beside me said. "Why are you even here? No one invited you. You shouldn't have even known."

What? I thought. She wasn't supposed to be here?

"You're being very rude Shigure- *kun*," she said, emphasizing in the honorifics. "I was only chatting with Hitsoku-kun."

I didn't like the honorific at the end of my name. I felt disgusted, but I didn't say anything. I just had to endure it until she left and then I wouldn't see her ever again. Hopefully, at least. She seemed to be a woman who was persistent.

"Well, it looks like you're traumatizing him." He was chuckling as he said it.

"What? I am not. Hitsoku-kun doesn't mind me talking to him, don't you, Hitsoku-kun? You should mind your business. You have Akito

now after all so my business shouldn't matter to you."

Okay, my endurance couldn't hold out any longer. "Actually, yes, I do mind. Please don't talk to me during the remainder of the dinner."

Her eyes looked like they were going to pop out of their sockets. She looked so angry that I got scared and regretted what I said. "How dare you?" She screeched, standing up suddenly. She slapped me across the face, her long nails leaving lined welts across my cheek. "I have never felt so insulted!" She stormed out in a huff. I heard the door slam shut on her way out.

I took a breath of relief. I felt as though I had never been so relieved in my life, even if it did get me a hard slap across my face. The knots in my gut loosened and my heart calmed down. I also felt the jumpiness and the spinning in my head halt. I really didn't care that my cheek was stinging at that moment. The wolf was gone.

Of course, that had lead to staring and Tohru jumping up to my side to make sure I was alright. She rambled on in her high pitched voice in a pace that I just couldn't keep up. During her panic, a man, I think his name was Hatori came up to me as I was trying to calm my younger cousin down. He grabbed my chin to examine the scratches. "You should get it cleaned up," he said.

I stood up out of their way. "I'm going to clean it up then," I said, thankful for the excuse to let the people calm down and let the event pass. I hoped that the rest of the dinner went by quietly and smoothly. I headed to the bathroom, the first floor bathroom, not mine, and looked at the four raised lines. Some of the thin layer of skin was peeling off, and there were even threadlike lines of blood. No wonder Tohru freaked out when she did, and no wonder it was stinging as much as it did.

I just decided to wash it off with warm water and pat it down with a hand towel. I examined it a little and since it wasn't bleeding anymore I didn't cover it up. When I went back to dinner everything was back to being relaxed. Everyone was chatting. The punk kid

seemed to be flirting with a grey-haired, purple-eyed kid, making him mildly uncomfortable, but not uncomfortable enough to argue with the orange-haired kid. Uo, the German kid, and his remaining roommate were also giving him a hard time. There was a girl sitting next to the sand-haired kid, with a meek shyness, but she was all smiles. No one had noticed me quite yet.

"It's too bad that Isuzu-san couldn't make it," Satsuki-san said.

"Nah," the punk kid said. "She doesn't like to eat in front of people."

I decided it was time for me to get back to the dinner. I was sure that if I didn't, Michi would be annoyed with me and interrogate me. The man I was sitting next to looked up at me as I sat down. "Wow, she really did a number on you," he said. I wasn't sure if he meant it as a joke or if he was just relaxed. Maybe someone snuck in sake?

I looked at him and saw that Akito was leaning over and looking at me too. She looked almost sad, but it was different. Whatever it was I had never seen her have that look before. I looked back at Shigure and said, "Yeah, it's fine though. No real harm done."

"Well, if you see her again, just avoid her."

I smiled and nodded my head once. "You don't have to tell me twice." I finally grabbed my chopsticks and grabbed a piece of the fish with rice and took my first bite. I could have died a happy man. I had forgotten what real good home-made food had tasted like. I felt myself smile a real smile. Something, I think, I hadn't done in a long time.

The dinner was great and the family seemed happy. I answered a few questions that were about my career, Tohru and I, and Michi. Shigure was bold enough to ask if I had ever had been in a relationship. "Yes, I have. Things just didn't work out between us and so she didn't want to further the relationship."

He let out a breathy chuckle. "And you just let her go?"

He was reminding me of the curator I was working for. I hesitated for a second before answering. "Yeah, I did."

He chuckled a bit more and changed the subject. After everyone finished eating, they started to leave. I saw to it that I saw everyone out of my door; I figured that it would be the polite thing to do. Shigure was the last one out. He said his good-byes to my houseguests and kissed Akito on the cheek before waving. I then remembered that the woman who had said something about him having Akito so that explained the PDA. Well, now I had a reason for the curator to leave me alone on my love life.

As soon as the door closed, I offered Satsuki help with the dishes, but her husband said that he would, the area was too small for three people to help anyway. Their kid who was watching Hinata scowled at me from the living room as I went up stairs to my room. Akito was just ahead of me. As she turned the door knob, I had to ask. "Are you okay?"

She stopped and looked at me. "What do you mean?" Her voice was in a low airy whisper.

"When that woman came in, you looked almost terrified," I said calmly. I didn't know how she would react, I knew she didn't like me talking as if I knew her, but it did worry me a little bit. "Are you okay?" I asked again. That was all I needed to know, I didn't want a several page explanation or even why she looked scared; that was none of my business.

"Y-yeah," she said, nodding a bit.

I didn't entirely believe her, because I did that exact same thing when I was seriously shaken up or just really upset, but if she didn't want people worrying over her, then I could understand that. "Okay, then. Good night Akito-san." I opened my door and went inside with a soft click behind me. I brushed my teeth and just realized that I never returned the hair band. Oh well, I thought. May as well keep it and actually use it once in a while. I went to my studio to sketch a bit

more before heading off to sleep at around midnight. It was a long day and I was tired. I wondered what the days ahead of me would be like. Akito and Satsuki would be with me while I painted the mural, occasional grocery shopping, maybe watching Hinata and helping out with other things. Maybe a few occasional visits from their family. Heck, maybe a few more meals with Satsuki's cooking!

Hitsoku was awkward with Ren's terribly obnoxious flirting tactics. When I felt Hitsoku flinch into Shigure, pushing against me, Shigure decided to stand up for Hitsoku. It was obvious he needed help. Ren was always uncontrollable, and it was that aspect of her that scared me. She was unpredictable, and no one could stop her from getting or doing what she wanted. My father, my bond no matter if it was inexistent or not, and my beliefs, whether she knew that or not.

When Hitsoku finally said something, requesting politely that she not speak to him, she got infuriated, and before I could think of any kind of warning, a hard solid slap rang out. Everyone stopped what they were doing and stared, even after Ren slammed the door behind her. I felt cowardly for not speaking to Ren, and bad that Hitsoku had been hurt because of her. Ren only wanted to manipulate Hitsoku, but for what, I didn't know yet. I knew she would be back, and that also scared me. Were we really safe here, now that she knew where I was hiding? Who would stop her from setting this place on fire too? No one knew except for Shigure, the head maid and I.

After Hitsoku cleaned up, I saw Ren's mark, which was slightly discolored, and then I saw the scar. It must have been a bloody accident to leave an angry scar like that on his head. Did he really just fall down the stairs, or was it just an excuse? I guess it didn't matter anymore. Even so, he seemed more relaxed when Ren had gone, and even gave a real smile. I could see the bright-eyed boy from the picture peaking through.

I was a little sad when they all had to leave, and wished I could have went with Shigure, but that wouldn't have been a good idea. Both ends of the teeter-totter were shaky, and with Ren about, who knew

what would happen? Would I have to find another place to hide since Ren knew where I was? What was going to happen?

I was touched that Hitsoku was concerned. He may not look it, but he was quite observant when he needed to be. That had me worried. If he found out how much danger he was in because I was staying in his home, would he tell me to get out? I didn't think so, but anything was possible. If Ren could find me here, she could find me anywhere. I didn't feel I was convincing when I told him I was fine, but he didn't question me any farther. 'Good night?' I hoped so.

...

Hilo! So you all know the secret of how the fire started. That was another thing I was feeling guilty about because there's so much going on on both sides. I also hope that it answers the question of her place as the head of the Sohma family. For now the head maid is taking Akito's place, secretly contacting her via phone.

"I'm not good with empathy, will you settle for sarcasm?"

Chapter 10

"Some mistakes are too fun to make only once."

...

After the dinner, things went back to normal. Well, as normal as my life could be; what, with the Sohmas still living with me and all.

When Michi visited two days after the dinner, he somehow got into my studio again, and said that his girlfriend needed him for something. She had said that it was an emergency, and that he was very sorry for leaving me with that she-wolf which he probably heard from Satsuki, or maybe even Shigure. He wanted me to ask of the emergency, but I just wanted to focus on my sketches. He seemed fine and he didn't mention that anyone was hurt so I didn't feel the need to ask what the 'emergency' was about. When I continued on ignoring him, he told me anyway. "Usagi," his girlfriend, "and I are going to have a baby."

My pencil and sketchbook had slipped from my hands and clattered to the floor. I was downright shocked. I didn't even know that they had been in *that* kind of relationship, but, then again, I hadn't paid much attention. "Are you two going to get married?" I asked, looking at him in the eyes.

"I thought you weren't the type to worry about stuff like that," he said, teasing me. It was as if he found some humor in me asking that question.

"About what, specifically?"

"Whether I marry her before the baby is due, you know? Your parents used to talk about it like it was one of the seven deadly sins when we were in high school. They would give us lectures every time we even talked about our girlfriends."

"Oh, no. I just... Usagi-san seems to be the kind of woman who needs commitment. At least an engagement ring or something. I really couldn't care less about when, before or after the baby's due, for you to get married to her."

"I know," he said, referring to that he knew what I meant. "I gave her my class ring until I could buy an engagement ring. Cliché, I know, but that was all I had that night. We're going out to buy the ring tomorrow." He smiled at me. He really was happy, but it was also as if he was waiting for me to say something. After a few seconds, he said, "Aren't you going to congratulate me and Usagi?"

"Oh, right. Congrats," I said so poorly. I just didn't quite know how to react. "I wish you two happiness and that you live happily together for the rest of your lives". It was totally corny, but he seemed to buy it.

However, he knew that wasn't all I wanted to say. He kept staring at me.

"And good luck to Usagi-san. Who knows how much longer she can deal with you and your gaudy attire?"

We both laughed at the little joke and continued joking about the 'wedding plans.' Usagi was definitely excited about it and had started looking at wedding magazines. I was honestly happy for them both, especially Michi, because he really needed it. We went downstairs and he told the women the good news. Satsuki was very happy for him and showed it by squealing, and Akito was more on the calm side, but congratulated him nonetheless. After he left I knew that he wouldn't visit as often and I was glad. It's about time he left me alone and paid more attention to Usagi.

Other than that, Shigure had started visiting. It was mainly to talk to Hatori and see Akito, but we had chatted a bit when he caught me out of my room. It wasn't as often as Michi either (he only visited twice since the dinner). I was usually watching Hinata when we chatted, which was good for me. I had this weird feeling about him

because he seemed a bit too nice and definitely too curious about my life. He often asked questions on the deeper matters of the Honda family that I didn't feel comfortable answering. Hinata was beginning to be my safety blanket or my shield to ward off the ill feeling. By focusing on her I had an easier time giving him answers without having to look at him and an easier time coming up with explanation that would surround and hide the real answer, but it would satiate him. I wouldn't lie though. When Satsuki was done cooking and so could watch her child, I made the excuse that I had to get back to work and head to my room.

So, despite those things, everything was respectably normal.

Hitsoku valued his privacy, so I lightly scolded Shigure when he got too nosy. He had been asking Hitsoku about a lot of things that wasn't necessary. I didn't know what was going on. Shigure then told me that the maids had heard about the dinner party and told Ren about it. Even after all the disaster and chaos she caused, that woman still had followers. It was those followers that covered for her when she brought the knife to my room, and the same followers who covered for her when she started the fire.

It had been a week and a half and I was finally getting somewhere with the mural. All I had to do was highlight and shade in a few areas, and make the mist seem more alive and wispy. The curator had asked me about Akito, I told him that she was taken. He looked at me very disappointed-like and said, "You should have asked her sooner!"

I would have told him that she was already taken by the time she stepped foot into my home, but I didn't see the point in telling him. Let him think what he wants. However that never stopped him from talking and entertaining them while I painted the mural. That was good though. I really didn't like to think that they were just sitting there watching me, hoping that I wouldn't get a seizure and collapse from atop of the ladder.

After I felt that I was done with the mural for the day, I cleaned up the area and went inside the janitor's room to put away the supplies and change my shirt. After the first day of watching Hinata, I didn't want her to inhale any more paint fumes especially because she liked chewing on clothing or anything cloth-like. I also used the calcium encrusted metal sink to wash off the acrylic paint off of my hands, arms and my face. There wasn't much I could do about my hair and there was only a few drops anyway (don't ask me how that happens, it just does somehow). It wasn't as if I was going to let her eat my hair, with or without the paint.

I hurried down the concrete steps to the women. I didn't think of them as babysitters anymore, but more as people who wait on me and just want to have friendly conversations with. "I'm done for today," I said. "Tomorrow's going to be the last day." I showed a small smile, silently telling them that I was relieved.

Satsuki smiled gleefully. "Oh, I can't wait to see it! Masuyo-san always talks about how wonderful your murals are."

All I could do was smile at her naïve self. She would just have to see it tomorrow to find out just how twisted the murals I paint for Nobu Masuyo are. It wasn't as if I could stop her anyway since it was public. I picked up the baby bag and placed the strap comfortably on my shoulder. We weren't going shopping since we did a few days ago, so I didn't have to worry about the strap moving too much. We went straight to the nearest bus stop.

It wasn't so bad waiting for him anymore. Masuyo always talked to us with pride about Hitsoku's handy-work. I didn't doubt it. He also talked a little about his late wife and her fondness for the unusual, hence his museums. A little after he left to set up his exhibit, Hitsoku started to clean up and came down. Just one more day.

The bus arrived only about five minutes after we did and by looking in the windows I could tell that it was crowded. When we got on a kind middle-aged man stood up and offered his seat to Satsuki, who took it graciously. Hinata was getting fussy, not that I could blame

her, it smelled of sweat and it was too warm. I gave Satsuki the baby bag so she could tuck it under her seat. No one else gave up their seats so Akito and I were left standing. Thankfully there were two straps left to hold on to.

After eight or nine stops, it seemed as if more people got on than got off. More people had to stand up because a young man in a wheelchair got on the bus. There was a young lady who was too short to quite reach the metal bar because there weren't any more straps and the other poles were taken, so I let her have mine. I wasn't much taller than her, but I could just barely get my fingers around it the metal bar. After a couple of red lights and stop signs, I knew I wouldn't be able to hold on. "Do you mind if we share?" I asked Akito.

She looked at me from over her shoulder and said, "Sure." She moved her hand so we could both hold on to the loop. It was fine, but I often had to hold on to her shoulder or her arm for balance. They were accidents, but I could tell right away that she was annoyed. She would tense up and, with a grunt, shrug off my hand.

I wasn't all that comfortable being so close to her either and not just because of what Masuyo had been telling me about getting myself a girl. I don't think that I ever felt truly comfortable around females at all. They were usually very sensitive and Michi always said that I was too blunt. He told me I had been getting more pessimistic, which was probably true, but I didn't see the point in changing since I really didn't want to be in a relationship with anyone. Plus, after the dinner, I would catch myself peeking over at her during the times I would watch, and play with Hinata.

I could tell that she wasn't focusing on her book, and was thinking about something heavy. I felt urges to ask her about it, but I never followed through since it wasn't any of my business. I also noticed more little things about her too. Like the way she would press the side of her finger to her lips to hide a small smile, or how she would hold her ankles to her thighs when she was tense or stressed out. I

noticed she did the latter whenever Shigure was around. It had me wondering about a few things, but I never dwelled on them.

I don't think either of us paid attention during the bus ride because when the bus hit a speed bump she lost her footing, and suddenly leaned backwards into me. I hadn't been holding on to the strap very tightly, and lost my grip, causing both of us to fall backwards onto the middle aisle. I had hit my shoulder on a pole on the way down and I could feel Akito landing on me with her head on my chest. People were asking us if we were okay, but I couldn't quite focus on anything. I could feel my eyes rolling, and I was beginning to panic a little. I had this awful taste in my mouth and there was a weird smell other than the humid sweat in the air. When I tried to stand up with the help of a few people, I felt dizzy and lightheaded.

"I need to sit down," I rasped out. The two people who sat next to where Akito and I fell quickly offered up their seats, but Satsuki said that this was our stop. I was so relieved to feel cool air on my face, and the still ground. The bus driver didn't even stop when we fell. "Let me sit down for a few minutes," I quietly said, lowering myself on the sidewalk against a light pole.

Satsuki then said something and flitted off somewhere. I could feel someone sitting next to me and guessed that it was Akito. "Hitsoku? Are you getting a seizure again?" She asked calmly.

I gently nodded my head. I felt myself calming down a little, especially because I was off of that crowded bus. I kept swallowing down the bad taste and breathing in fresh air, wading out my episode. The whole few minutes from the bus to sitting down and waiting felt like an eternity. At least it was a very mild case this time since it could have been a lot worse. When I felt that it was starting to wear off some, I reached into my jacket pocket for my house keys with the tiny coin purse keychain. I unzipped it and took out a pill with a shaky hand, brought it to my mouth and swallowed it dry. I always carried the little purse just in case of emergencies, and I put it on a keychain so I wouldn't forget. I brought my legs closer to my chest so I could breathe just a little easier and rest my forehead on my knees.

"Hitsoku, are you okay? Maybe we should have called a cab," the younger woman mumbled.

"I'm fine," I said quietly. "Let me just rest for a bit." After a few deep breaths I felt a little better, or at least well enough to walk the rest of the way home. I looked up to see her sitting on her knees right in front of me looking concerned. I stared at her face and realized that she was covering something on her cheek with her hand, and moved it in slow circles, trying to soothe whatever it was. I carefully moved her hand with my own and saw that a nasty bruise was forming. I felt at the swollen and slightly discolored flesh with my thumb, making her cringe a little and a blush forming on her cheeks. I looked around and found the baby bag and rummaged around in it and found the half frozen ice packs and a few tissues. "Here," I said, handing her the pack.

"Thank you." She took it without question and the blush turned just a shade darker. "Satsuki-san went to get you something to drink. She should be back soon."

"Yeah, okay." I don't think that I cared much for what she was saying, I just needed something other than cars and jingling bells that hung from the doors of shops and restaurants to listen to. After when the shakiness in my hands wore off and when my eyes felt open and clear, I tried standing up, and felt a little sore, but that was okay. Not long after that, Satsuki-san returned with Hinata in one arm and a lidded Styrofoam cup in the other.

"Here you go Hitsoku-kun." She certainly sounded frantic again and Hinata was starting to pick up on that and started to whimper. "Are you feeling alright now?" She asked, bouncing Hinata gently, trying to soothe her. Hinata was still fussing until I reached into the bag and offered her Mogeta (I had learned what the rabbit-thing was from overhearing the young German and the son). She took it with both of her tiny hands and waved it around. She smiled a little when she heard the little plastic beans clashing with each other inside the stuffed doll.

I carefully took the warm cup with both hands from Satsuki and saw a thin wisp of steam come out of the mouth piece and decided to wait a bit. "Thank you," I quietly said. I softly blew around the mouth piece to try and cool it quicker. "I'm fine now. Thank you for your concern. Sorry for the scare."

"What do you think caused that?" Satsuki asked.

I shrugged. "It could have been anything really; the split-second realization that I was falling, hitting my shoulder, the jolt of landing. It could have been almost anything so I wouldn't think about it too much. We should head home." I picked up the bag and we headed home, though it was a little quieter than usual. They must have been a little worried still.

He had panicked, and it scared me. We were on a bus, so what if he started vomiting, or convulsing? It was lucky that we were at our stop, but should we call for a cab to the hospital? I didn't know anything about seizures. Satsuki left to get him something to drink, leaving me alone with him again. He didn't look too good, but he had looked worse before, so that was good at least, right?

Calming down allowed me to remember about my cheek that was throbbing. On the way down, I had hit the metal back-part of the seat, but I could tell that it wasn't broken, thankfully. It still hurt though. Hitsoku took my hand away from my sore cheek to feel at it for himself, and then reached into the bag to get out an ice-pack. His hand was warm, and it was soothing. It wasn't the first time he had showed his own concern, but it always seemed to surprise me because he was always awkward. He seemed like a good guy, so why was he single?

...

"Tis far better to be pissed off than to be pissed on."

Chapter 11

"Davey doesn't watch the damn road when he's driving. I'm sure if we crashed he would be fine and I would be imbedded in a tree. If he kills me with his driving though, I'm going to come back as a squirrel and run up his pant leg." - Jade Puget from AFI

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My high school years were some of the best years of my life and I wish I could live in those years all over again, and again, and again. Even when it caused me pain at times. At first, I was completely awkward around my peers at my private school because they seemed to be just like my parents and I hated that so much. I sat alone at lunch and just stuck by myself and pretended to be polite to everyone even when I wanted to scream at the to get the hell away. Of course that ended when one student came along and pulled me out of there and made me a part of their group. I forgot his name and I really wish I could remember it now because I never got to thank him.

Even though the new group was completely different and seemed carefree and normal like I had yearned for in potential friends, I still felt incredibly out of place. I didn't know how to let loose or just relax and open up because I was never taught that. Even when I spent my days with my aunt, before I was forbidden to go to her again, my life was still dominated by rules and thoughts of being better than everyone else. Even if I was told to make friends, my parents would always tell me to continue to be better than them in every aspect so I felt that I shouldn't make friends in my elementary and middle school years. It almost felt like it was too late and that I couldn't learn how to be more normal.

During those lunches and other times when we just sat around and talked, I merely observed. They all talked about their jobs, or sports, or interesting club activities, or jokes they heard from one person or

another, but I felt that I didn't have a part in the conversations. I had art club, but I was practically invisible to the club because I didn't participate in contests or share any of my opinions. In fact, I didn't paint or draw what I really wanted because I didn't want the teachers to report to my parents about my 'disturbing' drawings. Soon enough that all changed too one afternoon. I remembered that it was a Friday sometime in winter because it was very cold but my chest felt a lot warmer because I had gotten an invite to go to the mall with them the next day because of the incident.

I was sitting with them like usual; there but not really there. Instead of observing and listening for a part to where I could enter the conversation like I had been doing for about a month, I was drawing in my sketch pad. I had given up on trying, but I would still call them my friends, and so I figured that it was safe to draw since no one paid any mind to me. I was actually thinking on why that guy had brought me over if I was just going to be ignored just like the other group I was sitting next to. I only had a pencil and a fine tipped pen as my instruments but that was perfectly fine with me. I was experimenting with line drawings and crosshatching and later when I was in my room I was planning on dropping ink to give it a certain effect that I couldn't quite explain. It was supposed to be depressing and dark but it would have a meaning that I didn't think that anyone would quite understand, but the teachers would certainly misconstrue and over exaggerate it to the extreme. They would probably have put me on suicide watch if they had seen what my sketch pads contained.

Someone had accidentally bumped into me and all the papers had scattered. I was panicking and scared if my new 'friends' were to see them, so I was trying to hurry and gather all of the papers. Of course there were too many and the people had to be kind and want to help out even if I didn't really take part with them. It was Umeko-san who changed my view of how people thought of me or other people in general. She complimented my drawings that she had in her long, slender fingers and asked if everyone could see the rest. I was so frightened and my heart was beating so hard in my throat, my face

must have been red and I could feel my hands shake, but I struggled to say 'sure' anyway. I gave her the stack of my deepest darkest secrets and trusted her, her being on the first person I had trusted in my life. I never even showed my aunt and uncle those kinds of drawings.

All she did was smile and thank me, as if thanking me that I was trusting her and them. I, on the other hand, must have looked like a frightened mouse in face of a hoard of feral cats in a dark, dirty alleyway. I watched as my papers were passed around to these people that I had been observing for a while and was about to get an opinion from them. I was just waiting for the cynicism and the negative reviews and for them to call me a freak or something personally for drawing such things. I was waiting for someone to tell me to get away or to go die, but that never happened.

They actually thought that it was kind of cool. Some of them admitted that it was a bit creepy but they had a certain respect for it. Even Umeko-san liked some of them and they all wanted to see more. For the first time, I actually wanted to cry in happiness. I felt relieved that I actually had, not one person, but many to share my feelings to. My feelings may not have been put into words, but I could finally share them somehow. I smiled for the first time in years and got out my other drawing books and talked about what the art club was up to and how my art class was. I actually had something to talk about that I was deeply passionate about and they had respected it and accepted me for it.

I had actually began loosening up around them unconsciously and shared some of the inside jokes that I overheard from other people. Being virtually invisible actually did have its perks if you could remember the information correctly. There were still times when I felt like I was walled off from them, but I was still a hell of a lot happier. I got to know everyone and in exchange I would let them get to know me and one of the best ways was through my drawings and a few pranks. The guy who had taken me away from the peers that I hated was notorious for his balloon bombing from the rooftops of random

buildings, but he often complained that it just didn't have the flare that he wanted to see. I added in my own artistic qualities and it turned out that he really like the multicolored flour splatter pattern even though I missed the innocent civilian target. We had escaped the authorities and I knew we could escape from them at any time in the future, but I wanted to play it safe and not do a prank more than once. He called me a One Shot Wonder: a person who makes a big bang and decides he doesn't want to do it again. I never figured out if that was a insult or not since it had a negative and a positive ring to it.

Ever since then, when my drawings scattered across that cafeteria floor, Umeko-san and I had talked a lot. I was needless to say quite nervous around her because I had felt closer to her than anyone because she was my first. We especially became close on her sixteenth birthday. She had been asking me to draw her something for a few months, but I didn't know what she wanted me to draw. And to put it bluntly, 'anything' was not helping at all, even though that meant that I had complete creative freedom. I decided to draw her as a white plum blossom fairy dancing in the falling plum blossoms. I tried to put in as much detail as I could without making the picture overactive and used watercolors. I put in 'Happy Birthday' with the date and my signature in the lower right corner to complete it. She loved it and it made me happy that my gift made her happy.

I drew pictures for people all the time and that drew more people around me to be my friends, but I was always closer to the original group. The art club wanted me to submit more work, but I just didn't want to because I never wanted to join the club in the first place, but did because it was required to by the school. They wouldn't kick me out either, which was good for me. My parents eventually found out about my friends and wanted to meet them so they decided to host a small party type thing. In other words, one big exaggerated occasion just for a small get together dinner. I decided to invite only a few of my very best friends, including the first person to change my life, Michi and Umeko-san, and since it was on a very short notice, hoped they would understand my tension with my parents without me

having to let them know. It worked at least, even if it felt like a group interrogation room. I made absolute sure to apologize to them as soon as possible. Other than that, it went pretty well.

No one had slipped up on the pranks that we all pulled or my drawings which I was severely worried about more than anything. My parents didn't really like my friends, but were content with my choice because of their proper attitude and etiquette even though I could tell that it was fake. Everyone had a ride back home except Umeko-san so I decided to walk her home, it being the most polite and suitable thing to do. I got my first kiss that night right in front of her doorstep. She laughed at my deeply reddened cheeks, wide eyes and stiff body, and joked that I was cute because I was innocent. She told me that she wanted to go to the movies the next day as a date and that's basically how our relationship got going. I couldn't help smiling and touching my mouth, just remembering what that felt like as I walked home. That was possibly the happiest day in my entire life and I definitely never wanted that to end.

Of course I was still extremely nervous around her because, well, she's a girl, and because it was my first serious relationship of that sort. I had to take it one small step at a time and I eventually, after a full year, became okay with my position with her. I was more conservative because that was what I was taught, and I, myself, didn't like to see PDA moments from other people, but she didn't mind too much for the lack of physical affection. I would go as far as hug her briefly in public, and then kiss her in a more private environment. We never went farther than that. Ever. And I felt that we were both just fine with it.

With our relationship and being with my friends, I was probably the happiest person in the entire known universe. I wish I could just sit with all of them again and just have everything go back to normal. To show off my drawings and talk to them and just to joke around. Actually, I wouldn't have minded if it was back in the early days when I didn't say anything, I just needed that kind of normality again and

wanted to go back in time and stay there, just to be with them. Of course, I guess that kind of normality was just a lie...

I felt a pang in my chest as my dream twisted around into something else. I was standing in front of Umeko-san. She looked frustrated and sad, her mouth was in a weird shape that crinkled her chin, her hands were covering her eyes, and she was looking down, allowing her thick curly dark brown hair to cover some of her hands. She was speaking through her hysteria, but I couldn't hear her.

"What?" I asked. "I couldn't hear you. What's wrong?" I could hear myself, but I couldn't move to hug her or even to touch her shoulder.

Her hair fell out by thick tendrils to reveal short black hair. When she looked up and uncovered her face, I realized it wasn't Umeko, but it was that raven haired woman. Sohma Akito. She was crying so hard that her body was shaking uncontrollably. She started saying something, but I still couldn't hear anything.

"Akito? Why are you crying? What's wrong? Who hurt you?" I asked.

She instantly changed, as if she wasn't crying before and said, "You," but it wasn't her voice. It was Umeko's.

Then I fell into darkness and slowed down into just floating as my consciousness started to arise.

I heard hushed voices in that darkness, but I was too busy trying to ignore them to really care. There were at least four voices: two were trying their hardest not to laugh, another one was crooning, and the other one was quietly telling everyone else, "Just leave him alone." I didn't really understand that there were words being formed in those whispers so I didn't put in a connection. All I knew was that I liked where I was and what I was dreaming about, which I had forgotten, and that I liked the smell that was drifting into my senses. Then I heard a shuttering sound and light gasps and curses from the voices.

Okay, what's going on? I thought. I yawned as I struggled to open my eyes. I saw six people in front of me, but I didn't connect who they were or where I was. I was about to go back to sleep when the one in the middle spoke.

"Hey Hitsoku? How was your nap?" He stood out the most because he wore a very light blue T-shirt with neon orange stripes going across his chest. He was smiling in a way that I immediately found quite annoying. I looked around and saw the mother and her son standing next to the end of the couch where I was sitting, the serious man in his usual suit and tie sitting on the closer end of the adjacent couch taking a sip of what I assume was coffee, the German kid standing next to my guilty friend, the punk kid was standing on the other end of my couch, resting his arms on its arm, the relaxed guy was sitting on the other end with his arm around the ravenette's shoulders, keeping her head on his shoulder. All, except the sand-haired kid and the very serious looking man whose name keeps escaping me, were smiling at me. Even the dark-haired woman was smiling a little behind her hand. At that point, there was only one question that popped into my mind.

"What the hell's going on?" I asked in a low monotonous grumble. I was having such a good nap, which was quite rare, so it being interrupted didn't put me in a good mood. I covered up my yawn and that was when I realized I still had the baby in my arms which explained the smell. She was laying on her stomach on my chest with a pink pacifier in her mouth and a teething ring, still just barely in her fingers. The pieces were slowly forming in my head, but there was still one missing.

My friend in the bright shirt was stumbling over his words and I knew he wasn't going to fess up. Unfortunately for him, someone else did that for him.

"He took a picture of you and Hinata napping together," a man said. He was the one who asks a lot of questions and was with the young dark-haired woman. He had a wide smile on his face and was speaking in a matter-of-fact tone. I didn't like him being in my house

and sitting on the same couch as me (I would never tell him that or let him know), but I definitely didn't like what Michi did even more.

I immediately set a hard glare at my friend, instantly ignoring everyone else. If it weren't for Hinata still being on my chest I would have grabbed his phone out of his hand that he was hiding behind his back, delete the picture, and be up in my room before anyone could blink.

He squirmed under my gaze and laughed nervously. "Oh my gosh, I almost forgot. Usagi-chan needs me for... um... shopping... for baby stuff, you know? Haha... Bye!"

"Get back here you neon freak!" I whispered harshly, but it was too late. Hinata made a noise that almost seemed like she was grumbling for me to be quiet and sighed going back to whatever dream she was having. As soon as I heard the door click, I knew he was long gone. Now I had to deal with the staring from my house guests. "Can someone take her?" I mumbled out. As soon as the mother lifted the baby off of me, not even by half a foot, I jetted on out of there straight to my room. I heard a lot of giggles on my way out and I became even more embarrassed. This must *never* happen again, I thought. And I want that damned picture! If that picture was shown anywhere, I was sure that I would never hear the end of it.

I looked over at my clock to see the time and it was actually surprisingly late. Seven forty-seven. That wasn't a nap, that was sleep! I immediately gave up in going back to sleep and decided to work on my drawings. I decided that if I didn't want to be caught sleeping again, I was going to draw to occupy the time Hinata naps, which was more often than not on my chest. It would be a little uncomfortable drawing in front of a few people, but it was better than having another snapshot taken. I was just hoping that everyone would forget it by tomorrow.

Hitsoku ended up falling asleep with Hinata on his chest before Michi or Shigure arrived. Michi claimed that his mild seizure must have wiped him out, which I didn't doubt. He had fallen asleep two-for-two

when he had a seizure. When Michi took out his phone, Shigure asked, "What are you doing?"

" I'm taking a picture. There's no way I'm letting this pass up." Michi had a mischievous grin on his face. Poor Hitsoku.

" Just leave him alone," I said quietly. In a way, I was trying to repay Hitsoku's kindness, but it wasn't as if I was going to stop him either. No one was. It was cute. Besides, Michi had already promised Satsuki a copy of the picture by the time I finished my sentence.

The shutter on his phone interrupted the comforted silence, causing a whispered curse to escape Michi's mouth. So much for getting away with the picture.

Hitsoku woke up. If Michi had stayed quiet, and let Hitsoku fall back to sleep, he would have gotten away with it without him knowing at all. I bet Michi was kicking himself inside when he realized that Hitsoku had no clue what was going on, except that he looked guilty. He, Satsuki, and Momiji, more specifically, looked guilty, but Hitsoku was focused more on his friend. When Hitsoku realized that Hinata was still on him, he looked more irked.

Shigure had spilled Michi's beans, probably to just get things along. He was being manipulative again, the aspect of him I didn't like. It was that side of him that I was afraid of, that made me think, "What is he thinking of now? What are his motives this time?" It was this reason why we were having problems with each other. Him holding on to my shoulder and my head resting on his was just an act until we could figure out how to make our relationship work. However, I wasn't sure if I wanted it to.

After Michi made a false excuse and escaped, Hitsoku also escaped to his room. Satsuki, Shigure and Momiji let out small giggles toward Hitsoku's usual awkwardness, but it wasn't in a mean-spirited way. It was just a funny awkward moment.

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"How many times will Davey put a disc into his CD player before realizing it's a DVD?" - Davey Havok from AFI

Chapter 12

"There are many ways of breaking a heart. Stories were full of hearts being broken by love, but what really broke a heart was taking away its dream-whatever that dream might be." -Pearl S. Buck

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"Finally. Done," I said as I wiped my brow with the back of my arm. It was unusually warm and as much as I didn't mind the small drops of paint on my face, the sweat wasn't letting it dry at all like usual. It felt more like little specks of acrid mud than paint. I carefully stepped down from the ladder and signed my work before cleaning up the area and myself up.

I quickly found Masuyo-san and walked down the steps. He was talking to Satsuki and Akito with that old, wise, happy smile on his lips, gently shaking Hinata's hand with his finger. I was so glad that it was the last day. The two weeks felt like months and I could just sense that he was keeping a much closer eye on me than normal. Plus, today, when he came to chat with me, he had this smile on his face that I felt uneasy to. He had this look that sang "I-know-something-you-don't-know." My right eye was twitching just thinking about it, and frankly, I didn't want to know what he knew. I was planning on just telling them that I was finished and that we would quickly get up and go home, but plans don't exactly go accordingly.

Hitsoku said that it was the last day to paint on the wall; he worked fast for one person. I was more relieved than anything else.

When Masuyo came by, he seemed ecstatic, probably because his mural was going to be finished today. It was that, and another reason. After he greeted us like usual, he asked us to ask Michi if he could have a copy of the picture. "I have never seen him so relaxed, and with Hinata in his arms, it's just too endearing."

" I know, right?" Satsuki agreed.

" But how do you know about the picture?" I asked. I was surprised that he knew so quickly. "Michi took it only yesterday?"

" Michi has a blog to advertise Hitsoku's works, and among other things." He had an old cunning grin on his face that made me wonder what the 'other things' were. "Just don't tell Hitsoku about it."

" Why? Doesn't he know?" I questioned.

" We can't help but worry about his avoidant behavior, so we're just trying to push things along. He has a lot of talent for one so young, so we're just trying to get him noticed." He didn't see the harm in doing this at all.

So no, Hitsoku didn't know.

Just then Hitsoku started to clean up. He was finished.

"Yay, we get to see it!" Satsuki said gleefully. "I'm sure it'll be fantastic." She looked excited to the point where she was getting impatient. I slung the baby bag on my shoulder followed everyone with the exception of Akito who was more or less walking next to me behind the older two.

By the time we climbed up all of the concrete steps, there was already a small group of people looking the mural. There were a few actually admiring it, saying that it was cool, but the rest either had gaunt visages or just didn't know what to think about it. There was even a little girl of four or five crying when she saw the ghastly face of the main guardian-type monster, the centerpiece of the painting. It was a humanoid monster figure with that was hunched over and had overdeveloped arm and leg muscles, yellow-orange skin with brown blotches in choice areas. It had unruly greasy-like thin red hair, with bangs nearly covering it's pure white eyes. It's lower jaw jutted out, showing off it's huge lower canines that curved up next to it's overgrown hook nose. It carried a spear made of bones of it's victims

and raised it high, about to stab a human that was crucified upside down.

In the background, there were other humans. One chained to the wall with rats all around him, most were in tiny cages where they had stayed there, an iron maiden was tipped over in the corner. All of them were in pain. Most of the pain were caused physically, but there were some that were obviously mental. The red border mist seemed to grab the victims where it touched them, as if it was holding them down. It was just a semi-realistic painting, would have looked even more real if there wasn't black outlines, like cartoons had.

I was wondering what kind of faces the women, who have only known me for a little over two weeks, would have.

The curator shook my hand with a strong grip, with a grin stretched across his face, causing his crow's feet to be more prominent. "This is your best work yet. See? You should trust yourself more!"

My best? How can he say that so easily? I thought. All I could think to do was just smile and nod, otherwise I would have been rude to say what I really wanted to say. He could think what he wanted anyway, but I knew it wasn't a matter of trusting myself at all.

I looked at the women to see their expressions. Akito's face was her usual calm mien with a small air of curiosity about it. She stood with her feet together, but one was standing on the balls of her foot, bending her knee. One of her arm was wrapped around her thin waist, with her hand resting on the end of her hip. The other arm seemed to rest upon it's sibling at the elbow, and the hand at her chin, as if she was lightly pondering. Her mouth was in its usual relaxed frown, not necessarily unhappy, just calm, contemplating maybe. Her eyes slowly scanned over the mural with an eyebrow raised ever so slightly. It was as if she was thinking, "What the hell is this?"

Satsuki-san, on the other foot, had an alarmed face. Her dark brown eyes were widened and she seemed to hold her child a little tighter. It actually reminded me of how my cousin looks at the mere mention of 'Haunted House.' I was thinking of holding her elbow and calmly leading her away before the monsters came to life in her mind. She seemed to be the kind of person to get nightmares easily, fortunately Masuyo-san distracted us.

"So? Can you guess what the museum is exhibiting?" He asked with a smug smile. Satsuki and Akito looked at him, curious to find out what the museum could possibly hold within its walls, but weren't too sure if they wanted to know. After all, he was the man who commissioned the work, I only did my best to paint it as real as he wanted it to be.

"The different versions of Hell?" I ventured a guess, jokingly.

"Close." Probably not. "The devices of torture from around the world." He had a gleeful smile on his old leather face.

I paled upon hearing that. Did he escape from a mental institution some years ago and I didn't hear about it? I couldn't help but think. This was his most disturbing gallery that I knew of yet, and I'm almost afraid of what the next one will be like. "Ah, so that's what it was. Yeah, I can see it now," I faked, smiling. "Well, we're going to head home now, I'll see you at the grand opening-what is it, next month?"

He smiled as well, his eyes squinting. "Yes, on the twenty-eighth. I might come over to buy a painting soon, but if not, see you all there then," he said as he waved us off. We bowed in respect and I walked with the ladies back down the concrete steps.

"That Masuyo-san sure has some creative ideas, doesn't he?" The mother asked with a wide smile. I couldn't tell if she was just naturally optimistic or if she was trying very hard to look at things from a positive perspective.

"'Creative'? That old man's a nutcase," the other woman said, right as the bus came. She, however, was probably naturally pessimistic. It's pretty hard to purposely be negative unless you have quite the imagination. Like me. "How did you even meet him?" Her eyes were slightly narrowed, probably a kind of reflex, but I could tell she was more curious than wondering if I was a 'nutcase' too.

She took the window seat, with me sitting next to her, and the mother sitting in the seats that were offered to the elderly, not to say that she was old or anything. It was so we were all within our circle, and could see each other while we talked, which I was still getting used to. Having company anywhere with me, and keeping them entertained, was definitely not my forte.

"I was wondering the same thing too," the mother pondered aloud, bouncing a fussy Hinata, trying to soothe her with her soft voice. Her lower lip was curled up over her upper lip, with her chin scrunched up, and her big brown eyes were watering. Her cheeks were coloring, and her nose was globbing up with snot, her pre-crying stage. She didn't seem to want her bottle or any of her toys, but we were on the bus, so checking and changing her diaper was out of the question-what with public breast-feeding being a crime and all. So poor Hinata had to wait a bit until we reached our stop to duck into a restaurant to use their bathroom or something. I didn't like it when she cried, actually, I can't stand babies, or toddlers, crying period. It wasn't the shrill note that they could reach that seemed to stab my eardrums, but the fact that they were upset with something and it seemed as if no one was trying to figure it out.

I also hated seeing their parents scolding them for crying in public too. I couldn't understand why they would do something like that to their children. They are upset, but they couldn't communicate it accurately, or their mothers or fathers couldn't understand when they try, so they cry. Scolding for trying to communicate? I know publicity and being out in society could be 'embarrassing,' but children don't know better, and the only reason why I probably behaved was

because I was always off in my own head, or never asked my parents for anything, so I was quiet when we were out and about.

The younger woman lightly elbowed my arm to get my attention. I was spacing out again. Hinata was in the midst of calming down-just a little. I looked at the woman next to me with a confused expression. "What?"

She gave out an irritated sigh and droned, as if she were saying it for the hundredth time, "We were wondering how you met Masuyo-san."

"Er, sorry. I can't quite say." It wasn't that I didn't remember, it's just that I wasn't sure if I should tell a couple of strangers about Masuyo's personal business. And I didn't feel like telling them about when I was in the hospital. Those were dark times for me. "We just happened to be in the same place, same time while I was painting, and he was interested and wanted to see more."

I could tell the mother was content with the answer, but her opposite seemed to want more, just from the light glare she was giving me. She knew I was hiding something, but she kept quiet about it. "So, now that the mural's all and done with, what are you going to do now?" She gruffly asked, leaning back into her seat with her arms crossed over her chest.

"I'm going to call a few tattoo parlors to see if they have some part-time slots open. One of them always has a spot so I'm not worried about not working." I was looking between them and my hands that were on my lap. I was still not quite used to keeping eye contact, especially to the ravenette next to me. It was like she was trying to drill a hole in my skull with her eyes some of the time.

"Do you have any tattoos, Hitsoku-kun?" The mother asked. When the driver hit a bump, Hinata was squealing in all of her furry, and swinging her small fists to try and prove her point. While the woman next to me was rubbing her forehead, the other was doing her best to distract her child by offering her pacifier and her half frozen teething ring, but wasn't succeeding. Everyone else on the bus was

getting uncomfortable, and she was getting flustered, apologizing to people around her.

We reached our stop only a few minutes later, and got off a little more quickly than usual. As soon as we got off, Satsuki reached into the bag and got out a smaller one, no doubt with baby bathroom necessities in it, and ducked into a random restaurant who let her go in. Being a mother had to be tough, with or without 'social status' bearing down on there shoulders. Kyoko-sama had to have troubles of her own when she was raising Tohru, even with her gang reputation behind her. It reminded me of when she accidentally bumped Tohru's face, and then she fainted because Tohru's nose was bleeding. It was a funny moment, and Akito must have noticed.

"What are you laughing about?" She asked, with an almost uncaring expression. Almost.

"Nothing. I just remembered something funny, that's all."

She and I talked more, usually when we were alone when I was watching Hinata. It was just tid bits of trivial subjects, like what I was drawing, or about a couple people we knew when we asked. I never asked any deep questions, and neither did she most times. She seemed to realize my reluctance to give straight answers, especially to the man she was seeing whenever he was in my home. I had given up hoping he wouldn't ask certain questions, be he always seemed to hit the nails dead on, and when I wouldn't quite answer his questions the way he wanted it, he would ask the question again, rephrasing it. The doctor, which I had found out because he examined Akito's cheek, which wasn't broken, but it was a dark purple color (the swelling had luckily gone down by the next day), would make him stop being nosy. He would stop, but he still gave me odd, penetrating, looks.

"About what?"

"Just something that happened when I was little. My cousin had a nosebleed, and her mother panicked and fainted." Usually, I dropped

the more specific questions, but I decided that giving out vague details was fine, as long as they were about anything other than me.

"Tohru?" Her dark eyes narrowed even more. She seemed to have noticed my lack of using people's names. I tried to make that inconspicuous, but there are some things that slip or that I just can't hide it well. I personally just don't want people to know because it's my personal handicap, and I don't want to be judged. People treat me normally, even with the seizures, which don't happen all that often, but forgetting people's names are a noose tightening around my neck to me. If only everyone in the world had to wear name tags when they had to go out, or just had their names sown onto their clothes and bags, but it won't happen.

"Yeah."

I had noticed a while ago that he didn't use people's names often, especially if he had to talk about a person. I asked Michi about it one day in private, and he told me that Hitsoku had no problem recognizing a familiar face, but he has trouble connecting it with a name. It explained a lot of things that happened in the beginning, like not asking for our names in the first place. Hitsoku seemed disappointed that he couldn't remember Tohru's name. He didn't want anyone to know, so I decided to keep myself quiet about knowing, but help a little if I could.

When Satsuki came back, the conversation went back to what we were talking about on the bus, after she apologized. "So, Hitsoku, do you have any tattoos?" She was smiling as usual, and Hinata was appeased, chewing on her teething ring, grunting, and patting her mother's cheek.

"Yes." I thought that was enough of an answer, but I was apparently wrong, again.

"Where? What is it? Can we see?"

So glad this is the last day, I thought. Satsuki's questions were coming out like ecstatic shotgun blasts. "Uh, a small one, on my back. I'd rather not show it."

"Hmm... Maybe I should get a tattoo? A cute little one..."

Oh, shit . I looked at her with widened eyes, and paled at the thought of her wanting a tattoo. "Maybe it's best if you don't. They really hurt, and it's permanent, so if someone messes it up, or you end up regretting it, there's not a lot of ways to erase it. Laser surgery is quite expensive and it can cause scarring. I heard about a lotion, but that probably takes a long time, too long for most people." Please, just change your mind so your kid doesn't think I put you up to this.

"What's the point of getting a tattoo if it's not visible?" Akito asked, changing the subject. Her questions were more like nail bombs. The explosion's small, but the shrapnel digs deep. It was her questions that seemed more to the point so I didn't want to answer.

"It was just for someone else to see." I could feel my cheeks heat up a bit.

"Who? Michi?" Akito asked with a raised brow.

I looked at her with a blank face before replying. "Hell. No. Can we just head home?"

"Fine," Akito monotonously said.

When we arrived home, I was so glad to open the door. After I called a few people, and when Satsuki was done preparing lunch and dinner for her family, I was going to take a nap. A long one. Maybe, if Michi didn't come. I wouldn't get my hopes up.

Nope, neither of those were going to happen, because Michi did come, and after bantering curses at him, he dragged me down to dinner, giving me a review of names so I wouldn't look dumb, not to my dismay or delight. I thanked Satsuki for the dinner, and just like

the dinner party, her food was beyond delicious. Without that man and she-wolf being around, it made me feel a whole lot better...

That is, until Satsuki brought up the tattoo subject. "Hiro-kun, what do you think about Mama getting a tattoo?"

I immediately felt several pairs of eyes staring at me, and two reddish-brown needles being aimed at me. The only one who didn't look at me was Akito, who knew what the other woman was talking about. I decided to try and ignore them and continue eating, playing dumb.

"I was thinking a cute little lamb with little sun above it," she continued, not noticing the death glare intensifying at me.

Glare at me all you want, I did not put her up to it. She decided it on her own!

"Maybe Hitsoku could do it for me?"

She had to ask me that question, didn't she? "Uh, there's a waiting list. It's gonna take a while until there's another spot." It was an excuse, but it was true. The earliest opening was sometime early next month.

"Oh," she looked a little disappointed. "Are you popular?"

"No. People whom I had given tattoos to already just like my work so they come back. That's all. I don't get new people that often."

"Okay then, sign me up," she said, smiling.

"What!" The kid, Hiro, said, standing up abruptly, looking at her with wide eyes. He had voiced my thoughts exactly. "But Mom, I heard that they hurt and they're permanent!"

Don't bother kid, I already gave her that explanation, I thought.

"Don't worry, Hiro-kun. I want this, and you're Mama's quite sturdy."

Are you really? It was obvious she didn't get the point.

...

"The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: A human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive. To them... a touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune is a tragedy, a joy is ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a god, and a failure is death. Add to this cruelly delicate organism the overpowering necessity to create, create, create-so that without the creating of music or poetry or books or buildings or something of meaning, their very breath is cut off... They must create, must pour out creation. By some strange, unknown, inward urgency they are not really alive unless they are creating." - Pearl S. Buck

Chapter 13

Hilo! Just in case anyone was wondering, or worried, I'm using the same quotes I used before I changed the story. So if you didn't copy them down, you still have a chance before the cyber apocolypse happens and my story is deleted forever.

"If A is success, then x plus y plus z equals A. X is for work, y is for play, and z is keeping your mouth shut." - Albert Einstein

...

Tuesday was going to be my first day at the tattoo parlor, so that left me three days to organize everything, including myself. Tsukimoto's employees were always rowdy and love to joke around, especially when it concerned the big V or just women in general, but they were exceptional artists, probably the best I've seen with ink in skin. It was fun there, last I remembered, but I was their usual main target with their jokes, and three guesses why? I made a list of supplies I needed. There was a lot on the list, so I decided to just buy the essentials since they were what I needed at the moment.

I had bought my own tattoo set a few years ago because it was at a time that I didn't want to leave my house-right after the prolonged stay at the hospital-so I decided against using the shop's tools. Besides, I hardly ever used it as it was, so I didn't want it just rusting in the corner of my studio. When I took in business in my home, it was because Tsukimoto passed on first-timers to my house, or what he liked to call 'tongue-biters,' saying that I was really gentle and my handiwork with ink was smoother than his stay-in employees.

The only reason he would pass on the customers to my house was because I had been to his shop so many times to price my drawings for future tattoos that I might want, back when I was a secretly rebelling sixteen year old, and then I ended up being hired by him a few months before my eighteenth birthday, and worked until half a

year after that birthday-when I fell down the basement stairs and cracked my head open. In other words, he saw what I could do, and that I did a good job, not to mention I treat the customers with more care than his other underling minions.

I rechecked my emails to make sure that I didn't accidentally skip anyone and rewrote my waiting list schedule in a pocket agenda, checking my sketchbooks to make sure that I had all of the sketches done, just to make sure that I didn't need to draw anymore. I also had to roughly estimate the price of each tattoo again, to see if I agreed with myself or not, and document it in my agenda so I wouldn't get cheated out of my pay. I had to calculate some other stuff including who to call to sell my paintings and other drawings, and just, again, keep myself organized for the next few months or so.

Of course nothing was ever easy for me, because Mr. 20 Questions came over again while I was documenting, rechecking everything in the living room, and watching over the baby who was playing under her toy arch on the floor that made musical noises and rattled. Yippee for the headache I would no doubt have later. I was very grateful that the dark-haired woman was in between us, and that I was determined to stay focused on my work, even if I tended to overcomplicate it. It didn't stop him from asking questions, unfortunately.

"Is being a tattoo artist really all that complicated?"

I wish he was more like the mother's son, who didn't hide his intentions or feelings, instead of just poking around. "No, but it helps," I said, making my tone light, as if it didn't bother me at all.

"You know, Tohru has been worried about you, but she was too nervous to call."

"Oh?" I asked, pretending that I didn't know. The German blond usually told me that, but I never called because I didn't want the chance of *him* answering the phone. I wondered what he was really inquiring as I checked off another sketch.

"Maybe you should come over and visit." I could practically hear the puppet strings creak from its tautness in his voice.

"Yeah, maybe." What do you want? I stopped to reread the time and date in my agenda.

"How about tomorrow then?" I could just tell he was scheming something, but what could he do with my cousin there, right? He wouldn't physically harm me, would he? He didn't seem to be the type.

"Yeah, sure." I didn't care anymore; I just wanted him to either stop asking me questions, or get out of my house. Neither of those was going to happen though.

He took a sip of his tea that Satsuki prepared for us before she went to the grocery store, leaving the four of us alone in the house, while keeping his other arm around his woman's shoulders, a more than obvious sign that he was telling me that she was his. Like I cared, but she was holding on to her ankles again while trying to ignore us with her book. I paused, still looking down in my pocketbook, and realized that she had never offered to just go somewhere to be alone, and whenever he offered, she would say that she was tired or use some other excuse, like she wasn't feeling well.

What is going on between these two? Not my business, I thought, putting down the book in my lap and rubbed my eyes, pretending that they were hurting. I looked down at the baby to make sure she was still there, since she was already learning how to roll over, in which case she tended to keep rolling, and to just make sure she was overall okay. I also looked to make sure she didn't have any new scratches, since her nails were growing faster than ivy, so the mother had to continually clip them. She was still there, and she looked alright, but she looked like she was about to fall asleep like a bear rug, splayed out on her back with her arms raised above her head. A perfect chance for me to escape, if only for a few minutes.

I put the book on top of my sketchbook with a light tap and went over to the baby to pick her up, making sure to get her pacifier on the way. She was getting rather clingy to her soft pink pacifier. As I was heading up to the ladies' room the man snickered. I lightly simmered inside upon hearing that, and I think he wanted me to hear it, but I had decided to pretend to not have heard-what good would it do to argue anyway? Of course, hearing a strong whap, and his ravenette saying 'Shut up Shigure' made me snicker to myself on the stairs.

I carefully put the baby in her crib with her pacifier in her mouth. She wasn't quite asleep, but I figured it was close enough. She was at the stage where her eyes weren't completely closed and the irises were rolled up, so it was kind of creepy to look at. On the dresser were the baby monitors, so I clipped one onto the crib and brought the other one with me to the living room, making sure that both were on and that the door wasn't clicked closed. The room that the mother and her dark one inhabited was still bare with only essential items in visibly out in the open, not planning to make themselves too comfortable, which was good.

When I got back the two that I left on the couch were whispering to each other. Well, one was lecturing the other, and that role seemed to switch between them; however the man was more smooth and even-toned about it, while the other was more scolding. When I sat back on the couch and put the baby monitor on the table, feigning that I hadn't heard or noticed anything 'suspicious,' the whispering stopped. I continued with my calculations for work as one went back to reading, and the other continued to make little comments to me.

I was actually thankful to hear the baby's sputtered whines only five minutes later. I was about to cave into my irritation for the man on the opposite side of the couch, so I hurried to her ignoring him. I did a quick mental check list of what could possibly have made her upset and considered only two things: her diaper needed changing, which would be awkward for me, but still doable, or she just wanted to be held, which was what I was hoping for. The latter wouldn't be

embarrassing and it would give me an excuse to keep away from him longer.

When I got into the room I picked Hinata up, her name was carved into the wooden crib, and checked to make sure that her diaper wasn't full. It wasn't, thank gosh, but she was still whining. I offered her pacifier, which she kept moving her head away, refusing it. Until I could think of another way to ease her whimpering, I gently bounced her and patted her back, which in itself was working a little. Well, she was still making noises, but was quieter about it.

"What is wrong with you?" Someone scolded, making me jump. I looked around and realized it was the baby monitor clipped onto the crib.

"Me? What have I done?" I recognized the voice as the man sitting on my couch. Apparently they decided to go back to bickering in private.

I really shouldn't listen to this, I thought, but do I have a choice? Should I say something? After a pause from thoughts, I decided to just let them talk it out. If I said something now, then that might dent their pride. Besides, if I don't say anything, they'll probably never know that I heard their conversation, they might actually be able to work it out themselves, and it might answer some of my questions that I've wanted to ask the ravenette.

"Why are you prying into Hitsoku-san's life? He hasn't done anything."

Oh, so she has noticed he had ulterior motives.

"Come on... You honestly haven't noticed? Do you see the way he looks at you Akito? It's pretty obvious that he's getting attached to you."

I could feel my cheeks darken a bit. I thought about it, and realized that he was a little right. I was fond of her, she was indeed beautiful,

and quite intelligent, but I have my own problems to sort through, so I have no time or want of 'attachments.' Besides, the only one I seem to be really attached to was Hinata, who was still making high pitched spluttered noises. "Come on Hinata, what's wrong?" I mumbled, hoping the other end didn't hear me. I wondered if they knew that baby monitors were like easy walkie-talkies.

"Even if he's making eyes, he wouldn't do anything. If he wanted to he would have done something by now."

This is getting a little embarrassing now, I thought. She really doesn't know me at all-well, it's only been a little over two weeks so obviously she wouldn't know me well anyway. It was kind of obvious that she didn't know how men in general think; he's going to be jealous.

"So you like that kind of attention?"

Akito hesitated before firing off, "What are you saying? That I have feelings for him? He's just a lowly artist who doesn't care about anything other than his art and when we leave."

Ouch, that stung a bit. I wasn't sure if I should be angry about that or not.

"Just get out. I don't want to talk to you anymore today." She sounded more sadden-frustrated than angry that time.

He made an indifferent sound, and said, "Fine. Say good-bye to the poor sap for me."

"Say good-bye to Ren for me then," she bit out haughtily.

There was a long pause before Shigure monotonously said, "I'll see you tomorrow." The door clicked shut a minute later.

Well, at that point, I had more questions than answers, so I thought that that was a waste of snooping. Akito began to darkly mutter to

her self. I could hear 'stupid,' 'Shigure,' and my name being snapped out. She was pissed, more pissed than usual. Then, after a while, there were sniffles and I immediately regretted to having listened to the argument. I wanted to forget it.

Hinata began to hiccup and an all too sickening smell wafted up into my nose. "Oh no," I whined, hoping it wasn't what I was dreading. When I pulled Hinata at arm's length, flour-white drool strung from her face that was covered in the mess, and to my shirt. There was a shock-pause from me before my eventual overreaction took place. I started to yell like a girl who saw a spider, while aimlessly pacing around in circles. All rational thought of what to do slipped out of my mind. I couldn't help it; it was the only perk about babies that I just couldn't stand. I could handle the other end, strangely, but, gosh, babies should not be aloud to upchuck flour-powdery-like drool! I could still remember the taste of my cousin's projectile spit-up, and trust me, it doesn't taste good at all. I felt like vomiting up my own bile.

Akito stormed into the room with a surprised, and worried, look on her face, hearing my girly reaction to the hated baby substance. "What's wrong?" She asked urgently.

I couldn't make a complete sentence at first, and started shivering and twitching uncontrollably. "Hold her," I was finally able to say as I thrust Hinata into her arms. Akito yelled at me, something about the baby being gross and that she didn't know what to do with her, but I ignored her. I didn't even wait to get into my room to take my shirt off. The tingling up my spine was even more violent when I felt some of it transfer from the collar to my face. I had to scrub my face, hair and hands until my skin was pink and my hair being ready to fall out.

I hated spit-up.

I was so glad to hear the door close and hear the mother come home to take care of it all. I promise, I will never eavesdrop again.

Hitsoku suddenly dropped Hinata in my hands, after his panicking episode. She must have spat up on him, and he freaked out. It was almost surprising since he was normally good with her. "Hitsoku, she's gross!" I yelled after him. I had never even so much as held the baby before, so what was I supposed to do?

He didn't wait to get in his room to take off his soiled shirt, and I saw the tattoo before his hair covered it, and before he went in his room. It was below the base of his neck on his back, in the shape of a white flower, with the kanji "love" in the center.

I sat Hinata up on her changing table, being careful so the spit up didn't get on me, and wiped her face. I wasn't sure if her clothes were salvageable though. She spat up again, making me cringe. Was she sick or something? I took another wipe and cleaned her face and her clothes as much as I could. She couldn't sit up on her own so I had to pick her up again, and set her down on her U-shaped bean chair in her crib just like Satsuki had done many times before.

I wasn't sure if Hitsoku would come out, but I wouldn't be too surprised if he didn't. Satsuki would be home any minute anyway, so for now, I would just sit and make sure Hinata didn't hurt herself or something. Hitsoku's tattoo held my thoughts for a few minutes. It was certainly girly to be on a guy, so the tattoo was meant for another woman to see. I remembered back at the dinner party, and how he used to have a girlfriend.

"I'm home." It was Satsuki, but it sounded like she was in the room with me. I looked around. "Hello, is anyone here?" It was coming from the monitor over Hinata's crib.

Hitsoku had heard every word of the argument Shigure and I just had.

...

"I myself am made entirely of flaws stitched together with good intentions." - Augustene Burroughs

Chapter 14

"Most of you have been where I am tonight. The crash site of unrequited love. You ask yourself, 'How did I get here? What was it about? Was it her smile? Was it the way she crossed her legs, the turn of her ankle, the poignant vulnerability of her slender wrists? What are these elusive and ephemeral things that ignite passion in the human heart? That's an age-old question. It's perfect food for thought on a bright midsummer's night.'" - Martin Sage and Sybil Adelman

...

Ugh, what the hell was I thinking yesterday? I thought from the back seat of the doctor's car, sketching in one of my drawing pads. I can't believe that I agreed to go to his house. Too late now, I guess.

"You're drawing again Hii-kun?" The blond German asked excitedly on my left, while his punky-calm friend was on my right, staring at my sketchpad also. It irked me that the blond used a nickname, probably because that was what Tohru called me, but I was dreading the trip even more because of it.

"Is that a fairy?" The punk kid asked, with an almost blank expression like usual. "I know you don't have any luck with women, but still, to draw a fantasy woman? Kinda desperate, don't you think?" He was being slightly sarcastic, but without a sneer on his face. I decided to just not comment even though I did want to argue back.

The 'fairy,' as he put it, was for Tohru (I looked at the photograph and wrote her name on the corner of the paper), as a sort of 'glad to see you are okay' gift. A simple black and white graphite sketch that I wouldn't be deeply attached to. There wouldn't be any fine details in it, more like vague shadowy lines, like when you look at a person through a few feet of mist. Besides, I didn't know what Tohru liked.

It's kind of like the situation at home. Ever since yesterday, Akito, who was currently seated in the front passenger seat, hadn't exactly been herself. It was as if she was there, but only a shadow. She was deep in her thoughts after her argument with that guy, and she seemed to be rather pale today, even though it was warm. I only remember bits of the argument, mainly when she called me a lowly artist who only cared for my paintings, which still hurt, but it wasn't my sole concern at the moment. I just wanted this field trip over with so I could get home faster.

Geez, am I really that uncaring? I thought, sketching half-mindfully. Unfortunately, what she said was still tugging at me. If I really only cared for my profession, then I wouldn't be feeling this, and I would have forgotten Umeko by now, right? Then what she said about me is wrong, and I shouldn't care, but since I do, what the hell does it mean? I normally wouldn't really think this much if someone else said something.

I quickly wrote, "Glad to see you again," vertically on the edge of the paper as we pulled up to the house. The first thing that ran through my mind as I looked at the two story Japanese-styled home was that it definitely wasn't going to be fun in there. It looked peaceful enough, but my instinct from past experiences told me that it was just a cover. Perfect colorful shells for something absolutely deadly, like the cone snail. I took a mental picture with the few seconds I had of it since I could possibly use it as a 'haunted house' theme for a future ink drawing.

I had another nightmare. It was different from the ones I had been getting after the fire. I was at the Sohma estate at night. No lights were on, and only the moon helped me see shapes. I was just wandering around, trying to find someone, hoping I wasn't alone. There were footsteps around corners, as if someone was watching me, and then running away when I got close. I hurried to catch the person, and caught them closing one of the sliding doors. It was Kureno's room. I was afraid to go in there, but maybe I would see him again and apologize. Maybe he would hug me, and comfort me

again, and tell me that I wasn't alone, but I wouldn't ever make him stay with me again. I just needed to apologize to him one more time.

I opened the door slowly and got in, not recognizing the room at all. It wasn't a room anywhere in the Sohma main house. The room was one of Hitsoku's extra guest rooms, except it was decorated for a child. A small bed tucked in the corner, a desk on the other side by a closet, dressers under the window and a bookshelf by the bed. There were a few drawings and watercolor paintings taped to the walls. They showed me that the child, whoever it was, was sad. The closet door opened a little, and when I turned to look, it snapped shut.

"Hello?"

"Why are you here?" It was Hitsoku's voice!

I yanked open the closet to see a little boy sitting against the far wall, holding his knees, wide-eyed and scared of me. They reminded me of Yuki's when I purposefully terrified him. After a few moments, I realized he was still Hitsoku, just smaller, and younger. I could imagine, and dream this because I had seen his picture.

"Who are you?" His voice changed to a small boy's. It was crackly because he was frightened of me.

"My name is Sohma Akito. I'm sorry for scaring you." It was like I was being forced to play along. I didn't have control over what I was saying or doing. "I don't really know where I am, and I'm scared of being alone."

Hitsoku seemed to calm down, but he still looked sad. "Are you here to go to the black room?"

"What's the black room?"

He launched himself and hugged my middle and started to cry hysterically. "Please don't leave me! I don't want to be alone!" They

were the words I had forced on Kureno the day his curse had lifted, only now they were forced on me by Hitsoku.

That was when I woke up. It wasn't the worst dream I had, but it still didn't make me feel too good. I was just thankful that Ren wasn't in it this time, holding a lit match to my face and burning everything. Sleep didn't come to me after that.

Akito wobbled a bit when she got out of the car and held her head before straightening up and sighing. Maybe she had been too stressed out and fell ill with a cold. Before I got to ask if she was okay, because colds shouldn't be underestimated, Tohru came out in her casual clothes and greeted us excitedly.

"I didn't know you were all coming over!" Her face turned that into a worried expression with a modest blush powdered on her cheeks and her fingers to her lips. "I would have gone shopping earlier if I knew. I didn't even prepare some tea." She went on rambling about snacks, or if she was told and she just forgot, or how irresponsible it was.

She really needs to stop worrying about useless things, I thought as I sighed. She was still the same after all the years. "It's fine Tohru-chan. So that guy didn't tell you we were coming?"

She didn't know who I was talking about and so was confused on who 'that guy' was.

I should have seen that one coming. "Er, never mind. You said you needed to go shopping? I'll come with you." I was trying to change the subject.

"Aw. We just got here and you're already taking Tohru away?" The blond whined childishly.

"Yes," I said bluntly. He had annoyed me so much in the car that I didn't want to stick around any longer than I had to. In addition, I really did want to talk to Tohru. Alone. "We'll only be gone for an hour

at most. It won't take long." I took her hand, and proceeded to drag her away, with her uttering her apologies, saying that she would be back soon. When we were far enough away, I was felt like I was finally able to breathe.

There was a moment of an awkward silence before she said, "So Hii-kun, how have you been? We haven't really seen each other for a long time." A nice light layer of a blush spread across her face. "Your hair has really grown since then, are you going to cut it?"

A small smile molded itself on my lips. "Are you saying that I don't look good with long hair?" I teased. It was always easy to tease her, and it felt nostalgic to do so. I couldn't resist.

Her eyes started to swirl, and her blush darkened as she panicked, exclaiming, "Oh no, no, no, no! T-that's not what I meant at all! It's just that I'm so used to you having short hair. It's going to take some getting used to, that's all." Same old Tohru-chan.

"I was just teasing, Tohru-chan. It's alright." I have missed these kinds of moments. "Are you okay? I heard that you had quite a tumble a while ago. Had I heard about it, I would have gone to visit."

She laughed it off, saying, "Oh, yeah, but I'm alright now," and lightly touching the back of her head. The conversation went smoothly after that. We touched bases on several things, letting her know that my seizures weren't too serious most of the time and the whereabouts of Kyoko-sama's grave. I hadn't visited her because my parents refused to tell me where or when the funeral was, and I was forbidden to ask any relatives, so now that I knew, I would be able to visit later. She smiled wider when I gave her the drawing at the grocery store, and complimented with a simple, "It's gorgeous," but I could feel the sincerity in her tone. So far, I was glad I came along, but, when we got back to the house, it was a completely different matter.

In front of the house, the punk-kid was fighting with the orange-haired kid, while the German and the grey-haired kids were

watching. Both were rooting against the orange-head, which was a color similar to Kyoko-sama's. Tohru looked worried, but the spectators eased her and both of us went inside, ignoring the other two. They were getting loud, calling each other idiots. It was strange, but not what I was worried about.

When we got to the front door, I felt shivers of intimidation, mainly because this wasn't my home, and no where near my studio, but also because it was his house. For all I knew, he could have set up traps to release poison gas right in front of me. He seemed devious enough, but when I thought about it, he seemed too unmotivated to actually build that kind of contraption specifically for me. I met my goal of talking to Tohru, so I wanted to go back home, but I had agreed to 'visit,' and the only way home was to have the doctor drive me back.

Tohru didn't allow for me to hesitate, so I had to go in, and besides, I was holding the groceries so I did have to go. After slipping out of our shoes, she showed me to the kitchen to drop off the bags, seeing a sly smirk and hearing a snigger from the guardian of the fortress on the way. It was getting annoying fast. While I helped her empty out the bags, I got out the cold medicine I had bought separately, and had to ask Tohru for a favor.

During our outing, I had thought of Akito's cold, along with what she had said yesterday. It was good that she thought that I wasn't interested, because I did not want to have a relationship with anyone in the first place, but I really was worried. After all, Katsuya-sama had died with a harmless cold, and it had changed my, and my aunt and cousin's life. So many things would have been different if he had lived, so I was worried what would happen if she had somehow gotten worse. Would her family suffer the same way? And despite having ill-feelings towards the guy whom is attached to her, I would feel a bit sorry for him.

When I came out, I greeted everyone and sat down at the table, while Tohru called her to the kitchen to pick out which tea she wanted, and how she liked it. It was just an excuse so she could give

the dark haired one the medicine in private, and hopefully Tohru would keep quiet about me buying it for her. I just didn't want anyone especially that man to know.

I was glad Tohru called me to the kitchen. Shigure had been asking why I didn't look well. If I told him about the dream we would have just gotten into another argument. Hitsoku already heard part of it yesterday, and I didn't want him to hear any more of it. Because Hatori was with them, Hitsoku should be safe from Shigure's prying.

"Anything's fine Tohru," I said before she asked anything.

"Actually, it wasn't because of the tea." She smiled in her cheerful way. "Hii-kun noticed you didn't look too well and wanted you to take this." She grabbed a new box of medicine out of one of the paper bags and handed it to me along with the cup of hot tea. "Is everything alright at Hii-kun's place?"

I was touched at Hitsoku's gesture, even after what he had heard. Did he just forget? I took a couple of pills and sipped the tea. "What kind of man is Hitsoku?" The question just came out. Even if I did want it answered, what kind of answer would I want?

Tohru didn't understand the question either-it was visible on her face-but she answered to the best of her ability. She had her soft and gentle smile, like she was caring for a baby chick in her hands. "Hii-kun just cares for people, even if he seems distant. He just doesn't know how to show it more openly. Hii-kun cares a lot about you, Akito-san, I can see it." The answer seemed to hit a spot inside my body.

I looked around the house discretely, and noticed its old scars. Dowels were broken, doors were repaired with cheap materials, walls were cracked, and even the ceiling looked like it needed a bit of repair somehow. It was almost unnerving to be sitting inside. He may as well put up a picket sign saying, "Please destroy me!" I thought.

The light chat was actually not half bad, until the doctor decided to take his smoking outside. That's when the guy in the yukata started to show his real colors. "Did you enjoy your walk with Tohru-kun?" He asked in an expecting tone. He had a devilish grin and a malignant glimmer in his eyes.

"Yes, I did." I decided to play along, hoping he wouldn't bring up any uncomfortable subjects, but it was rejected.

"Why don't you see Tohru anymore?" I could hear his arrogance oozing out with every word. "For someone whom she claims that you care for her, you're not doing much to show that you deserve such praise."

I had nothing to say. He didn't know me or how we grew up, so he didn't have a right to say something like that, but I wouldn't raise my voice to object. Let him think what he wanted, let everyone think what they wanted.

After a minute of silence between us, he chuckled. "I think I finally figured it out."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Figured what out?" I asked warily.

"Why your girlfriend left." He took a sip of his coffee, purposely letting the sudden pause get to me. Of course he had to go there. "She wasn't satisfied with you because you wouldn't hold on to her."

"Excuse me?" I was insulted, but overall confused.

"She didn't feel that you wanted her around, that she was just there right next to you as a prop. Just there so you could call her yours, but without the benefits. When you started convulsing, she merely found the door out."

As he was saying these things, I looked back into our relationship. What he was saying was completely wrong, and the fact that he was saying these things was pissing me off. "That isn't true," I uttered,

keeping my voice low, and trying to sound threatening. "I loved her very much. I never treated her as a 'prop.'"

"Then why did she leave?" He taunted.

I hesitated. I had been trying to answer that question for years, and I still couldn't come up with an answer. "I don't know."

The girls came out just in time to here the man across from me ask, "Do you think if you could have made your girlfriend happy that she would have stayed?"

That was it, I had enough. I stood up and was going to get out, but after a large crash, I found myself looking up at the ceiling with my upper body on top of the table, and my arm was hurting wall, with something heavier, was on top of me, so I couldn't move to check my arm. What the hell's going on? I whined in my head.

Everyone from outside came inside with shocked visages, and the doctor asked, "Is everyone alright?"

"Yeah, I'm alright," the punk kid said, from on top of the wooden wall. "That was actually kind of cool. Can I do that again?"

"Can you get off?" I asked breathlessly, and in an annoyed tone. I breathed in relief when he got off, and someone got the wall off of me immediately, but then I noticed that my left arm was pulsing. Something about it didn't feel right.

"You alright?" The doctor asked me specifically.

"I don't think so, my arm's hurting." I started to get dizzy, so I tried to reach for my pills, just in case, but my other arm was aching too much. He immediately, gently, took my arm and lightly felt along the sides of my forearm. I hissed in pain when he touched the bump that was slowly swelling.

"Yeah, your arm's broken," the doctor bluntly said.

After hearing those particular words, my cousin started to panic again, and started flipping out, jabbering about calling for an ambulance. Calming her down would take some time, and a lot of convincing.

...

"It's important that someone celebrate our existence... . People are the only mirror we have to see ourselves in. The domain of all meaning. All virtue, all evil, are contained only in people. There is none in the universe at large. Solitary confinement is a punishment in every human culture." - Lois McMaster Bujold

Chapter 15

"We found the following in a list of actual notes from medical reports, as dictated by physicians: 1. While in the ER, she was examined, X-rated and sent home. 2. By the time he was admitted, his rapid heart had stopped, and he was feeling better. 3. Discharge status: Alive but without permission."

...

I hate this place, I whined in my head. The doctor, Ha'ari, as the German kid called him, drove us to the hospital. He insisted that I sit in the front seat, and everyone else in the back. I tried to tell them that they didn't have to come in with me, but they wouldn't stay at Shigure's house, or in the car. The only compromise I got was that the German and the arm-breaker stayed in the waiting area, with the doctor watching them, since they 'couldn't be left alone for too long.' The ravenette and Tohru, who had to squeeze in the back seat, came with me. To make sure I was really going to be alright by myself. In other words, I was being babysat again. Unfortunately. They were apparently friends too, but that wasn't surprising either since Tohru was a friendly person.

I walked to the desk, and the secretary immediately recognized me from the seizure days. "Hitsoku-kun? Is that you? My, you haven't come here for a while. What's up?" She was middle-aged with a dark brown bob cut that framed her slightly pudgy face. She was nice, and when I snuck out of my room to avoid the doctor, and out of pure boredom, I usually came down to talk to her when she wasn't busy.

I carefully raised my arm and said, "My arm's broken, I think." By then, the pain was a dull ache, but it still hurt to move it too much.

Her eyes widened. I had never broken a bone besides my head in my life before this. "How?" She gave me the clipboard with the

paperwork. Seriously, I practically lived here for almost two years, you would think that they wouldn't need paperwork from me.

And to be honest, I had no idea how a kid came flying at the wall, so I had to curve it. "A wall fell on me, and I fell on a table with my arm pinned ."

She paused, not fully convinced of my story. "What?"

"Is the doctor in?" I gave her the clipboard.

"Dr. Ikeda? Yes, but he's with a patient now."

Her wry smile told me all I needed to know. "He's with a female, isn't he?" She confirmed it with a nod. "Can I interrupt him?"

"Yeah, she only came in to what looked to be a cold, so they should be finishing up. Room C204. I think he planned to have her for another half hour." This was his strategy whenever he didn't want to deal with (male) patients. Too bad.

I thanked her and headed toward the C wing, making sure the girls kept up.

Tohru commented on how well I knew where everything was, so I figured that she didn't know how long I had actually stayed. It was a good thing I earned my uncle's inheritance because the hospital bill altogether cost more than to actually build the hospital. My uncle was extremely wealthy before his company failed, but he managed to save a large amount of money before he died of old age. I only met him once when I was in high school, and I didn't even know he was my uncle. We were both bored and we talked about a lot of things I had no interest in remembering. I was only in my first year of high school, and he seemed surprised that I, a young person, would take an interest in him, a very old person.

When we arrived at the room, I didn't bother knocking and just went in quietly. As usual, while he was haggling the prescription price, he

flirted with her to try and gain sympathy to raise the price even higher, or trade a night in her bed for the prescription. He was a great doctor, but I had no respect for him. I walked behind him, not really caring if Tohru and her friend saw since I was too irritated, and kicked his lower back. I turned to his patient, and told her he was just haggling her and some over-the-counter aspirin would be enough for whatever she had. She thanked me and hurried out before Dr. Ikeda got up.

"Who the bloody-?" He glared at me from behind his silver-framed glasses. His crow's feet were more prominent.

"Hey Doc," I said in a half casual, half annoyed tone.

"Oh. It's *you* ." He wasn't happy to see me. Of course. "What do you want?"

"My arm's broken."

"Hah! What did you do? Fall off a ladder? 'Bout time your stupid job crept up on you." He didn't believe that artist should be paid as much as they do. Or at least he didn't believe I should be paid as much as I did for the murals and the auctions. He studied hard to become a doctor, and I didn't even go to college.

"A wall fell on me."

He hesitated, and gave me a flat stare. "That is the dumbest bull-shit I have ever heard Honda."

"It's true." For the most part. You can see how interesting our relationship is. I'm positive that the girls are flabbergasted at our display of professionalism.

A nurse brought in my paper-work that he didn't even bother to glance at. He practically lived through my medical history ever since my head was cracked wide open, and knew it by heart. He sighed and said, "Alright. Let's get that x-ray," and used the phone to get a

nurse to warm up the x-ray. When he looked towards the door to get out, that was when he saw my guests. His pervy grin returned. "Well hello there, and who might you two be?" He went over to Tohru first, since she seemed to be those 'easy' types.

"That's my cousin," I said before he got any ideas.

He immediately shirked away from her. Anyone who was related to me was bound to be as 'arrogant and irritating, if not more so' than me. We have had plenty of time together to discuss his obsession with women and my personality quirks. When he went over to the dark haired one, he took her hand. "My, my, my. You are very beautiful."

Before he could continue his sexual assault I kicked him behind the knees. "Focus Doc. You have a patient in pain and I want out of here ASAP." I would have said that she was taken, but I wasn't sure if that would discourage him from trying anyway. In addition, after her argument, I wasn't sure if she was with him anymore.

He stood back up and loomed over me and gave me a harsh whisper. "Can't you be patient? I've been single for over twenty years!" He didn't want to show how desperate he really was.

"I am patient. I'm your patient. And really? I thought you were single for over fifty." I didn't bother to whisper it back. Hopefully the girls got the hint.

Of course, he was in his fifties, so he took offense. "Ugh, get out."

"I'm your patient with a broken arm. You can't just write me off and send me home."

His eye twitched and he headed out, ignoring the ladies. I followed him in the room while the girls had to wait outside, and the results said that I did have a broken arm. One of the two smaller bones in my lower arm was broken, but stayed in place. It was lucky that it was a clean break and didn't splinter. Dr. Ikeda was hoping that it

would be more than that, or that I was in at least more pain other than the dull ache I was already experiencing. As he said to multiple patients in the past, "A trivial broken arm was not something an experienced doctor should heal." At least he was doing his job.

Dr. Ikeda was the first person who didn't seem to like Hitsoku, and it seemed that Hitsoku didn't have the patience to deal with his doctor. When the doctor hit on Tohru, I knew why, and I became irritated. Amazingly, Hitsoku only needed to tell him that Tohru was his cousin to scare him off as if Tohru had the plague. When it was my turn, I had to force my shivers down, and Hitsoku had to be more forceful on him. It was a surprise to see Hitsoku acting so differently.

The cast was no big deal, except when he purposely squeezed my arm to get a reaction from me. The only problem the doctor had was getting the appropriate pain medication. A lot of different kinds of medicines can trigger my seizures or mess with my seizure prevention meds, so he had to look up a list and make a careful choice. I had to remind him as a sort of motivator that if he didn't choose the right medicine, I would just wind up back at the hospital in his care. He also knew that I could tell the difference from a placebo, so that wasn't a choice either. When he finally decided on which pills, we compromised on a fair price, and headed out.

"I'm glad that's over," I told the girls. After practically ignoring them for over an hour, I figured I had to say something at least. My arm was in a plain white cast, which I would probably paint over out of sheer boredom later, and in a blue sling. He said I had to keep it in there for at least the rest of the day so I wouldn't move it too much. My arm would probably heal in a few short weeks.

"You really don't like hospitals, do you Hii-kun?" Tohru commented, with a smile of course. She was more perspective than I ever gave her credit for.

"Nope. Now let's just get out of-"

"Is that you Moto-kun?" An old, horrendous voice asked. I was too afraid to look and tried to get out of there quickly, but two thin cold arms grabbed hold of my unbroken one. I felt shivers sprinting up and down my spine. "Moto-kun! I knew it was you. You came back to me."

"I am not your husband." I sounded harsh, but this woman scared me more than anyone.

She was an eighty-two year old woman in a wheelchair who thought I was her husband who had died sixty years ago in a war. On one of my excursions of the hospital, I accidentally wandered into the psyche ward and met her. I thought she was a nice old woman at first, just remembering her husband, since she claimed that I looked so much like him, but I always told her that I wasn't her husband. Then, after that day, she started following me around, which I didn't mind too much. It was at least something to do. The time she crossed the line was when she snuck into my bed and tried to 'get it on.' From then on, as long as I was living there, she was under a closer watch, which never seemed good enough because she kept escaping.

I admit it. *She* was the reason I didn't want to stay any more. "Let go of me now."

"But you'll leave again if I let you go." She started to sob in my hand, with both of her arms still around mine.

That's the point.

"Who's this Hii-kun?" My cousin asked, giggling to the side. The other woman merely had a brow raised. She had a 'curious to know, but not sure I want to know' face.

"Where is your nurse?" I was trying to stay calm, but around her, it was impossible not to stress out.

"Oh! I don't like her, you know that! She still thinks that you're dead!"

"Your husband is dead. He died sixty years ago. His ashes are with your daughter. I am not your husband."

She still wouldn't take it. "Take me home Moto-kun. I'm so sick of this place." She let go of me only to hug my middle. "When we get home let's hurry to bed." Her hand slapping my butt was the last thread cut to my stress meter.

I jumped out of her grip with a yelp and hid behind the nearest person, the ravenette. She didn't like it at all, and tried to get out of my grip on her shoulder. "Go back to your room," I told the old woman. Her name was one I didn't want to remember.

My heart was beating too quickly and my breathing became shallow. Everything suddenly went black and I felt gravity yank my body down into unconsciousness. Another seizure. Great.

Hitsoku freaked out and hid behind me from an old woman in a wheelchair. Granted, she groped him, but what would he be afraid of? He kept urging her to go back to her room, and then it happened too suddenly again. His grip on my upper arm tightened so much that I was almost sure it was going to bruise later, and he only let go after he yanked me down on top of him. When I got off of him, it looked like he was shaking off of the ground, and his eyes were rolled back.

Tohru started to panic, and doctors and nurses hurried to him, telling us to get back. One was keeping his head still, and another was trying to turn his body onto his side, like what Michi and Hatori did the first time Hitsoku had a seizure. The old lady was calling out "Moto-kun!" over and over again, until a nurse came and took her back. Tohru was holding onto my arm tightly and was on the verge of crying, while I was just watching her cousin convulsing with a straight face. I was sure that I didn't look scared, but I was. I wasn't the one who mattered right now.

Was Hitsoku scared? Could he die? Why are the doctors not giving him something? They're just waiting it out? When Hitsoku's body

stilled, they put him on a stretcher and let him rest. It seemed like it wasn't new, and that he was just another patient who had a seizure. Dr. Ikeda quickly heard what happened and took over the documenting since he knew Hitsoku's medical history better than anyone. He assured us that Hitsoku was going to be okay, and that he just needed to sleep it off.

Tohru and I went to tell Hatori what happened, after Tohru cleaned her face first. She was still shaken up though. Hatori said it would be better if he took Tohru back to Shigure's place and take Momiji and Hatsuharu back to our temporary home before Hitsoku woke up. Momiji would have fired questions at Hitsoku as soon as he woke up. I stayed behind to assure Tohru, and told her I would call later when I got back.

Meanwhile, waiting besides Hitsoku's bed, I asked Dr. Ikeda who the old woman was. "Eh, I don't know much, as I don't work in the psyche ward. Hitsoku wandered, met her, and then she started escaping the entire wing just to see him." Dr. Ikeda started laughing maniacally to himself before he continued. "The staff had to keep a closer watch on her since a certain accident that I'm not allowed to tell you without both participants permission, happened, but she still escapes somehow just to see if he came in." After the way the old woman behaved around Hitsoku, I wasn't sure if I wanted to know what the 'certain accident' was.

My aching head was what woke me up. I wasn't surprised to see that I was still in the hospital. Groaning was the only thing I felt like doing at that point. All I wanted was out and back in my room. The first person I saw was the doctor, then followed my guest doctor, then the ravenette. I wasn't feeling well enough to notice the missing people, nor did I care. My head and my arm hurt, I was dizzy, and I didn't know if I wanted to go back to sleep or puke first.

"Alright Honda, sit up," the hospital doctor said. He was annoyed but civil since he knew I wasn't feeling up to arguing with him. After I sat up, he checked my heart, breathing, etc. and gave me a few pills: my preventives and the pain meds, along with a paper cup of water. Not

long after, I was cleared to get the hell out of there and go home. By the time I got to the car I was so tired that I didn't notice the extra space and fell asleep in the back.

Only five minutes into the drive home, Hitsoku had fallen asleep. His head was resting on the seatbelt strap, and his entire body was leaning toward the side, looking like he couldn't care less on whatever was happening at the time. Hatori let me know that it was okay to let him sleep after I kept looking back at him. I wasn't so sure I would be able to get to sleep after the scare today. It reminded me of the dream. What was the black room? Why would Hitsoku be in my dreams at all anyway?

I was worried when Hatori couldn't wake Hitsoku up. After he checked Hitsoku's pockets for his new prescription bottle, both of his eyebrows raised. "Hitsoku-san is going to be out for a while. The doctor gave him strong pills. Go get Akemi-san, and open the doors for us." Hatori searched Hitsoku's pockets again for the keys.

Satsuki was startled to see Hatori and her husband carrying Hitsoku and his broken arm as if they were moving a corpse. She freaked out and kept asking what happened, and if he was okay. After getting the body to his room, it took Akemi and Hatori a long time to console her and convince her that Hitsoku was going to be alright.

On the first ring, Tohru answered the phone, as if she had been waiting. I told her that everything was okay, and that Hitsoku was sleeping soundly. Calling Shigure's house reminded me that I needed to talk to Shigure, and asked Tohru to put him on. "Why did you say that to him?" I was angered that Shigure had kept prying, but even more pissed that he would have asked him about his relationship with whoever the woman was.

"What do you mean?" He was feigning innocence, like he always did.

"You know what I mean Shigure." I was trying not to yell, as I was using Hitsoku's land line and I was within everyone's hearing range

in the next room. "You always do this. You manipulate people. You always prod at people's weaknesses. You act like you do nothing wrong. You need to stop. Leave him alone."

" Have you thought about our deal?"

I was confused, and he had changed the subject. "What deal?"

" Your chance of fluttering off or coming back to me."

So that was called a deal now?

" I was only making sure that he knew that he should just continue to keep to himself until you make a decision."

I couldn't say anything. There was a pause for a few minutes.

" Akito? Are you there?"

I had realized something, and I needed to tell him. "I'm not going back to you."

" Did you fall for him or something?" He asked as if it was a joke he couldn't believe.

" No. I don't love Hitsoku. He just made me realize that there are better people out there, and sometimes, they're just hiding. I'm not going to hide myself anymore, at least not until after Ren is properly detained. Good night Shigure." I hung up without hearing what Shigure had to say. He would have just said something to make me feel guilty and end up having me to rethink my decision. This one decision was something that had to be final, and I could not afford to have doubts. I would not be controlled by that man anymore.

...

Hilo! I did it! I replaced all of the chapters in one day! I hope that I portrayed Akito as accurately as possible and that she didn't seem

too OOC, and that she is a respectable character. A bit of a disappointment in the last paragraph though, huh?

"Curran said to Father O'Leary, the wittiest priest of his day, 'I wish you were St. Peter.' 'Why?' Asked O'Leary. 'Because,' said Curran, 'you would have the keys of heaven, and could let me in.' 'It would be better for you,' said O'Leary, 'that I had the keys of the other place, for then I could let you out.'" - W. R. LeFanu

Chapter 16

Hilo everyone! This chapter's going to be short because: (1) I'm trying to get back to the 2000 words per chapter pattern so it will naturally seem shorter, and (2) I have been stuck and I'm tired of letting you guys wait. Next chapter is going to be Hitsoku's first day at the tattoo parlor, so that is why I ended it the way I did. I hope Akito's italics are distinguishable from the rest of the text. If it isn't, just let me know and I'll stick to underlining it. I hope you enjoy.

"Humans are the only animals that have children on purpose with the exception of guppies, who like to eat theirs." - P. J. O'Rourke

...

I had been having the same dream for another two nights. There were only minute differences in the dreams, but it was the same overall. It was still night, I still wandered around the Sohma estate and only caught glimpses of a kid running around corners. It was still Kureno's room I would stop by, and when I went in, it was still my imagined Hitsoku's childhood room. He didn't hide in the closet this time. I found him painting a picture, except the paper was blank, no matter how much paints he loaded on to his brush with every stroke. Hitsoku was still scared at first, and after the first time with the dream, I seemed to have more control over my actions.

I decided to venture. It was only a dream after all, right? Nothing could hurt me. "Hitsoku? What are you painting?" I started off with an easy question.

He hesitated. Shy. Awkward. Just like he was now. "You."

" Why?"

" Just in case you go to the black room. I want to remember you."

" What is the black room?"

He looked up at me with widened muddy pools of fear. He stood up so we were at eye-level and grabbed my arms. "Please don't go in there! Everyone who does never gets out. They don't come back. I'm always alone. People keep coming and going. Why can't people just stay?"

I knew what he was talking about. Tohru did too. Permanence. That's what we all strived for, and Hitsoku had been lonely because no one would stay. "Where is it?" I asked gently.

"No! I'll never tell you where it is! I don't want you to go there!" Hitsoku was throwing a tantrum, and had begun crying. "Please don't go."

"Hitsoku, if you show me where the room is, I'll know which room that I shouldn't go in." It was a lie.

He sniffled into the back of his hands as he thought about it, and then he nodded his head in agreement. After I stood up, he offered his little hand that I took. As soon as we stepped out of his room, a huge blast of heat surrounded me, and I woke up. The fire seemed so real that it horrified me. If it wasn't for Hinata and Satsuki still sleeping soundly, I would have thought that I had screamed myself awake.

I decided to stretch my legs outside of the room. Today, I would have to start a discussion about switching around the rooms. I was afraid that if my nightmares persist, I might keep Satsuki up. Besides that, I got uncomfortable when I had to wait outside the room when Akemi and Satsuki were having their moment.

I climbed down stairs and just wandered around, opening cabinets even though I already knew what was in there, looking in the fridge even though my stomach was flipping too much to handle food or a drink. Before I started to step up the stairs, thinking of going back in my room, I saw a door. The door was always there, but I never saw it opened, and it didn't appear to have a lock. Michi told me that the house had a basement, so that would explain the extra door to the

already big house. Since Hitsoku hadn't explicitly said anything about the basement, it caught my interest on what could be down there. Maybe there wasn't anything in there, but it still caught my interest. It wasn't locked, but it was stuck, and with a good yank, I got it free.

It was too dark so I tried turning on the switch, but the light wasn't working. Black. That was all I could see. I realized it would be too dangerous to try to go down there by myself in the middle of the night, so I decided to call it a night and try to go back to sleep, but when I got to my door, I looked at Hitsoku's door. An ill feeling came over me. With all of his seizures and the dreams, I figured that just a peek to see if he was breathing would soothe me enough to try to go back to sleep, and if his door was locked, I would still have to try to go back to sleep.

For once, Hitsoku's door was unlocked. Either he got comfortable enough around us, or he forgot to lock it, but I was betting on the latter. The room was dark, but not as dark as the basement. I could see some shapes of where the bed, book shelf, and desk were. That was enough for me to quietly sneak over by his bed.

It was embarrassing, really; thinking that I'll be able to sleep just because he was sleeping peacefully. That probably didn't make a bit of sense. Hitsoku slept on his back, and after an adjustment along with opening his curtains, I could make out more of his features. They weren't anything new I hadn't noticed before, but it was enough to convince me that it was still him. He was still breathing as well; a plus to the dark night.

I panicked when he shifted on his side toward me, and rested his splinted arm over his ribs, but he didn't wake up. Good thing; I'm not sure what I would have told him if he had. Was watching someone sleep considered stalking if I lived in the same house? Probably, which made this situation even more embarrassing. With a trembling hand, I placed some of his hair that was covering his face behind an ear. I'm not sure why, other than it always irritated me when I woke

up with hair in my mouth. I saw his scar on his hairline, and lightly traced it as I fixed more of his hair.

Hitsoku didn't even move.

Looking at his arm, I just wanted to see one more thing. As I watched his face closely, and his hand that was in his white cast, I placed my hand under his.

...

"Yeah, thank you for letting me know. Have a good day." I hung up the phone and sighed. That was the sixth tattoo customer that had canceled on me, all in the same month. Apparently March, which was this month, was a popular month for anniversaries, weddings, and all sorts of other celebrations that didn't include needles and ink.

Plus, according to Satsuki, whom had finally changed her mind about getting a tattoo-thank god-a few more had canceled while I was away at dream land yesterday. The day after I visited the hospital, I took the pain medication, plus in combination with my preventatives, and they were so strong that only one of each put me to sleep only less than an hour later on my studio floor for the entire day. I couldn't imagine falling asleep while sticking a vibrating needle on someone's skin, staining it permanently, so I decided that feeling the pain was well worth it.

I went back on the couch with Hinata and set her down with her Mogeta doll. My broken, and still very sore, arm held my planner while my stronger hand wrote "Reschedule" under the clients name.

Maybe I had gotten on the doctor's nerves too much so he prescribed stronger stuff, however, missing Satsuki's initial reaction was probably worth the extra sleep. I had heard from Akemi that Satsuki had paled and started to panic, shrieking wanting to know what happened, just like Tohru had done. I definitely couldn't have been able to explain how I broke my arm. Plus, as lucid as I currently was, I still couldn't piece together how a kid literally flew at a wall

hard enough to actually break it. His story about practicing martial arts with the orange-haired teen, and how he flipped him was too sketchy for me to believe, but I dropped it because I didn't want to bother with it anymore.

I was getting annoyed that people were canceling their dates, so I would have to draw quick sketches for walk-in customers. Being prepared made me feel better, and I would rather work on the skin immediately rather than back to sketch-work. It was getting tiring.

After checking with Tsukimoto, the boss, we agreed that I would get the evening shift and start today, but I didn't have to leave for a while yet. In addition, since I wouldn't be home until after eleven, Satsuki insisted-enough to call her stubborn-on making me a bento dinner. She claimed that she missed making bento lunches for Hiro since he gets his lunch at school, so she wanted to do this for me. It was embarrassing no matter which way I looked at it, but I was grateful anyway. I had to be.

She was also worried about Akito, saying that she's been having trouble with sleep, which was why she was still in her room. Hatori mentioned a while ago that she often got sick, so it did worry me, but that woman was so prideful that it was hard to imagine it. I hoped she was taking the medicine I got for her.

...

On another note, I am indirectly working on this story. Towards the end another story is going to be told, so it inspired me to actually write it out, but as a separate urban legend myth kind of story. I'm about half way through the story so I'll let you know when I have a link to it. I'm also almost done recollecting all of the quotes I originally lost in my first quote book-I'm so excited! I hope you enjoyed this latest chapter, and please let me know about your concerns, especially about Akito's perspective.

"If you're afraid to let someone else see your weakness, take heart: Nobody's perfect. Besides, your attempts to hide your flaws don't

work as well as you think they do." - Julie Morgenstern

Chapter 17

Hilo everyone! Got another chapter in, finally right? There isn't any Akito's P.O.V. italics in this one, so it's all Hitsoku.

"If you can solve your problems, then what is the need of worrying? If you cannot solve it, then what is the use of worrying?" -
Shantideva

...

"Yo, Honda! How've ya been?" Tsukimoto said with heavy kansai dialect in the back of the room over his client, about to stick a large piercing needle into the guy's nose. Why anyone would want that was beyond me. I was fine with the ear cartilage piercing I had on each ear, courtesy of Tsukimoto himself, but I guess some people could get addicted. Tsukimoto actually had more rings and bolts than tattoos, which was amazing since he had sleeves, back pieces, chest plates, and even a few on his neck. It was only natural that he was in charge of the piercing side of the business. "How long do you plan on sticking around this time?"

"I'm probably going to be around for only a couple months, maybe more." I quickly found my usual spot in the back next to his station, and set up my equipment. There were a total of ten tattoo stations, equipped with two chairs each, a movable table along with a stationary desk, and mirrors. Most of the stations had built-in tattooing equipment, but some of the employees also bring their own like I did. In the front next to the doors is the secretary's desk that schedules in clients, and the sofas where the clients sit and look through art portfolios and magazines. There was no wallpaper, just the walls covered in photos, drawings, a couple of paintings, and posters. Some of the tacks that held the stuff up were actually sharpened earrings because he couldn't find tacks and he didn't like using tape.

"That's fine by me, man. When's your first victim?" He went back to his client, who was shaken up because it seemed that Tsukimoto was distracted, and he called his customers 'victims;' he wasn't distracted, and he meant to scare his customers because he found it fun. I looked away when he stuck the needle in, and shivered. He was such a sadist.

I got out my agenda, spying a few of the employees roll their eyes. It was quite handy and it saved me from bringing more than I could carry, so I didn't care if it was generalized as a woman's item. "In a half hour if the guy hasn't canceled already."

"Ah, the March celebrations. Well, you know the rules. If he doesn't show or is late, take whoever walks in the door."

"Except those who want a piercing; that's your job."

"Damn straight." Tsukimoto went to introducing the newcomers, and cleaning the piercing he had just made. I waved at the old employees. He and the older employees already knew I couldn't remember names well when they figured it out in on the first day I came back here to work. They were cool with it since it couldn't be helped, but I would still prefer if the customers or people I'm being paid by didn't know. "What happened to your arm?"

"A couple of kids were practicing martial arts outside, and one of them flipped the other, practically throwing him at the house I was in, and the wall fell on me, pinning my arm to the low-table." If the story was crazy enough, Tsukimoto would believe it, which he did with a raised triple-pierced brow.

"So, have you lost your V yet?" He asked, joking around.

I ignored that with a warm face, making him and everyone struggling to hide their chuckles.

My client didn't come in so I did have to take in a walk-in, and that did bug me, but I didn't mind it too much. There were light

conversations tossed around from client to needle-artist, from needle-artist to other needle-artists, and even from client to client. It was just a friendly atmosphere, in a place my parents wouldn't dare step into. They believed in the stereotypical brand name for all tattoo, piercing, mechanics and other shops where delinquents and drunkards would likely hang out and how delinquency was contagious. Overall, I was relaxed because there weren't any high expectations, except to please the client with permanent art, but that was easy for me.

After a couple of weeks, I had developed a continual work cycle, and had a steady income, making me more financially secure. It all became routine for me. It was no problem when the Sohma family decided that they needed to switch around the roommates, especially since they had thought and agreed to the arrangement themselves: the mother, father and their children in one, the doctor and the two teens in the other, and the young woman in the room next to mine. It startled me at first when I wake up and come out of my room to see a different person coming out of the room, but I quickly got used to that.

The only thing that broke the wonderful routine happened in my third week of working at the tattoo parlor. During my half hour dinner break, I went to look for an empty outdoor table near a café to eat the bento, and I was interrupted by someone I thought-hoped-I would never see again.

"Hello Hitsoku-kun." The she-wolf came back, sitting in the seat directly opposite of me. She wore a deep V-neck long dress and heels. It didn't matter what color the dress was, because I was so scared that it seemed like I was colorblind for a few moments. The blood in my face must have frozen because she noticed that I was scared stiff. "I do apologize for my temper the last time we met." She reached out and caressed the faded scabs on my face. "I was already in a bad mood, and I snapped for no reason. I promise I'll keep a better hold on it from now on."

"Apology accepted," I struggled to say. It didn't matter if she had never slapped me; I still would have been scared of her. She was quite aggressive. I wanted to leave, but I had already figured that she wouldn't let me. This woman had come to me for a reason and she wouldn't let me go until she succeeded.

She rested her arms on the table and leaned her body over slightly, giving me quite a view that I pretended I wasn't looking. "Shigure says that you and Akito have been getting closer, is that true?" She went right to the point.

So he was involved in this too? This conversation seemed to be getting worse. "I guess. We talk sometimes, but I don't see how that matters," I said stiffly, trying to be nonchalant but was unsuccessful.

"I just thought that you would like to know that she wouldn't be good for you." She waved off the waiter when he saw that someone new had sat down.

"Akito and I aren't in a relationship, and I'm not interested in getting into one right now," I tried explaining, but she cut me off.

"I'm sure that's true, but I'm just saying that she could talk you into doing anything, including changing your mind. She's always been sneaky." She had a dirty look when she said the second sentence, and it disappeared when she continued on. Seeing how quickly her expressions changed gave me chills, in a bad way of course. "Has Shigure ever told you that she slept with another man while they were together?"

"They aren't together?" I couldn't care less about what Akito had done, it had nothing to do with my love life, and I was convinced it wouldn't ever have anything to do with me.

"No. Akito called if off about a month ago. When Shigure told me what happened, I thought Akito surely would have told you." She was suggesting something with her eyes, but I wasn't getting the message.

"What she does is none of my business. If she felt that she wasn't happy with him, then that's her reason. I don't particularly care." I tried my best to not act as nervous, but it still showed through when I had trouble with eye-contact, and I was just fiddling with my food. I couldn't eat with her watching me like a snake.

"She hasn't tried anything with you lately?" She narrowed her eyes as she brought her laced fingers under her chin, trying to act coy.

"No, not at all." I must have answered too quickly, because a smile appeared on her lips.

"Well, if she does try anything, and if you start to have feelings for the poor girl, I just thought you should know something."

"Which is?"

"She gets emotionally confused quite easily especially when she's lonely. That's what happened with Shigure. When one of her dearest friends was about to leave, she slept with him to make him stay, and slept with Shigure to keep their relationship going. It continued like that for years. Don't believe everything she tells you about her romanticized feelings. It's all an illusion she fantasized and imagined all on her own."

I didn't know what to say to that. What could I have said? I wouldn't trust this woman with my toenail clippers, and yet, after observing Akito and Shigure, I began to question if she was right. Akito never seemed to be interested in Shigure, and yet she stayed with him until a month ago? That put up a red flag in my mind. While I wouldn't budge on getting into any relationships, it didn't mean I couldn't still ask myself if it could work. Everyone did that, right?

The woman across from me stood up and laid a hand on my shoulder, before saying, "If you find her too immature for your tastes, I'll be available." She reached into her clutch for a pen and wrote down her phone number on a napkin, purposely leaning over me so I could smell her sour perfume. "Call me when you're ready."

As soon as she hailed a cab and was out of sight, I wanted to rip up the napkin, but I couldn't. It wasn't as if I was really interested in her- she was way too bold!-it was because she knew more than what she was letting on. She was definitely the type of person to withhold valuable information. I knew I promised myself I wouldn't get involved with any of the Sohmas, but if any of them needed something then I would like to know more of what was going on than give false advice, or do something that wasn't wanted or needed. Because I felt so insulted, and disgusted, from the woman's behavior, I couldn't finish my dinner, so I headed back to work early, sticking the napkin in my pocket, trying to forget the conversation altogether at least until I could wrap my head around what was really going on behind the closed curtains.

Tsukimoto noticed my sudden change of behavior so he kept nudging me for answers, but I refused to tell him. He even went so far as to take my cast and bang it on the edge of my work table as a kind of torture method; it hurt in a dull ache kind of way, and he only stopped when he realized that with my arm hurting, I wasn't doing much work. I ended up only telling him that there was no way I could explain all of the mess to him, and that I would tell him when everything cleared up. It wasn't the whole truth, but it got him to leave me alone about it. Besides, if he found out that there was a single woman currently living under my roof, and then he would start shoving down dating advice and stupid pick-up lines that should never be used down my throat. As if I would ever use pick-up lines, even if I was looking for someone.

I was relieved when my shift ended and I got to go home. No one was awake at that hour, so that was a good thing. The very last thing I wanted was to run into Akito. There was no way I was ever going to tell her that I had a run-in with the she-wolf; she seemed so terrified of her, it would probably worry Akito to mention the horrid conversation.

The next few days after, the she-wolf didn't come back, which was great, but what she said still irritated me. Akito hadn't done anything

but be nice to me, besides getting irritated at me. I was actually trying to avoid her because everytime I looked at her, the conversation and that woman's face would just pop into my head. I felt as if someone gave me a button and told me, "By pushing this button, it may give you eternal life, or it will blow up the Earth. You have two seconds to push the button or the Earth will blow up anyway." I really didn't need anymore of that kind of stress.

...

"Ideals are like stars: you will not succeed in touching them with your hands, but like the seafaring man on the ocean desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and following them, you reach your destiny." - Carl Schurz

Chapter 18

Hi everyone. I just haven't been feeling up to writing this story and that's why it's been a while. At first it was because I had this idea written down in my timeline, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it wouldn't have fit. I really wanted to write it so I tried rearranging some stuff, and it just wouldn't work out, so it kind of made me moody and I just didn't feel like writing at all for a month on any of my stories. To be honest, giving myself a break was probably a good thing.

I've also been doing a ton of other research that's been distracting me for a long time, which I'm currently taking a break from. I hope you enjoy this latest installment, but please let me know if you feel the characters seem odd, or if my grammar and spelling isn't up to par.

"If a man insisted on being serious, and never allowed himself a bit of fun and relaxation, he would go mad or become unstable without knowing it." - Herodotus

...

After a few days, the conversation the she-wolf and I had slipped comfortably to the back of my mind, and I hoped it would stay there. Satsuki was excited to go out with her family to do something fun since it has been a while and would be the first time since the Sohma family had moved in with me. Hatori also went out. To do what, he didn't say, but he wore a much more casual attire than I had ever seen him. He actually wore jeans. Momiji and Hatsuharu decided to take the bus and visit Tohru to help her study, even though I thought that they might have been more of a distraction than help, but I didn't say anything. It was the first time I practically had the house to myself since they moved in, and it was a Saturday. That day was going to be the closest to a day off I was probably going to get with them living here.

Akito was still in her room, and while I did still have that free feeling of being alone, I couldn't help but worry about the woman a little. She had been in her room a lot lately. After rummaging through the fridge and cabinets a few times, I finally gained the courage to climb the stairs to see how she was doing; however before I could decide whether to knock or just sneak a peak in case she was still sleeping, there was a knock on my front door.

I didn't like whom I saw on my doorstep, but I did my best to hide my dislike.

"Hi Hitsoku." He didn't even bother with the honorifics. "I didn't expect you to answer the door. Usually Satsuki-san did that." It was that guy. The person I never bothered to try to remember his name. The very same guy whom Akito supposedly dumped-not that I cared about that, but it begs the question: what was he doing here? "How's the arm? I heard that something serious happened at the hospital." Strange, he would have actually sounded genuine, if it wasn't for his smug grin on his sly face.

"Satsuki-san, her family, and Hatori-san went out. Akito-san's still upstairs, but she might be asleep." I purposely skipped the hospital incident since I was still shaking out the chills that old delusional woman gave me.

He didn't bother waiting for my permission before he stepped inside my house. "That's OK. I'm just here to check up on her."

I wanted to say something, but I wasn't sure he knew that I knew they weren't together. If I had stopped him, and if the she-wolf had actually lied, and Akito found out about it later, it could spell big trouble for me. Just as he hadn't bothered with my permission, he didn't even knock on the door.

As I climbed back up the stairs, he came out of the room and asked, "Where's Akito?"

"Hmm? Oh, wrong room. She's in this one now," I explained, pointing to the correct door, before heading to my own room to work on more sketches. All of a sudden, I didn't have that feeling of freedom anymore, so it was back to work for me.

I was in a place where I was in between sleeping and wide awake. My eyes were closed, I could feel my body relaxing and resting, but I definitely wasn't asleep. I wasn't even sure if that was called sleeping, but I tried to keep up the façade when I felt the side of the bed sink. At first, I thought it could have been Hatori, but he told me he was going out. His eyes told me that he was happy again, like when he was with that woman, Kana. Maybe he was on a date with another woman. At first, I felt that old protective jealousy, but after remembering that I caused him so much pain, I felt guilty. After all the years of abuse, he still decided to tell me where he was going even though he was finally free. I didn't say anything to him before he left.

The only other person that was in the temporary home was Hitsoku, but it didn't feel right. It wouldn't be like him to actually sit on my bed and not say anything. He didn't seem like those perverted types to stare at a woman sleeping.

"Akito."

Oh no.

"I know you're not sleeping."

It was Shigure, and I did not want to see him, at least not for a long while. I tried calling his bluff and continued pretending.

"Akito, you're not sleeping. I want to talk."

I didn't give him the pleasure of seeing my eyes, so I turned to my other side. "What's there to talk about?"

"I was only teasing the guy; pushing his buttons."

"I told you over and over to stop it, and you kept doing it."

"I'm sorry, I'll stop. Just come live with me."

"You know I can't do that, even if I wanted to. I've hurt all of them there."

"OK, maybe not come live with me there. Just say that after Ren's under control, you'll be with me." He placed a hand on my shoulder, but I quickly shrugged it off.

"I gave you my decision, and I said no, Shigure."

There was a long pause. "That's a little unfair, don't you think? Yes, I used people, I'll admit that, but I did all of that because you slept with Kureno. You may have felt insecure because of what your mother said, but you could have talked to me about it. You didn't have to go and sleep with the poor bastard to make him stay with you. And now that everything's over and done with, now that we could finally move on together, you choose some guy who has nothing to live for and can't even help him-"

I bolted upright and turned to him with angry eyes. "Shut up, Shigure," I raised my voice. "This is about you and me, not anybody else. You say everything's 'over and done with' but it's you that's still hurting people. You're still manipulating other people's feelings, just as you're trying to manipulate my feelings right now. I don't owe you anything Shigure. I don't love you Shigure, so just get out of here, and stay away from me."

He stayed calm, like he always had done. That part of him scared me. No matter what happened, he didn't panic, and while others thought it was bravery, I found it inhuman. "Can you just answer one question for me then? Did you ever love me?"

I had to think back at all the good and bad times. While most of it was bad, there were a few good times. When he told me his famous phrase while giving me the flower, it was the first time I felt loved;

that made me happy. When Kureno's curse broke, I only thought of my mother's hateful words and wanting for all the zodiacs to be together forever, so I slept with him. I was furious because Shigure slept with my mother, and for what, to get back at me? When I kicked him out of the main house, I repeated his phrase repeatedly, reliving that happiness in between hurting my beloved family. I only had one memory to relive, and with all the madness, it didn't look like there would be any chance of making more. At the party, I found him, mad that he hadn't even greeted me, so I slept with him then. Before the final banquet, after everyone's curse was lifted, when he said good-bye to the old me, the me that my father seemed to want, when he repeated the words I thought he forgot, that made me happy too. Nevertheless, did that mean I loved him?

"No. I don't think I ever have loved you Shigure; and I'm sorry for just realizing that."

His face stayed the same, but his eyes showed that he was furious. Even if he tried to say anything to change my mind, my decision was set. I lead my own life, and no one was going to take control of it again. "When you need it, I'll welcome you back with open arms. In the mean time, I'll go and apologize to Honda-san," he said. I wasn't sure how he managed to offer something like that, or why he said it, but those were his parting words for the day before he closed the door.

Somehow, I didn't feel any guilt. Maybe I should have, but I didn't, and that was fine with me.

Was it really eavesdropping if I could hear them from my room while I was innocently drawing? Well, I could only decipher a few words at a time, so it wasn't as if I understood completely what they were talking about. I could hear some of what Akito said, but the other guy's voice was completely muffled since he wasn't yelling. I stopped drawing at times to try and understand the dialogue, but otherwise I was treating it as white noise. The conversation was short, but that made me realize it was a bad thing because I didn't have enough time to brace myself when I heard my doorknob jingle.

Oh, did they realize I was listening? I was honestly a little scared on who might be on the other side of the door. Neither of them would be a good person to talk to if they did know I could hear them.

Hesitantly, I cracked the door to see who it was, very disappointed to see the guy, Shigure I thought I heard her call him.

He gave me a wide smile which didn't convince me that he was at all happy to see me. Actually, it scared me quite more than usual. "Hi, can we talk?"

Did I have a choice? I opened the door wider so we could talk in the living room or outside, but he pushed me in and closed my door behind him. Now, I was terrified. I froze where I landed, sitting on my bed.

He looked around my room before casually commenting on it, "Huh. For a hermit, I expected more clutter and useless junk."

Actually, the clutter was in my studio, but I wasn't even going to mention it in case he wanted to inspect that too.

Shigure looked at me with slightly narrowed eyes before leaning over me, wordlessly threatening me. "Even though Akito seems to like you," he uttered in a voice low enough where no one had a chance to overhear, but loud enough for me to hear clearly, "you won't be able to make her happy."

Why did everyone seem to think I had feelings for her? She had been nice despite the rough start, and I was concerned, but I couldn't even consider her a friend. "I don't think you under-"

"I think you're the one who's dense." Oh, he was pissed. "You're still hung up on your past girlfriend-it's so damn obvious that it's utterly pathetic. So as long as you still have feelings for that other woman, no matter how great she was, and no matter how great of a person you were, you will never be able to make Akito, Tohru, or any other woman happy. You will never have a chance with Akito if even I couldn't keep her happy."

It took me a while to realize that Shigure was alone with Hitsoku, and the odds were that he wasn't going to apologize. When I opened my door, the front door had closed, so Shigure probably left. I went to Hitsoku's door and hesitantly knocked. Almost instantly the doorknob twisted, but he left it ajar a couple millimeters before he opened it wider. Shigure had done something if Hitsoku had to check who it was before actually opening his door at a decent length. He hadn't even done that during the first few days.

"Are you OK?" He asked me.

I found it strange that he was asking me that. "Yeah, I am, actually." It was the honest truth for once. I felt almost uplifted, like some weight flew away. "Did Shigure talk to you?"

He threw out a single word, "Yeah." It was obvious that Hitsoku wasn't going to specify without some prying.

"Was he being mean to you again?"

His mouth was gaping like a fish, trying to search for the right words. "No, no, not really."

"Did he at least apologize?"

"Yep," Hitsoku replied, but it was too quick. He lied, and Shigure didn't apologize like he said he would. Shigure probably threatened Hitsoku somehow, but before I could ask further, Hitsoku cut me off. "How are you feeling? You've been in your room a lot lately." He really did look concerned, and I was touched again. It reminded me of the medicine he had bought for me.

Maybe I should start being more honest. It didn't have to be Hitsoku, but he's the only person I knew who wasn't biased, or make fun of me. "I've been having nightmares so I've been trying to catch up on sleep."

"Oh?" He relaxed considerably and let go of the door. "Well, you can try burning it." When I didn't say anything, because I didn't know what he meant, he continued. "When I had nightmares when I was still in school, I would write or draw whatever I dreamed about, so when the fireplace was lit I would take what I had drawn and burn it; however I would consider using the pit out in the back instead of inside my house if you wanted to try it. I once tried using a candle here since I didn't have a fireplace and I accidentally burned my curtain."

It was an interesting idea, but I probably wouldn't try it, not after Ren had set my home on fire.

When neither of us knew what to say, he was retreating back to his awkward shyness. "Maybe burning it was a bad idea; I forgot about what happened to your home. Sorry. Maybe just keeping a journal around, or a dream catcher or something." He stopped talking suddenly and looked at me. "Are you happy?"

"Huh?"

"It's just, you were smiling. I don't think I've seen you smile before."

I looked to the side because I was too embarrassed to look at him anymore. It was so blatant that I had gotten self-conscious over it, that even Hitsoku could probably tell. I hadn't even realized I had been smiling.

His voice turned soft as he offered, "If you need anything, you can knock on my door any time. Even if it's for something silly or insignificant." He was going to retreat back into his room until I reached over and touched his arm.

"Thank you."

It took him a while to reply. "For what?" He truly didn't realize how much he did for me.

I had to swallow. Just telling him my thanks was hard. "For caring." For caring and worrying over me with no ulterior motives, or strings attached, even when I was just a person living in his house and he had his own problems. I felt uncomfortable when I felt tears prick my eyes. Oh gosh, he must have thought I was being an overemotional woman.

When it looked like he was going to say something, there was a knock on the door. It was probably Satsuki and her family back from their family date. She had been so excited that I could hear her down in the living room from my room. Satsuki had let Hitsoku know that they would be back around that time. I thought it would just be awkward for both of us if I tried to explain my gratitude further, so I went back into my room. Sleep would be impossible, so I decided to call the head maid to see how things at home were going, and if anything was needed. It had been a while since I last called, so there were probably a few things I needed to do. I needed to get myself on top of my responsibilities so I could finally start moving on.

...

I know I told you guys about the side-story I was working on that had kind of something to do with this story, but very indirectly. The written aspect is half way done (I'm a slow writer!), but I have finished the preface and almost finished the prologue of the manga version (because I thought it would be fun). The story is called 'The Abstract Heart', and the links to where the manga version can be read will be up on my profile soon. If you decide to read that, I hope you enjoy it so far, despite the small number of pages.

It's a bit late, but I found a funny Thanksgiving joke:

"The wife had invited a houseful to Thanksgiving dinner. At the table, she turned to her six-year-old daughter and said, 'Would you like to say the blessing?' 'I wouldn't know what to say,' the girl replied. 'Just say what you hear your mother say,' the father suggested. The daughter bowed her head and said, 'Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?'"

Chapter 19

Hey. OK, so you can think of this as a filler chapter, or an added development to the story, I don't care either way. I'm just happy to provide an update, finally-and it's over 3,000 words. Many things will be happening personally, so I may not be able to update for a while again.

" Forget injuries, never forget kindness." - Confucious

...

I was hoping no one would notice, and just go along with their day. To be honest, I would not have known what today was if Tohru hadn't called me earlier. Masuyo called too for the same reason, although Tohru didn't make it sound creepy by telling me the history of today. Even so, now that I knew, I was hoping that a certain someone wouldn't come by today. After having these people in my home for almost two months, all I wanted was an entire day to me. No calls for commissions-actually no more calls period, no forced socializing with Satsuki, her husband, or the doctor by Michi, no glares from the son, no bubbly voice asking questions from the German, no weird comments from the punk kid, no probing from the raven-haired woman, and I've even included no watching over the baby on the list. I just wanted a day to myself... or more art supplies. Either one was fine with me.

Anyway, from the moment I got Tohru's and Masuyo's call in the morning to later in the evening, it looked as if I was getting my (first) wish. It was the weekend so the kids were at sleepovers and Satsuki, her husband, and their baby were going to a restaurant and said that they might stay at a hotel. The doctor had another date, dressing semi-formally and said he would be out until very late. That just left the raven-haired woman, but I guess seven out of eight wasn't so bad. It wasn't as if she bugged me with anything in particular. Lately she's been calling someone, I think it was from their

home that's currently being rebuilt since I overheard her talking about the construction. Because it was a one-ended conversation, it wasn't worth it to eavesdrop and try to figure out when they would be moving back in.

Unfortunately, by the late evening, I had still thought too soon. That certain someone rapped at my door calling my name, telling me to open the door. If Michi hadn't have mentioned that his fiancé was with him, I would have made him wait longer. As soon as I opened the door, a bright green blob squeezed my arms to my sides and was about to twirl, but luckily the fiancé had enough sense to stop him. It was more than obvious that Michi had gotten a head start with the alcohol. He didn't drink much, but it was still enough to give him a good buzz, and his words were only slightly slurred. He also wouldn't let go, using me to maintain his balance.

Michi's fiancé stepped inside with an almost embarrassed smile. She was short with a light brown bob cut and dark brown eyes evenly set on her darker peach skin. She wore a blue kimono with a crane decoration, but it didn't do much of hiding the baby bump that was forming. How long was she waiting on telling Michi if it was already that noticeable? Maybe the baby was going to be big. Or worse-twins. Poor her. "Hello Hitsoku," the fiancé greeted with an almost embarrassed smile. "I'm Usagi." Michi had told her about my poor memory for names, so she already knew to tell me her name again, even though I've met her quite a few times.

"Hello again Usagi-san," I huffed. Michi still had me in his clutches and it was getting harder to breathe. My busted arm had begun to feel better, but it started to pulse within its cast in Michi's hold.

I was hoping that they would either just come in, not mentioning what today was, or they would say it quickly and leave before the raven-haired woman came around, but neither happened. As soon as the raven-haired one came in a minute later, probably wondering what all the commotion was about, Michi finally let go of me and reached into a bag to pull out a huge bottle of sake covered in wrapping paper. "Happy twenty-second Birthday Hii-kun."

Oh great. He's calling me by my pet name that Kyoko and Tohru nicknamed me.

"It's your birthday today?" The ravenette lightly inquired. "Why didn't you tell Satsuki-san?"

Damn. She heard. Moreover, if she told Satsuki later, all hell would break loose for me.

"Michi, after what happened last year, I think I want to hold off a while longer on the alcohol." I was trying to get them to leave subtly. "So thank you for your consideration, but you can take the sake and-." However, like usual, nothing worked with Michi, even more so when he was even the slightest bit drunk.

"-Now hold on!" Michi grumbled. "I haven't seen you since you started your part-time job at that Tsukimoto's shop." He was more or less scared of Tsukimoto ever since the sadistic boss made a comment on wanting a life-sized voodoo doll while staring at him. They hadn't seen each other since. "And that was over two weeks ago. I wanna hang out with you tonight." He went back to hugging me; as if I would disappear like vapor (I wished I was vapor). The way he said it made it sound like we were having a homo love affair.

While I was wondering how to get him off, Usagi didn't bother to hide her giggles, and the ravenette tried her best to hide her smile. She wrapped her arms around herself, as if she was trying to contain something in her stomach.

It was obvious that Michi had no plans to leave tonight, and I finally noticed him carrying an overnight bag for both of them, so I practically had no choice, but to let them hang out for the night. "Fine," I droned. "Just please stop hugging me. If you want to hug someone, hug your *fiancé* ." I couldn't stress "fiancé" enough. If he really loved her, he would pay more attention to her, right? Usagi didn't seem to really mind, but then again, she was the most patient woman I've ever known.

"She won't let me hug'er anymore."

I looked over to her.

"He's hugged me enough today," she said curtly.

"You set limits?" I ask.

"I kind of have to."

Point taken. I wished I had thought of that long ago, but it was probably too late to change Michi's habit by now-not that he being currently tipsy would help anyway.

"Alright." I managed to unwind Michi's arms and get him to stand with his own balance. "We can sit in the living room. I'll go make some tea."

At that, Usagi took the lead to introduce herself to the ravenette, who in turn introduced herself as Akito, and congratulated the expecting mother along with the marriage plans.

Before I headed to the kitchen to make some tea, Michi grabbed by sleeve, stopping me in my tracks. "You're drinking some sake tonight," Michi declared with a promise. He tore the paper from the bottle for me and revealed that he remembered my favorite kind: Ginjo Shu. In high school, we experimented a little with some brands of sake, and I tended to like the sweeter and lighter sake. By my twentieth birthday, I had found my favorite.

It was my favorite, and I couldn't resist. "Fine, I'll have a glass tonight." I took the bottle, planning to put it in the refrigerator to chill for a couple of hours while we had some tea in the mean time. "Hey, Michi, I'm just making sure, but, do you even remember what happened last year?"

There was a pause. Michi looked down, then rotated his face to look up, and finally produced an answer. "Kind of. I remember the first

half of the day, when you won the contest, and then we went to the beach, but I can't remember what happened later that night."

I couldn't stop myself from smiling.

"Last year?" Akito quoted. "What happened?"

"Hitsoku, didn't you call me to tell me that Michi was in the hospital around that time?"

Wow, she had a good memory. Scary. "Yeah. Michi was taken to the hospital that night."

"I was?"

I took a breath. Obviously, there was no way to avoid telling the story of what happened last year. "Just let me make some tea, and get something from my room." When I was going to enter the kitchen, Michi grabbed my sleeve again.

"You're not going to your room just to lock yourself in and avoid us, are you?"

"No. This something will help fill the later half of what you don't remember."

"OK, I'll go ahead and tell these two what I remember."

"Fine." Since Usagi was the one who was mainly going to drink the tea, I went for the herbal, her preferred flavor, instead of the fruity or flower kinds of tea. It only took a few minutes to get everyone a cup-I made Michi drink an entire cupful before he tried telling the story just to wake him up a little. It took a while to find the tape though. By the time I reentered the kitchen, Michi had gotten to the beach part of the story.

"After only getting second place in the art contest," I was more interested in the free set of expensive markers than the prize money, "we headed to the beach."

I hadn't been to the beach very often, and it was a sunny day, so we went to enjoy the sun and the breeze. In addition, there were plenty of subjects to sketch.

"Even though I was badgering him to at least get his knees wet, he just wanted to draw. Since it was supposed to be his day, and he was starting to get crabby, I let him. A woman came up to him, and she was..." Michi was having trouble finding the right words.

As I was setting up the TV, since I didn't tend to watch it anymore, I tried to help. "Very much endowed in the chest area?"

"Exactly," Michi confirmed. "Anyway, she said she recognized him from his paintings and his museum gig and asks him out on a date."

She asked if I would make a sketch of her, not go on a date.

"I have to practically shove him to get him to agree because he just sat there and stared."

At her face, instead of her chest, but Michi didn't bother to be specific.

"He gets her number, and tells him to meet her at a bar later. We changed clothes; I gave him advice on women, and told him to have a good time." He turned to me with his eyes squinting. "Later that night, you came back to the hotel, pounding at the door because you lost your key, and was out of breath?" That was about all he could remember. Half of the reason was that he had been tipsy, but there was another reason.

I finished hooking up the TV, and put the VHS tape in, but I didn't push the play button yet. "We went to her place and had a few drinks before she wanted me to sketch her, and, well, I got her angry." That was an understatement. I got her severely pissed off. "When I got to the hotel after the run and the drinks, I got sick and had to rest my head over the toilet." I did have more drinks than I probably should have, but the running made me dizzy, and my hands were twitchy. It

wasn't a full-blown seizure, but I was lucky that it was a mild case. That was when I pushed the play button. "The woman found my key, and came to our hotel room making a ruckus. By the way, our neighbor from across our room filmed this, and gave a copy to me when he wondered if I wanted to press charges." I pushed the play button and rested my head on my folded arms. I could already feel the vibration in my gut.

"Honda, get out here!" The woman screamed, no doubt waking up everyone on the floor. She had been pounding on the door for a good five minutes before the filming.

Michi opened the door, obviously having had been drunk also. He used the door for balance, was squinting because the lights were bright, and he was heavily slurring. "Hey, why'er you 'ere?"

"Where's Honda?"

"Wha? Hitsoku? Why do ya wanna see 'im so bad?... . Oh, wait, did he say something?"

When I drink more than a few glasses, the filter to my mouth gets broken, and I say whatever I think. Most of the time, I meant it to be harmless, but I end up phrasing it wrong.

"Yes. Wanna know what that jerk said? He said, 'Are those real?'"

"Hitsoku!" Usagi chastised.

I lifted my head to say, "To my defense, I was actually focusing on the stars on her breast," before placing my head back down on my arms. I thought it was a tattoo, but it was so smeared I should have realized it was drawn with a marker. The size of her breasts did come to mind, but I started running before I could ask.

I wasn't the only one whose mind wasn't working quite right that night either, because without missing a beat, Michi replied, "They are?" And he did mean the woman's chest.

With only two words, Michi topped my comment. I snorted and couldn't keep my chuckling quiet.

"Michi!"

"I swear, I don't remember any of this," he defended, but couldn't help but laugh out a curse.

At that moment, the woman grabbed a vase and hit Michi over the head with it with a loud THWUMP! Not even that sound from the tape stopped my laughter. The tape goes on to show that the woman runs away, having realized that she just hit a guy with a hard object, and the paramedics eventually came to help Michi, ending when Michi is on a gurney and rolled out of sight. I wasn't on the tape at all because I hadn't come out of the bathroom.

When I calmed down enough, and lifted my body up, Michi asks, "You were in the bathroom, right?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't come to help me when she hit my head."

It wasn't a question, but I answered anyway. "Yes."

"Why didn't you help me? Even the neighbor with the camera was trying to stop the bleeding."

I started giggling again. "Because I was laughing too hard."

"You're mean! You don't care at all, do you?"

"Michi. Over trying to keep my laughing down, and trying so hard not to vomit, I honestly didn't hear you get hit. I felt really sick and passed out before the paramedics came." In the morning, I asked the neighbor what happened, and he gave me a copy of the tape and directed me to which hospital he was taken. That's when I called Usagi to let her know that Michi was in the hospital. He was OK with

only a mild concussion, but I couldn't stop smiling for a few days after watching the tape when I got home.

To escape Michi's glare, I went to the kitchen to fetch a few glasses and the chilled sake. Seeing the bottle lifted Michi's mood almost instantly. Akito respectfully accepted my offer to share the sake, and we all, with the exception of Usagi who stuck with her tea, had a glass. I rather enjoyed my birthday. After my second glass, I cleaned it and headed to bed, leaving Michi with the sake bottle. It looked as if Akito had enough of the sake for the night, so she probably wouldn't drink any more and continue talking with Usagi. They seemed to have gotten along quite well, but then again, Usagi was a psychologist. She could get anyone to talk about anything with her. It's one of the reasons I try my absolute best to avoid being alone with her.

It was a strange night. Michi was on the verge to being drunk, I got to meet his fiancé, Usagi, a rather charming and stately woman, and I saw a new side to Hitsoku. Through some sake and conversation, he eased into a rather lax state. His walls covered with politeness, and indifference seemed to dissipate. He looked quite happy with Michi recalling past memories-they mostly talked about high school or Michi's time at a university.

After Hitsoku and Michi went to sleep, and after things had calmed down, Usagi and I continued to talk some over a new pot of tea at the kitchen bar. I was surprised to hear that she was in her late twenties and that she used to worry that she was too old for Michi, but she was excited to marry him, and to be a mother. A part of me was envious. While worrying about the Junichi, and what would happen between Shigure and me, along with the pressure of being the head of the family, I hadn't once considered being a mother. After the fire, and being around Satsuki, I was afraid to know what it would be like to have a child of my own. Would I be like my own mother? I didn't want to find out, but I did have that longing feeling of wanting an extended part of me to hold. It felt lonely being around her and Usagi.

" I'm sure you'll be a great mother." I meant those words. Even though I've only known her for a few hours, she seemed so patient and dignified. I was sure she wasn't anything like my mother or me, so I didn't know what she had to be so scared of.

She giggled. "I'm so nervous though. It's going to be a first for me, and I'm just so sure I'll make some horrible mistake. I keep thinking that I'll do something to make my baby hate me-gosh, I don't think I could bear it if he or she slammed a door in my face or screamed at me."

" You won't." Those words just slipped from my mouth. "Your baby won't hate you." I honestly didn't mean to sound forceful, but this woman wasn't anything like my mother, so I was sure that she, Michi, and their baby would be happy. Actually, I wanted them to be happy. Just like I wanted the Junichi to be happy, and Tohru to be happy. I wanted them to be happy because they were good people, and I didn't think they deserved anything less than happiness. Even Hitsoku.

She hugged me so suddenly.

A choked gasp erupted from my throat and I just realized I had been crying.

" You're such a kind person Sohma-san, so please give yourself more credit," she whispered to me.

...

I hadn't counted on Usagi and Akito being friends, but I realized that it felt natural to do so.

" Our greatest pretenses are built up not to hide the evil and the ugly in us, but our emptiness. The hardest thing to hide is something that is not here." - Eric Hoffer

Chapter 20

Ugh, I had gotten to 1,400 words, and then my laptop turned off accidentally; unfortunately, when I turned it back on, it only saved the first 400 words. That right there is such a writing mood killer! Anyway, if there's anything anyone has questions about, or is confused, ask away and I'll answer them. Of course, I can't answer any questions if they'll be answered in the story, in which case I will let you know that I can't answer that, but everything else is fine. I hope this chapter makes up for my lack of updates lately.

Hasn't Tohru moved out of Shigure's house yet? Due to the fire, which was massive, it left a lot of the Sohmas in need of shelter. Basically, nearly everything within the "inside" Sohma walls was at least damaged. It isn't just the ones mentioned living with Hitsoku, and even those who weren't zodiacs were affected by it, so Kazuma, and other "outside" zodiacs and other Sohmas are lending some space also. So while technically Tohru would have moved out by now (with Kyo), Kazuma's home is already occupied to the max, so she's staying at Shigure's until she makes sure things have settled down. In addition, all the times Yuki was around, he was merely visiting, being concerned about the fire and all.

"How human can a lonely heart get?

Human enough, they say,

'til it over look and looks over

and runs headlong into tragedy."

-"Lonely" by Mary Mason

...

The power had gone out a while ago, and with the storm, I couldn't get through to anyone on the phone. Hitsoku had left the number for

the tattoo parlor he was working at, but it was wasted since I couldn't even call him to see if he was coming home or staying there. It would have been good to know whether staying up waiting for him would have been needed at all since I was currently alone. All before the flash storm, Hatori left on another date, Satsuki and her family went to see the progress of the construction at the Sohma estate, Momiji went to Shigure's, and Hatsuharu went to visit his mother at the hotel she was staying at. All in all, because of the surprise storm, none of them would probably be able to come back home until at least tomorrow. Eventually, my curiosity had gotten the better of me again. With a flashlight in hand, I wanted to take a look in the basement, just to see what was down there. There was probably nothing since I had never seen Hitsoku even touch the door before, but it was something to do and it was just there.

What a time to have a storm! I never minded a little rain here and there, but I hated rain storms, especially when it was so hard I had to walk all the way home because the buses were too dangerous. Thank god Tsukimoto let me leave my kit in the back room because there was no way I could walk with it in this weather. I was having a tough time keeping my cast dry let alone the thought of trying to protect my equipment. My drawings and files were safe in my leather messenger bag. And the wind! God, I hated the wind even more than the icy rain! It nearly blew me into traffic a few times. The only thing I was thankful for was that we all got to go home a few hours early if we decided not to stay at the shop to wait out the storm. Tsukimoto barely got through to his wife who made it to the day care on his cell phone, but it only lasted long enough for him to hear that she was going to stay put before his phone fizzled out.

It must have taken me nearly two hours to get to my gate entrance, and a full half hour climbing up the steep and muddy path. Because I kept slipping, my legs, up to my knees, and my hand were caked in mud, but I was so cold that I wasn't even going to worry about dirtying my mat floors. I probably needed to replace them anyway. When I got inside my warm and dry house, and deposited my shoes, I thought it was the wind pounding on the windows at first, but when I

heard a few seconds later, "Let me out! Somebody!" I didn't even bother to take off my soaking socks, or pull the leggings of my pants up to prevent the mud from dragging across the floor. It was coming from the basement, and I immediately recognized the voice. The ravenette.

"Hey! Hold on! Hold on, I'm here!" It took a few bouts of yelling to get her to realize that someone was actually home.

"Hitsoku-kun? Please, there's someone down here!"

I tried to use a calmer voice. "I need you to let go of the doorknob, and step away from the door, OK?"

"No, there's someone down here! She's trying to hurt me!"

"Listen to me!" I yelled, and then forced my voice to a calmer tone, even though I was scared too. "There is no one down there. Now please, I need you to step away from the door."

She hesitated, and after a few moments, uttered, "OK."

The warped door with rusted hinges, like always, was stuck. I could have had it fixed a long time ago, but never bothered to for a couple of reasons, mainly because I never use the basement anyway, but after this moment, I was definitely going to change that. After a couple of strong pushes, I asked, "Are you away from the door?"

"Yeah. I'm a few steps down," she choked. "Hurry."

"Alright, stay right there." Holding onto the doorknob, I rammed my body at the door. It took a few tries before it finally opened free. I almost fell, but my grip on the knob was strong. With my foot, I slid my bag to the door frame so it wouldn't close again, and when I stood up straight, about to ask if she was hurt, I was shoved back a couple of steps, almost losing my balance entirely if I hadn't held on to her.

She was desperately clinging to me, and was crying, babbling that someone was down in the dark with her. I could feel her nails rake at my back and grip on my thick jacket. It was hard to understand everything with her face against my chest, but I had gotten the gist. When she was specifically saying "she" was there, I had assumed the ravenette was talking about the she-wolf. There was no one else that I could think of that could have riled the ravenette so much.

I didn't know how to calm the woman down, but there was only one thing I could think of doing. I rubbed her back with my broken arm, and weaved my other hand through her hair, like I had done to Umeko whenever she snuck in my room in the middle of the night. Like with Umeko, it seemed to have a soothing affect on the ravenette at least when her blathering slowed down.

"Trust me, there's no one down there," I whispered over her ear, resting my soaking and cold cheek on her head. She smelled like flowers, and was warm, so even if it should have felt awkward, I shoved that feeling down so I could hold on to her. Holding her was enough to even calm me down a little. After a few minutes, when she had traded her muttering for trying to hold in her sobs, I carefully unbound her arms and led her to the table next to the basement door so I could retrieve a flashlight from the drawer.

"No, I can't," she groaned. I couldn't quite see her face in the dark, but could tell she was crying.

"It's going to be OK, I promise. I'll show you that there's no one down there." I was barely able to hold her hand with my broken hand because of the cast wrapped around my fingers, and I held the flashlight with my other. Whether she wanted to or not, the best thing for her was to be certain that there were indeed no interlopers in the house. Plus, I also needed to know that there weren't any persons that shouldn't be in my home. I only told her there wasn't anyone with her to get her to calm down-there really could have been someone with her.

We took one step at a time. Step down, the second foot meeting the step of the first foot, and then the first took the next step down, repeating this march until we reached the bottom. He waved the light around, showing the empty concrete room with only a water heater in the corner. Hitsoku even handed me the flashlight so I could inspect as thoroughly as I wanted. I found the flashlight that I had dropped. The glass was cracked, and the plastic rim around the glass was broken. It wouldn't turn on at all when I pushed the button. The only additional feature that I noted was a dark spot on the floor that I at first thought was a peculiar water stain, but it was too far away from any pipe overhead, and too far away from the water heater. Other than that, the basement was completely empty. God, I felt stupid.

I handed Hitsoku back the flashlight, and he lead me back up, holding my hand again through it all. When we reached the ground floor of the house, he dragged his bag away from the door and the door closed shut on its own, probably as stuck as when I first tried to open the door. While I went to sit on the stairs to the second floor, Hitsoku moved the small table, it had a pad of paper and a pen for writing notes down when he was on the phone, in front of the basement door-a temporary fix for a hopefully temporary problem. I didn't look away from my knees, but I could feel Hitsoku sit next to me, and hear the step lightly creak.

" Are you OK? You didn't get hurt, did you?"

I shook my head. When the door slammed shut behind me, I had dropped the flashlight and turned around too quickly. I nearly slipped, but my arm found the railing and I desperately held my body upright. After a few tries at trying to open the door, that's when I heard her. I was finally alone just like she wanted. And it was terrifying.

" You didn't hurt your head or sprain your ankle?"

I shook my head again. "My arm and side hurts from when I grabbed the rail, but it's nothing serious."

I exhaled in relief. If she had hit her head and had developed a concussion, I wouldn't have known what to do. The buses were dangerous, the taxis closed, I didn't have a car-not that I knew how to drive one-and the phones were out so I wouldn't have been able to call for an ambulance.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you? For thinking there was someone with me?" She sounded like she was about to cry again.

"No, I-."

"Liar." Her voice cracked, and her shoulders shook.

I moved the upright flashlight and scooted closer to her to place my fingertips on her shoulder. The warmth she had was inviting, but I didn't want to blow it and make her angry, or even more scared. Just knowing that she was so warm made me start to shiver. "The darkness likes to play tricks. It likes to distort your sense of time, and how much space around you there is. It dives into your mind and pulls out your deepest fears. The fears talk to you, and can even touch you and harm you. You don't have to be crazy to experience those kinds of things, especially if you're alone in the dark."

She slowly pulled her head up to look at me. "You were alone in the dark too?"

"I fell down the stairs in the basement. That's how I hurt my head," I said as I traced my scar with the heel of my palm. What I saw down there, I didn't want to tell her. I wasn't sure if she would understand, and it was kind of embarrassing. I looked to the side, not willing to face up to it. A sudden and violent chill ran up my spine, and I had to let go of her to hold on to myself. All the adrenaline staved off the wet and cold, but now that I had calmed down, I was freezing! My jacket wasn't doing much of anything besides feeling heavier and not even bringing my knees up to my chest made a slight of difference. I couldn't stop my teeth from chattering.

She tugged on my jacket and exclaimed, "You're soaked! Why didn't you say something about this sooner?"

"Cause I was worried about you," I stuttered out in between the clacks of my teeth. To be honest, I didn't mean to say anything, but my scalp was so cold it hurt to think such clear statements besides 'I'm freezing!'

"Come on, get up!" She sounded more angry than concerned. When I stood up, albeit considerably slouching, she pulled my arms apart, ripped the zipper down, and yanked my jacket off before I could protest.

"Gah! Give it back, it's even colder!" I felt her hands over my chest.

"Your shirt's soaked too? How long were you out there?" She wouldn't let me have my jacket back, and it was even harder for me to answer her questions. "Come on. You need to get out of those clothes. I'll go get a towel." With the flashlight shaking in my hands, my knees creaked in protest, and I barely made it up to the fourth step before she returned to my side with an arm around my back. Her warmth was certainly more encouraging than her orders. When we reached my room, she took the flashlight and started to tug on my shirt.

"What are you doing?" I yelled.

"What does it look like?" She snapped back. "You need dry clothes."

"I can do it myself." Without the flashlight, I rummaged through my drawers and felt for my underwear, a shirt and sweatpants, and felt along the walls for my bathroom.

"Don't you want the flashlight?" She sounded like she was right in front of the door.

"No, thank you," I replied, but I was shivering so hard that I wasn't sure I could say it loud enough. The shirt was no problem, even

though I scratched my back trying to cling the shirt as I pulled it forward over my head, but my fingertips were so numb that I couldn't unbutton or unzip my jeans, so I had to pull it off my hips (even though it felt like a rug burn doing it). Just thinking about her having to do that made my face feel warm. Now that would have been humiliating.

I felt much better having dry clothes on, and when I opened the bathroom door, the woman surprised me by draping the towel on my head. "At least let me do this much."

"Fine," I exhaled. I didn't have much strength to argue with her, and I could see faintly from the flashlight standing upright on my nightstand that she really wanted to do this. If she wasn't so insistent about this, I would have just sunk in my bed under the blankets and went to sleep, wet hair, half-wet clothes and all. I was just too tired.

We sat on the edge of my bed as she carefully wrung my hair out with the towel. I'm glad she wasn't just scratching at my head like the way I usually dry my hair. She was being deliberately gentle about it, and it felt good every time her fingers accidentally glided across my cheeks. I could detect the soft smell of flowers from her wrist. The warmth she emanated comforted me in ways I hadn't felt before. She repeatedly took the towel and petted and dabbed thick strands of my hair, making it a slow process, but I didn't mind. Our eyes didn't meet during this; she was focused on what she was doing, and I was watching her determined face. Her look was softer. She didn't have a scowl or tenseness in her expression like usual.

His skin was still far too cold, and with only a flashlight, I couldn't tell how pale his skin was. At least he wasn't shivering as much as before. He must have ached walking home, and walking up the stairs. I should have told him to take a warm shower, but he just looked so tired, he looked like he could have fallen asleep as I was drying his hair. He probably would have fallen asleep in the shower.

Hitsoku didn't look as handsome with long hair, but I did like his hair. I liked running my fingers through it. His hair made me wonder what I

would look like if my own hair was longer. My hair had been growing, but it was only slight. If my hair was longer, would I be or feel more womanly? How would others see me?

I peaked up at Hitsoku, and looked more fully in Hitsoku's eyes to realize that he was staring at me and he had been leaning much closer to me than before. Our faces were only about half a foot apart! I could feel his shaky breath waft across my cheeks. In surprise, I tugged the towel down over his face. "You can dry the rest of it yourself," I muttered, turning my body completely around to hide my own face. How long had he been staring at me and how long had our faces been that close? I stood up and headed for the door, intending to go to my own room, but remembered that I needed to say something. "Thank you, Hitsoku-san, for saving me."

He lifted part of the towel so we could see each other. "Yeah, you too. For drying my hair. Good night."

" Good night." What did Hitsoku think of me?

...

"Sadness pervades

all that I am,

mainly because

I don't know

all that

I

am."

- "Mainly Because" by Hillary Brender

Chapter 21

"First love is only a little foolishness and a lot of curiosity." - George Bernard Shaw

It seemed as if, all of a sudden, I didn't have time to myself anymore. A few days after the storm, Masuyo had visited and brought along a few snobby people interested in buying my paintings, drawings, or whatever I had; although all they did was criticize my furniture and the tea that Satsuki had served (luckily she didn't hear that), talk about their rich lives and how fine they were; they didn't even buy anything of mine and swore that they would recommend me to other people. I wouldn't hold my breath to that. Masuyo also reminded me that the new exhibit opening party was coming up, which he hinted that I had to come. Along with a date, which he made it seem mandatory. Whatever.

That guy, Shigure, came once, which he had brought Tohru, some guy with orange hair, and the little girl that hung out with the sandy-haired kid, along with a serious looking teenage girl with short black hair and quite an outfit who marched straight to the punk kid without even a look in my direction. I was torn between staying in my room, away from that guy mostly, and staying down stairs to spend time with Tohru. Luckily, he only wanted to talk with Akito, which she didn't look at all happy with. I was more than shocked when I figured out that Tohru was dating someone, more specifically, the orange-haired kid (the hand-holding and a peck on the cheek was more than an adequate sign for me to figure out), but I didn't say anything. I needed some time to process that information. My cousin had truly grown up, and it only reminded me how much I missed it, and how much I missed Kyoko and Katsuya. I should probably go to their graves soon.

As if all the surprise visits, helping Tsukimoto out cleaning his shop because his front windows were smashed from the storm, working,

occasionally babysitting Hinata, and then working on commissions for other people weren't enough, my room isn't even a private place anymore!

The first time it happened, waking up with Akito's head resting on my shoulder the morning after the storm, it freaked me out, but didn't say anything because I thought it would just be one time, which I could understand because that night was stressful. She had seemed surprised as well as embarrassed about it, even after I told her that it was fine because of that night. I was just as surprised on the second time it happened. By the time the fifth morning came around, I was somewhat used to it. It was still uncomfortable because I would have refused if I could, if I had been coherent, but knowing I couldn't refuse even if I was (something about refusing a strained woman just makes me feel guilty), well, I'll just put it that I didn't mind it in a mindful way. It was now officially a straight week this had happened, and it was on the border of it being either absolutely ridiculous or strangely comfortable. I shouldn't hope to wake up to this every morning, but those thoughts still linger in the very back corner of my mind. Having a soft, warm presence next to me at night was something I hadn't thought I missed, but why me? She could call whoever she wanted, or she could choose someone else to comfort her. I am hardly the capable guy of easing whatever shadow she was carrying around.

By then, I had learned to keep a camera in my bedside drawers, just for that kind of morning. I carefully got out of my bed and started taking pictures. She just looked so peaceful, and soft. When she was asleep, her guard was completely down, and she looked more vulnerable. It was something that I had never seen in anyone, and I felt the need to record it, as much of it as I could, so I could replicate it later on canvas or on paper. She even had this alluring expression, sighing softly as she buried the side of her face into the pillow, and parting her lips before her eyes fluttered open.

Oh. Crap.

"What the hell?" I squeaked, bolting up from the bed, dragging the blanket to cover myself from the camera. If I was any louder, someone would have woken up, and I definitely didn't want anyone to wake up to see that I was in Hitsoku's bed. Again. I thought he was an artist, not a photographer! What was he doing with a camera?

Hitsoku faltered and stuttered, trying to find some way to say whatever he was trying to say. "Well, you see, I, um, well, er, how do I say this?"

"I don't care what your reason is, give me the camera." I hold out my arm expectantly. "Now."

"What?" Hitsoku chuckled. "No."

"What do you mean, 'no'? Give me the camera, right now."

"No way am I giving you my camera. Do you know how expensive this is?"

"Then give me the memory card."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you're a pervert who took pictures of me while I was asleep!"

His face turned bright red, and he didn't deny it, but he did have a retort. "Says the woman who's sneaked into my bed every night for a week now."

"I didn't sneak into your bed! You gave me permission." That was half a lie. Every night, late into the night, I snuck over to his room and woke him up to ask him if I could sleep over, and he did let me, but he continually mistook me for "Umeko."

"I don't remember any of that."

"Because you were too drowsy, now give me the memory card." I started to get out of the bed, and he started rushing to his ladder to the attic. "Oh, no you don't." Unfortunately, I was too slow and he made it to his studio with the door closed, and locked it. "Get back down here, you coward."

Why the hell did he want those pictures? Why wouldn't he just delete them?

Hitsoku's phone rang by his bedside. When it continued to ring, it was obvious that Hitsoku hadn't installed a phone in his studio. I didn't want anyone else to wake up yet, so I took the call, doing my best to mask my irritation. "Hello, Hitsoku-san can't come to the phone right now, but I can take a message."

"Is this Akito-chan?"

"Yes, is this Masuyo-san?"

"Oh, good. I most wanted to talk to you."

When I was sure that Akito had left my room, I came down and immediately locked my door. Just in case. I then saw the note on my bedside table, and groaned. Apparently, the call Akito had taken was from Masuyo, telling me that the party was tonight. I had totally forgotten about it, and had also forgotten to prepare for it. Luckily, I had all day and an address book.

"I didn't know you owned a suit!" Satsuki gushed. Honestly, this was the only suit I owned, and I wore it every time I needed it. I never bothered to buy another one because I almost never wore a suit anyway. "And your tie knot is so fancy! It looks like a bamboo shoot." On a whim I looked up different ways of tying a tie, which was about as easy as folding origami-it took a few tries, but I got it down as neat as I could.

"Thank you. I'm glad you approve," I said, only because I didn't know how else to reply. When there was a knock at my door, I took the chance to excuse myself to answer it. "Ah, Masuyo-san. Welcome." I bowed respectfully to him and his two lovely companions. This guy could talk any woman to hang out with him for the night. They were attractive in their own right too. "So, are we ready to go?"

Masuyo looked around behind me. "Where is Akito-chan?"

"You mean Sohma-san? Why would she come?"

"Because I'm your date tonight," she said from the top of the stairs coming down. I looked to her and my eyes bulged out of their sockets. She wore a dress that new how to hug her body in certain areas, and was loose in other areas to keep a man guessing. It was honestly sexy in a modest fashion.

My face turned red, and I didn't know how to react, until I remembered that I already had a date. "My date? What? But I have a date."

"What?" Akito and Masuyo belted out. "Since when?" Akito was immediately at my side with a furious expression.

"Since a couple hours ago when I called her."

"You called her at the last minute?" Masuyo asked, sounding ashamed.

"Well, when did you decide to become my date? And why?" I asked Akito pointedly. She didn't even ask me.

"When Masuyo-san called this morning, when you ran up in your attic. And you know why." She narrowed her eyes even more when she stated the last sentence.

It was revenge for this morning.

"Well I can't cancel on her at the last minute, since I called her at the last minute."

"That's fine," Masuyo stated with a sly smile. "They'll both be your dates tonight."

"What?" I stated. I may not have been great with women-OK, I was probably terrible with women-but it doesn't take someone savvy to know that taking two women around your arm was a bad idea. Especially when one was already pissed at you. This was going to be a long, long night.

"Isn't it a very curious thing that St. Patrick drove teh snakes out of Ireland an' the English brought in the fleas." - Frank McCourt; *Angela's Ashes*