

My ma, she... never really had t' say it.

She'd just... look at me, y'know?

And I could see it on her face.

I mean, yeah, I knew she loved me.

Loved me more'n she loved her own stupid, sacred self.

Always said nothin' would change that.

But every Sunday, she'd just...

Smile.

Chapter Three

Today?

The room was bright. The sterile, white- wash walls seemed to raise the quiet humming and beeping behind him to a cacophonous pitch, each note like a drop of water centered on his forehead.

Raiku looked around, eyeing the innocuous bathroom door, the curtain drawn on the empty bed beside him, the handrails fixed to the walls.

How did he get here?

Sitting up, he reached for his head, only to wince. The thick gauze wrapped around his skull pulsed at the lightest touch, jogging vague memories around in his skull like so many flies trapped in a jar.

Nothing was clear. He remembered a face, adorned with so many piercings. A kind smile.

A plain looking man who wasn't what he was.

A vile stench.

A woman, wrapped in a heavy coat.

Eyes that knew.

Why was he here?

He was due elsewhere, that much he knew. The details were hazy. Had it been an invitation? Was someone waiting on him?

If he was here, he was probably late.

Biting his lip, he swung his feet around the lip of the bed. His vision blurred, head pounding. He took a deep breath, picking the clips and stickers from his fingers and chest. Easing down, his feet touched the warm floor.

... Warm?

Well.

It was winter.

Clearly they heated the floor.

Legs trembling, he stepped shakily into the hall beyond his room. He took a deep breath as he glanced around, lungs filling with the scent of bleach and chloroform. Save for the equipment, the hall was silent — a beaming column of sterility with each surface cleaner than the last.

He worked his way down the hall. Stumbling, he caught himself with a hand on the wall, but he quickly drew back his fingers — filthy and sweaty, he was sure. Who knew where they'd been?

Reaching for the hand rail, he hesitated. It was full of tiny, circular scratches. The mark of years of scrubbing.

He bit his lip. Grasped the rail, anyway.

The patter of his bare feet seemed to grow louder as he walked, the machinery quieter, the lack of human presence sucking the air out from around him. By the time he reached the end of the hall, it hurt to breath. The rail grew warmer and warmer, until it burned his fingers.

Turning the corner, he spotted a woman's back. She was stooped over a cart, tending supplies. He paused, then tapped her on the shoulder with the back of his hand. Once, twice.

She didn't move.

Raiku blinked, stepping back. Eyes narrowing, he reached slowly forward, resting his wrist on her back.

She wasn't breathing.

Tilting his head, he drew his hands to his chest and stepped slowly around her. When he spotted her face, he stopped.

Paper mache...?

Biting his lip, he looked to her cart, hastily grasping at a bottle of sanitizer. Slathering it all over his hands, he eased in closer, nervous fingers gingerly touching her face. Pale and dry. He traced over her plump cheeks, her withered old lips — smiling cheerfully, naively, as though she had always looked at the brighter side of life.

He reached down to her hands. They were curled carefully around a sterile needle, ready to tear the stubborn packaging. Thick fingers, the sort that were always in pain, but were especially wary of the weather.

Perfect. Clean. She smelled like a bundle of roses that had been washed and paper pressed. Under his breath, he thanked her for her years of hard work.

Stepping away, he turned slowly, wondering if anyone had done the same while she was still around to thank.

His feet carried him farther, though in what direction he wasn't entirely sure. The walls seemed to shrink around him, ushering him forward on a linear path as though to remind him that he was late, that he was due, that he was still *here*. He felt heat at his back, sharp and dry, and with a glance over his shoulder he saw flame crawling patiently along the rails.

The woman's cheek grew red hot, then her hands, paste and paper curling and smoldering above a wire frame.

Raiku winced, drawing his fingers to his chest. He felt sick, and dropped them to his side, lips moving in silent apology to the woman he had defiled.

In moments, he was heading around another corner, only to arrive at an information desk.

There were two nurses behind it, one seated and one standing. Each was plaster. The cheek of the former was streaked with a single stripe of fleshy tan, the latter with a healthy brown. Both were smiling. Both were pointing down another hall.

Nodding thankfully with fingers entwined, he followed their suggestion. Behind him, he felt the breeze of closing doors, sealing the halls from his intrusive presence.

The halls ahead were silent. Odorless. The beeping had faded, replaced by vacuum. A vacuum home to three more nurses, each staring his way with the most plastic smiles he had seen in years, urging him ahead. The first had painted lips, the second lips and brow. The third, a small woman whose sunken cheeks spoke of hardship and sorrow, had painted hands.

He warily regarded each as he passed, eyes meeting their chalky white sockets. He paused at the last, looking more closely — she was familiar. Haitian? He knew her from —

No, she wanted him to go. He could feel the heat again, this time in his feet. They were seeping dirt, filth, leaving a mess on her clean floor. He was lingering, and she had been kind enough not to say so. To treat him as a guest. He took a step away, toward the end of the hall, where a handful of white balloons bobbed along the ceiling.

Just before the corner, he froze. He knew this scent. Thick, sweet, and musky, tinged with the chemical scent of masculinity. Reality as truth; reality as product. The cigar, seated in cologne.

Slowly, carefully, he turned his head around the corner. His eyes widened. His stomach dropped.

It was a dead end, with a single wheelchair parked next to an open door. Seated there, hewn from clay, was his grandfather.

Padding forward, he knelt slowly a few feet away, daring himself to crawl closer. His hands touched the priceless suit pants, the unbuttoned custom jacket just above. They reached for thin, frail fingers on his lap, permanently calloused from decades of hard work.

Still as stone, they were as warm as the tears streaming down his cheeks.

Raiku reached for the old man's face, but hesitated. It was so perfect, down to the dimples etched forever into his cheeks, the crinkles around his eyes, the wiry goatee he had tried for so many years to pass off as professional, only to excuse as his elderly prerogative.

Ojii- san. Taking a deep breath, he drew his fingers away, only to straighten the crooked fedora that covered his grandfather's balding head. The suit jacket was tugged down around the old man's shoulders and buttoned. Closing his eyes and wiping his own cheeks, he smiled softly to himself. *Ojii- san* was old, not sloppy.

Looking back up, he arched a brow. His grandfather was pointing into the room, now. Glancing over, he crawled to his feet, stealing one last lungful of his grandfather's presence. He stepped hesitantly away.

The room was strung with photos, dozens clipped to string and crossed along the ceiling. More balloons bobbed along, obscuring some pictures and highlighting others.

They were all from his home. Family photos with his mother, his grandfather, his aunts and uncles and cousins. Some of them involved him. Most of them didn't. But one of them stood out. His favorite. The only one he had hung in his room, back home.

In it, he was six. He, his mother, and his grandfather were grinning ear to ear, huddled together in front of the central gate of Japan's Horyuji Temple — one of the world's oldest surviving wooden structures.

A teardrop struck the image, and he quickly pulled it away, wiping it on his hospital gown and scrubbing his cheeks with the back of a hand. Glancing down, he stopped, noticing something etched into the back of the image.

His mother's handwriting.

We miss you, Rai- chan. Why didn't you save us?

A deep quiver setting into his knees. Sinking to the floor, he stared at the words, years of repressed guilt flooding his gut. His chest tightened, his throat swelled, and before he could stop it, stuff it down for the hundredth time, he found himself sobbing.

For the longest time, he sat there, fists balling around the photograph. Seconds passed. Minutes. Maybe hours. When he finally stood, flesh loose and mind numb, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Whipping around, he froze, gaze locking onto his uncle's concrete eyes. In his lips was a withered cigarette, ash long since crumbled onto the brown plastic tray he clutched in his fingers.

It held a scalpel, and a folded note.

Trembling fingers picked up the note. Opened it.

You watched me do it.

You could have stopped me sooner.

You are a coward.

You are a disgrace.

You know what you are worth.

And you know what to do.

Raiku dropped the note. Numb hands touched the tray. Worked slowly toward the center.

He looked back to his uncle's face.

Nodded slowly.

And grasped the blade.