

Chapter Five

Today

New York City -- Winter

“HOW IS HE?”

“Good, all things considering. The nurse stopped him before he... before anything too serious could happen.”

Raiku blinked, bright light streaming across his face as a nurse fiddled with the blinds — who? He knew her from... when? His last visit. Yes, that was right. Ma... Matha... Mathania, was her name, right? A Haitian immigrant. Yes. He remembered her from his last visit, when he broke his arm. She was a kind woman, but right now, she was searing his eyes.

He tried to reach for his face, but his hand was stuck.

Stuck?

“I am an adult, Doctor Cross. A grown woman. Don’t sugarcoat.”

“My apologies, Ms. Kaminaga, I —”

His head rolled to the side. Eyes opened. His hand was cuffed to the bed. Had he —

“Please. Hirubasa.”

“... Ms. Hirubasa, I meant no offense. Your nephew, he is... very sick, but his wounds should heal quite nicely. The scalpel he used was only about a quarter- inch long, so the damage was superficial, really. Just... be warned. It looks much worse than it is. Twelve... well, not lacerations. Incisions, really. He’ll have scars.”

That voice. *Oba*. His stomach sank, cheeks flowing crimson. His *obawas* here, to see him like this. As a failure. A prisoner.

“... Thank you. This medication... you said it was new? How is it different?”

“Uhh, yes. Ms... Hirubasa, how familiar are you with neuroscience?”

His eyes fell closed again. His head hurt. His stomach hurt worse. What had he done? What had *they* done, to draw his aunt back from abroad?

“Quite, by now. Go ahead.”

“Well, as you are probably aware, previous medicines worked by modifying the distribution of dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with the reward centers of the brain. They... helped quite a bit with the so- called ‘positive’ symptoms — hallucinations, delusions, that sort of thing. But they weren’t as much help for the ‘negative’ symptoms — blunted emotion, lack of motivation, lack of pleasure. The real kickers. What goes on inside.”

The inside? Raiku grit his teeth. The man had no idea. No clue. If aunt Kana wasn’t here, he would have...

... done nothing, in truth. What could he do? What could he say?

He was here.

“And what does this new drug do differently?”

“It... well, everything, really. It regulates glutamate, not dopamine. Glutamate is... really the main road of communication in the brain. Too much, and you’re subject to seizures and your brain cells start to die, among other things. On the other hand, too little can lead to coma, death, and... psychosis. It’s a pretty big deal, really, and what we’ve found is that this new drug addresses not only the positive symptoms, but the negative. It should help him function in a real, appreciable way. It won’t cause the Parkinsons- like symptoms down the road, either, as tardive dyskinesia is directly tied to dopamine.”

Great. It wouldn't break his body — just his soul. His wrists turned in the cuffs, pulling gently, careful not to make a sound. He didn't want the doctor to know. He didn't want to see his face. To have to feign appreciation.

"I see. Thank you, Doctor. Now, may I have some time with him?"

"Of course. Take care, Ms. Hirubasa. I'll be available if you have any questions."

Raiku took a deep breath. Clenched his eyes tighter. He didn't want to see her face. Her disappointment. Her shame.

Her guilt.

"Raiku?"

His toes wriggled, feet pulling subtly against their restraints. His eyes opened slowly, hesitantly. He stared at the wall. "... *Obasan*."

"I... heard you were arrested. At the mall. I came as quickly as I could."

His lips parted to speak, but he had nothing to say. They closed again.

"The doctor said —"

"I heard."

"... Oh. Alright. Well, that's good, right? I know you were worried about the side effects, and —"

"No." He pursed his lips, fingers balling into fists. "Why does nobody ask *me*? I don't... *fuckin'* want 'em."

"... Raiku, you're already on the —"

"*No. More. Drugs*. Whoarethey, anyway? Who says they can tell me what I'm sposeda see, or think, or —"

"Raiku, please. Look at yourself. How do you think you got —"

"What are you even doing here? You come all this way just to get on my case, like I don't already know what you want?! I —"

His face reeled back with a loud smack, pain surging through his porcelain cheek.

"*Obasan*..."

"Christ sake, Raiku! I did not travel ten thousand miles to have you spit in my face!"

"I —"

"No, you listen to me!"

Kana's fingers clenched his jaw. She pulled his face toward hers.

Small, dainty features, twisted in hurt and rage. Almond eyes, creased with the first signs of age. Straight, jet- black hair, shoulder length. His aunt had always seemed frail, in body, but few dared to cross her.

"Do you even know what you did to yourself?! To others?! The man from the mall, the one you punched in the face, needed six stitches in his lip. Six! There's a nurse with a black eye, and the monitor... *thing* you broke, it cost the hospital *thousands*. But you know what really bothers me in all of this, Raiku? Do you know what hurts me most?!"

Raiku bit his lip. Shook his head. His eyes widened a bit as his aunt reached for his cuffs, ripping them off the bed.

Grasping his hospital- issued top, she yanked it up. She reached for his head. Clenching his hair, she pulled forward, as if demanding he look for himself.

Nodding quickly with a wince, he tried to push himself up. The skin on his abdomen cried out in protest, and he timidly glanced down.

His stomach was covered in gauze. From just above his groin to the flesh over his ribs, he was sewn, padded, and taped. He couldn't see what had happened, but his brief motion was more than enough to feel.

"That... *this*, all of this, it's *my fault*. That I can't be here to watch you. To keep you safe. And that I trusted you, for just a moment, to take care of yourself. I lied to myself, Raiku. And it hurt you."

Raiku fell silent. His fingers trailed across his side, across his bandages. He didn't remember doing this. He hardly remembered the mall. There was a man, whom he'd hit, for some reason. A curious woman. A kind stranger, who helped him after he tripped. Glass in his head.

And then a nightmare. The hospital. *Ojiichan.Kaasan*. His... uncle.

His lip quivered. He sank back, eyes trailing off to the wall, again. Fingertips grasped the bedsheets.

After a long silence, the elder Hirubasa sighed quietly. "What... *happened*, Rai- kun? Why would you do this to yourself?"

Raiku closed his eyes. Swallowed hard. "... My... your hus... *Kaminaga*, he... blamed me. Mom, too. Wanted to know why I... didn't sa... s- save..."

His aunt drew in a sharp breath. Her fingers began to tremble, and she held a hand over his lips, shaking her head. "That... wasn't real, Raiku. You were —"

“ *Don’t tell me what’s real!!*” His eyes shot back to hers, moisture welling within. “It was real to me! Don’t you get it?! All of it, everything I see, it’s *all**real TO ME!***”

She paused. Glanced down. Smiled softly. “What... what my husband did, Rai- kun... was no one’s fault.”

His eyes moistened. He held up a hand, began to speak, to protest.

“ *No.*” Stepping slowly around the bed, she shook her head again. Knelt next to his face. “No. You know what you did do, Rai- kun? You saved *me*. Fourteen years old, and you saved my *life*.”

“ *Oba...I...*”

“Your mother wouldn’t blame you for that.” Leaning closer, his aunt wrapped her arms around his shoulders, cupping his head in one hand. Fingertips leafed through the snow- white roots of his hair. “You know as well as I do, Rai- chan, that your mother would thank God, Himself, that He gave her a son so brave. And that... *that* is why I tell you, it wasn’t real.”

Raiku looked down. His vision blurred. Weak hands trailed slowly around his aunt’s tiny frame, holding her as his eyes began to overflow. First gently, then as tight as he could. His throat tightened. His chest burned.

And for the first time in two years, he sobbed.