

Never Mind Me

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Syaoran is the ghost of a young boy who haunts the Kinomoto family's new home. When Syaoran discovers that Sakura is in for a terrible fate, he agrees to a sacrifice to protect her. But he doesn't realize what he's really given up...

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Shattered Silence

Brief summery : When Fujitaka gets a new job, the Kinomoto family must move from the hustle-bustle of Tokyo to the small, quiet town of Tomoeda. Little do they know that old house they move into already has an occupant: the ghost of a young boy named Syaoran. When he finds out that Sakura is fated to die sooner than she should, he agrees to sacrifice himself for the chance to save her. But what kind of sacrifice is involved when someone has nothing but his own being to give up in exchange? What are the limits of the human condition? And what, exactly, does it mean to be alive?

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Chapter One

Shattered Silence

Syaoran glared at the people who were invading his home. The workers were noisy and obnoxious as they scuffled around the house kicking up the decades worth of dust that coated the hardwood floors. Syaoran had no idea what they were doing exactly, but they were being extremely rude while doing it.

Syaoran had inhabited the same house for as long as he could remember, and assumed it was where he had died. The house gave him a sense of comfort and familiarity, which was why he never wandered very far from the area. Sometimes he wondered if he was bound to the house in the way a fish was bound to water.

So naturally, he felt extremely offended and irritated when he suddenly found his home swarming with nearly two dozen mortals.

"What are all these Living doing here?" Syaoran asked no one in particular.

"They're called 'movers' Syaoran," a solemn male voice sounded beside the boy. Syaoran casually turned his head to look at the new arrival, but he didn't know why he bothered. There was only one person in the entire world who even knew that he existed.

Syaoran looked up to see a handsome young man dressed in white, flowing robes standing over him. His long white hair flowed down his back and blended in with his robes. He had piercing sky-blue eyes and large white wings that flared protectively over Syaoran, as if to shield him from the noise. In fact, the young man's appearance did seem to make the noise a bit more tolerable.

Along with Syaoran's memories of his home, Yue had also always been around. Syaoran found that whenever he needed him (whether it was a conscious or unconscious thought,) Yue appeared, always with an appropriate response. Syaoran had never questioned Yue's presence, since without him Syaoran would be doomed to wander his silent, lonely home without a soul to call company.

"Movers?" Syaoran asked, following a particularly fat one as he fiddled with the pipes in the kitchen sink. "What are they doing?"

"Making the house livable for mortal people," Yue said following closely behind Syaoran as the ghost wandered through the house. Syaoran stopped in every room to glare at the people working inside. "It seems that this house is up for sale."

Syaoran stopped moving and didn't even seem to notice when a group of workers passed right through him. He whirled around, looking as angry and threatening as a ghost possibly could.

"Someone is selling MY house!" Syaoran yelled, his aura flaring. "Who would dare!"

Yue had never seen Syaoran so angry, but couldn't say it was unjustified. Most ghosts resisted change; especially sudden, abrupt change. It seemed Syaoran was no different.

"This house belongs to the Living, Syaoran," Yue explained calmly, deftly sidestepping out of the path of a worker. "They don't recognize your presence, so it's no use getting angry and shouting at those who won't hear your voice. It's best to save your energy."

Syaoran nodded, although his aura was still blazing dangerously. He watched intently as a worker got on a ladder and began clearing the cobwebs that hung gracefully from the ceiling. Syaoran crossed his arms tightly over his chest as if to keep them from doing something he'd regret.

"I don't know how much longer I can take this," Syaoran said, his voice strained as if talking through gritted teeth. His ghostly hair was standing on end like an angry cat's. He glided over to where a man was cleaning the dust off the windowsills. "Look at what they're doing! I like that there!"

"Get used to it," Yue said in an offhand way. "There are many more changes where that came from."

Time passed (Syaoran had no idea how much time, since he never bothered to keep track,) and the Living continued to shatter his quiet existence by parading nosily around his home. Besides the workers, potential buyers would often take a tour of Syaoran's house. The ghost would follow them closely, as if he could somehow stop any potential sale with his presence alone.

Every time it was the same routine: an older man carrying a clipboard would lead one or two other people through each room, all the while giving them the identical speech.

"As you can see, the home comes unfurnished and is a bit of a fixer-upper, but even with the minimal repairs that have to be made after

the crew is done here, it's a great bargain. The property totals 8,000 square feet with three baths, five bedrooms including the master, and a huge living area and kitchen. The neighborhood has a low crime rate and one of the best elementary schools in the county is located four blocks down the road."

"And how long did you say this place has been abandoned?" the other man would usually ask, eyeing the cobwebs on the ceiling.

"Well, the home has never actually been *abandoned*," the salesman would say defensively. "The city has kept up with the lawn and the exterior of the home to keep it up to code. Although the home's been vacant for a little over fifty years, it doesn't show as much wear as it should, due to the constant upkeep on the exterior."

The couple would then ask for a moment alone and they would spend a considerable amount of time murmuring to themselves. Eventually one of them would say something like, "Are there any other homes in the area that we could take a look at?" and the salesman would lead the people out of the house while muttering about how he would "never sell a piece of junk like this place."

This, of course, was perfectly fine with Syaoran. The last thing he wanted were noisy, disruptive mortals to go traipsing through his house at every moment of every day. He would be perfectly happy if all he had to put up with were these periodic interruptions.

"It's only a matter of time before the house is sold Syaoran," Yue said warningly, only to disappear as quickly as he had arrived.

To Syaoran's utter relief, one day all the people simply stopped coming. For some length of time, Syaoran was alone and content in his silent house, although he could sense that this was only the calm before the storm.

The workers had totally renovated the house, much to Syaoran's horror. The holes in the ceiling were gone, as were all the cobwebs

that once hung gracefully in the corners. Most of the dust remained, although the careless construction workers had kicked up the flawless layers and spread them unevenly throughout the rooms. Several new lighting fixtures had been adhered to the walls in strategic locations, all with new bulbs in their sockets.

Syaoran was certain that, with enough time, he could adjust to the situation. He could only hope that no one bought the house for at least a few more years.

All too quickly, however, the "for sale" sign disappeared from the lawn. Syaoran wasn't stupid; he knew that it meant the house had been sold. His heart sank. How long would it be before some noisy, messy Living took up residency in his house 24-7?

His question was answered when a car suddenly ("suddenly" to Syaoran means "a few days later") pulled into the driveway and three Living climbed out. Syaoran couldn't see them too well in the overwhelming afternoon sunlight, but he could tell that there was one middle-aged man, a boy in his late teens, and girl who looked about fifteen. After a few minutes, a huge moving truck pulled into the driveway behind them and the movers began to unload pieces of furniture onto the lawn.

"Great..." Syaoran said, glaring menacingly at the new arrivals. He savored his last few moments alone before the family unlocked the door to his home and let themselves inside.

"Wow!" a cheerful, girlish voice exclaimed. Unlike Syaoran and Yue's voices, hers echoed off the bare walls. It was strange to hear a voice that was so energetic. "It's so big!"

Syaoran continued to glower as he caught sight of his tormentors for the first time. The first one he noticed was the girl who seemed to be about the same age Syaoran's ghostly body was locked into. She had short, stylish auburn hair and bright emerald eyes that were currently dashing around the house, taking in every square inch.

"Yeah..." said the teenager. He seemed on the verge of turning 20, but not quite. He had very dark brown hair, so dark that was almost black, serious eyes, and an extremely pointed face. "It's still really dusty in here though."

"Yes, well, the workers only renovated the house," the older man said - obviously the father. "It's our job to clean it."

"Then we should start cleaning up, right?" the girl said. She had somehow already obtained a rag and cleaning solution.

The father smiled softly and put a hand on her daughter's shoulder. "I don't know about you Sakura, but I'm hungry. We should get some lunch first."

"Yeah, calm down kaijuu," the teenager said playfully. "We just waked in the door."

"Don't call me kaijuu!" Sakura yelled, stamping her foot down hard on her brother's.

Syaoran rolled his eyes and sighed heavily as he watched Sakura and the teenager chase each other around the house. Syaoran had been hoping for some Living who were a little more quiet.

"This is going to take some getting used to," Syaoran mumbled sulkily to himself.

The family ordered out, ate quickly, and then set to work cleaning the house from top to bottom. Syaoran groaned frustratingly as the dust was slowly cleared away, revealing the hardwood underneath. After they were done sweeping, they mopped the floor until it shined.

Syaoran was impressed with how diligently the family worked, even though he was extremely unhappy with the end result. In little less than an hour, the room had been transformed from a dreary, barren

cave into a bright, comfortable living space. The movers had set up the couch, coffee table, and television set in a suitable arrangement.

By nighttime, the entire house had been cleaned and the rooms were full of furniture. Even though he could simply walk right through the furniture, Syaoran still found them to be annoying obstructions. He wasn't used to having objects in his path all the time.

Syaoran was even more irritated when the girl chose his favorite room in the house as her bedroom. There was a small balcony outside and a wonderful view of the quiet neighborhood below. Syaoran had enjoyed watching the townspeople go about their business from the window, but now that a Living had taken up residency in the room, he figured those days were mostly over.

"This is the most horrible thing that's ever happened," Syaoran said as he watched Sakura unpack all her little girlish trinkets from the boxes that littered the floor.

"You'll get used to it," Yue said, placing a comforting hand on Syaoran's shoulder. He disappeared quickly again, knowing that Syaoran would rather not have too much company at the moment.

The teenager suddenly poked his head into the room, a suspicious expression on his face.

"Were you talking to someone?" he asked, his eyes darting around the room. "I heard voices."

Sakura looked at him quizzically. "Who would I talk to? There's no one here but me."

For a moment, Touya's eyes seemed to linger around the location where Syaoran was present. Then he shrugged and left the room.

"Someday I'll crush him under my foot!" Sakura whispered passionately as she continued to deface Syaoran's property with a set of bright pink curtains and a pastel bedspread.

Syaoran was hoping for some peace and quiet once the family fell asleep, but found Living to be noisy even while they slept. The teenager snored like a foghorn and the girl tended to mumble in her sleep as if she were having bad dreams. Syaoran found both to be horribly distracting and eventually made his way onto the roof to escape the racket.

The full moon hung low in the sky, bathing the sleeping town in a blue-white haze. The moonlight seemed to fill Syaoran's being and renew his energy. He hypothesized that, as a Living's body was sustained on vitamins and minerals, his "body" needed moonlight to function. This hypothesis was further validated by the fact that he always felt weak and sluggish on the days when a new moon was approaching.

Syaoran sighed heavily, which didn't involve breathing because he wasn't able to breathe. For a ghost, sighing was a release of pent-up energy rather than a release of air.

"I hate them," Syaoran said quietly, glaring at his memories of the day.

"You hardly know them," Yue said rationally, appearing on the roof as if he'd always been there. "Give yourself some time to adjust."

"It's unfair that *I'm* the one who has to adjust to *them*," Syaoran said, getting up and pacing around the roof restlessly. "I was here first."

"They seem like nice enough people," Yue said, draping an arm casually over his knee. "It could be worse."

"It couldn't get much better, though," Syaoran said bitterly.

"Who knows," Yue said, a strange tone in his voice. "Maybe you could even grow to *enjoy* their presence."

For the first time since they had known each other, Syaoran turned his potent glare on Yue.

"Never."

The Odds of a Coincidence

Chapter Two

The Odds of a Coincidence

"Hoeeee! I'm late!"

After a few months, Syaoran had slipped into a tolerable routine with the family. The girl was the most predictable. She would wake up late every school morning without fail and then run around like a maniac trying to get ready in time. Syaoran was actually impressed with how she had made an art form out of being late. In three minutes flat, she was dressed, groomed, and downstairs in the kitchen cramming breakfast into her mouth.

"I'm off!" she yelled, spewing crumbs from her toast all over the floor.

"Safe trip!" the father yelled after her.

Syaoran watched her rollerblade down the street from the living room window.

"Onii-chan! Wait up!" she called as she disappeared over the hill.

Syaoran breathed a sigh of relief. The noisiest member of the Kinomoto family was finally gone, if only for a brief amount of time. He savored the stillness and silence. As soon as the father left, Syaoran would be alone again.

In the few months the family had been around, Syaoran had begun to realize he possessed abilities he never had the chance to discover. He found that if he concentrated hard enough on a physical object, he could make it into what he liked to call a "ghost object." It took a tremendous amount of energy to make something a ghost object, so he couldn't keep it up forever. But for that brief period, the

family was unable to see the object until he released his concentration and allowed it to go back to being physical again.

At first he had just used the power just to annoy the family. He would hide car keys, textbooks, left socks, and the like for no other reason than to be a pain. After a while of doing this, however, he realized that the power actually had practical applications.

The family had an impressive library of books (most of them still in boxes from the move) and he spent countless hours sitting by the window, reading whatever random book he happened to come by. The stories they told helped him to understand his new roommates. Love was often a major theme in almost every book and Syaoran came to the logical conclusion that love was one thing all Living could understand, even though he had a hard time finding the significance in the subject.

The Living craved affection; that he understood. But as to *why*, he was in the dark. All Syaoran wanted was to be left alone and to have things back the way they were: quiet and calm.

"I'm home!" the girl yelled, banging through the house even though none of her other family members were home.

Syaoran sighed. She seemed to like making noise for no reason.

"Otou-san, can I have a sleepover here for Tomoyo-tachi?" the girl asked suddenly that evening over dinner.

From his place by the living room window, Syaoran groaned into the book he was reading. Sakura was a very energetic and cheerful girl, so she had quickly made friends at school. Several weekends in a row she had spent the night at her friends', so now it was her turn to play hostess. The last thing in the world Syaoran wanted, however, was a horde of giggling elementary school girls up until all hours of the night in his room. He knew the father would agree though. It was inevitable.

"That sounds like a great idea," the father said predictably. "I would enjoy meeting your friends."

"Yeah," the brother spoke up, his mouth half-full. "It'll be interesting to meet the brave souls who can stand to be friends with a kaijuu."

He let out a grunt of pain as the girl dug her heel into his foot under the table.

Syaoran suddenly didn't feel like reading. The mere thought of a house full of noisy girls had drained all his energy. He set the ghost book down and let up his concentration.

"It's your turn for dishes Touya-san," the father said, getting up. "I'm going to finish a few things for work and then go to bed. Goodnight."

"Goodnight Otou-san," the girl and brother chorused.

The brother started clearing away the dishes on the table.

"Hey! I'm not done yet!" the girl protested as the brother took her food away.

"Yeah, well I'm not going to sit around for another hour while you continue to cram food into your face," the brother said in an extremely sarcastic tone. "I know monsters need to eat a lot but..."

The girl balled her hands into fists. Syaoran knew just what she was thinking.

Someday I'll smash him into a pancake!

So predictable.

"Hey," the brother paused on his way to the kitchen beside Syaoran's window. "Where did this book come from?"

"Huh? I dunno. Maybe Otou-san put it there."

"I didn't think we even unpacked any of these yet," he was glaring suspiciously in the direction of where Syaoran was sitting.

It was strange to feel someone watching him. He didn't like that feeling one bit.

"Tomoyo-chan! Did you find my house okay?"

"Of course Sakura-chan. Your directions were very detailed. I had no problems at all."

Syaoran grimaced. The night of the sleepover had come much too soon. However, the sight of the calm and refined-looking girl at the door calmed his aura a little. She didn't seem the type to make too much of a tremendous racket.

"Hello Daidouji-san," the father greeted the girl. "It's nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you too Kinomoto-san," the girl said, bowing deeply. "Thank you for inviting me to your home."

"Everyone's waiting in the kitchen," the girl said, grabbing her friend's hand and leading her away. "I made tea!"

"Hopefully you'll be able to choke it down," the brother said, coming down the stairwell. "Drinking Sakura's tea is like ingesting watered-down motor oil."

Tomoyo giggled as Sakura shot a poisonous look at her brother.

"That's my stupid older brother Touya," Sakura said, making introductions as calmly as she could.

"Nice to meet you," Tomoyo said, bowing.

"Come on Tomoyo-chan," Sakura said, dragging her friend away before Touya could get another word in. "He's not worth the energy."

The two disappeared into the kitchen.

"They're multiplying!" the brother said to the father, sarcastic panic in his voice. "How many are there now? Four?"

The father nodded. "Rika, Chiharu, Naoko, and now Tomoyo. It's going to be quite a night."

"Quite a night," Syaoran repeated miserably.

The brother looked around as if he had heard an echo. When he didn't see anyone, he shook head and followed the father into the kitchen.

"He can hear me," Syaoran said. His aura flared in beat with his mounting frustration.

"I think you're right," Yue agreed. "Isn't that interesting?"

"If by 'interesting' you mean 'annoying as hell', then yes."

"Hey guys! I found this weird deck of cards while emptying boxes the other day. It's supposed to be some kind of game. Wanna play?"

Partly out of dark curiosity, partly out of pure habit, Syaoran had eventually made his way to his spot by the window in the girl's room. He figured that he wouldn't be able escape the noise no matter where he went, so he might as well keep an eye on the group.

"Sure!" the girl named Chiharu squeaked. Syaoran cringed. "How do you play?"

"Well, there's an instruction booklet that came with it," Sakura said. She slammed a fairly thick book down on the floor so everyone could see.

"Those are quite a lot of instructions," Tomoyo commented.

The girl with the glasses picked up the book fearlessly and began to leaf through it. "Hmmm... Hey! This is like a tarot deck! Each one of these cards have an attribute and when you put them in a certain order, they're supposed to tell you the future and stuff!" Her eyes sparkled with glee. "This is so cool! Let's play right now!"

The girls started giggling insanely.

"Naoko-chan is in her element," Rika said.

"So how do we start?" Sakura asked anxiously.

"Well, first we have to draw a magic circle on the floor," Naoko said, her eyes scanning the pages wildly. "The book says it's one of the key components. We can't proceed without it."

"That's easy enough," Sakura said. She went to the closet and rummaged through the piles of boxes. After a few moments, she emerged with a box of sidewalk chalk in hand. "It's a good thing Otou-san hasn't had the chance to put carpet in here yet. This way we can just draw on the floor."

"The circle's kind of complicated though," Naoko said. She put the book on the ground so everyone could see. There was a wave of hushed awe from the girls.

"It's so pretty!" Chiharu breathed.

"Yeah, but there are so many lines..." Sakura said. "How are we supposed to draw something like that?"

"Let me try," Roka volunteered. She carefully drew on the ground using the yellow chalk. About fifteen minutes later, she had created a fairly accurate replica of the circle in the book. It was very detailed - right down to the Western zodiac symbols that bordered the circle at even intervals.

"Great job Rika-chan!" Chiharu exclaimed. "It looks perfect."

"Thank you," Rika said, smiling humbly.

"Okay! Now we can start," Naoko said excitedly. She opened the box beside her and carefully removed a deck of tall, narrow cards. Each one had an image of the magic circle on the back and a unique picture on the front. "They're all labeled in English down here at the bottom, but there's a kanji up here at the top that tells you what it means. Every card has a different meaning."

"Oooh! This one's really pretty," Sakura breathed, picking up a card. It had a woman on the front with large, feathered wings folded over her body. Sakura sounded out the English word on the bottom. "Ui... n... di. What does Windy mean?"

"Well, it depends," Naoko said, paging through the book. "She can imply communication, predict receiving mail, or could simply mean that tomorrow will be usually breezy. You have to put her into context with some other cards before you can tell what she's really trying to say."

"Alright then," Chiharu said. "I think Sakura-chan should go first since it's her game."

The girls murmured in agreement.

"Okay here's what you do," Naoko said, handing Sakura the deck of cards. "First you need to cut the deck with your right hand three times, and then reassemble it in a random order."

Sakura did as she was told.

"Now comes the fun part!" Naoko exclaimed. "You have to decide what question you want to ask the cards. Then you'll recite the appropriate incantation and throw the cards up into the air. The ones that land completely inside the circle are the ones we're going to read."

"That seems easy enough," Chiharu said.

"What question do you want to ask, Sakura-chan?" Tomoyo asked.

"I'm not sure," Sakura replied. "What kind of questions are there?"

"Well, let's start with an easy one," Naoko said, turning some pages. "The most basic invocation is 'A Request of Past, Present, and Future.' Ready? Okay, now just repeat after me."

Sakura recited the words as Naoko read them off the page.

"I, Sakura Kinomoto, request a contract with the powers that govern these cards. I implore them to guide my hand and reveal unto me the truth of my past, present, and future. Release!"

With that, Sakura threw the cards dramatically into the air with all the force she could muster. For a moment, the delicate golden cards hung in the air like so many sparkling stars. Then gravity took over and they fell to the ground in every corner of the room. One of them even fell right through Syaoran. He felt an odd tingle of energy as it passed and raised an eyebrow. Could the cards really have some true magical powers? He reached down and examined the card, which had landed face up. It had a picture of a young figure holding a large hourglass. Curious, he turned it into a ghost card to examine it further.

"Return," Syaoran read. The spark of energy he had felt from the card before was gone. He turned the card over and read the tiny script on the bottom: "For entertainment use only." Syaoran grinned cynically. So these weren't magical cards at all, but some cheap toys made in a giant factory. Syaoran turned his attention back to the giggling girls, eager to watch them make fools out of themselves.

"What a mess," Tomoyo said, looking around at the card-cluttered room.

"But look! Some landed inside!" Chiharu exclaimed, pointing to the floor. Sure enough, a total of seven cards were completely within the borders of the circle.

"Now what, Naoko-chan?" Sakura asked, obviously eager to continue.

"The first card you're going to pick up will represent your past," Naoko said, her eyes skimming down the page in the book. "It will be the card that's the closest to the left edge of the circle without going over the border."

Sakura picked up the card and turned it over. "It's the Move card."

"Hey, you moved to Tomoeda from Tokyo, right Sakura-chan?" Chiharu exclaimed. "Is that what this card is describing?"

Naoko briefly flipped through the pages before nodding affirmatively. "Yes! The Move card represents a change in location, usually over a short distance."

"Tokyo isn't very far away at all," Rika said, awe in her voice.

"The cards are pretty accurate so far," Tomoyo commented.

"Now pick up the card that's closest to the exact center of the circle Sakura-chan," Naoko instructed. "This card will represent your present."

"It's the Light," Sakura said, holding it up.

"That sounds like a good thing!" Chiharu said.

"Light means satisfaction, comfort, and easy transition," Naoko recited.

"That's true too!" Sakura said, grinning. "Now the card that's on the far right border without going over is the card that represents my future, right Naoko-chan?"

"Yep."

"Okay everyone," Sakura said, taking a deep breath. She reached down and picked up the card that was lying just beside the right border of the circle. Everyone in the room held their breath as Sakura turned the card over.

"Maze."

"Uh oh," Naoko said. "Maze is one of the 'dark' cards that are governed by the moon. It's usually a bad omen..."

The girls were silent as they waited for Naoko to get more information. The tension had become so thick that even Syaoran had a hard time ignoring the event.

"Come on," Syaoran said to himself. His voice fell flat against the silence in the room. "Why should I care about some stupid Living's fortune from a pack of fake magical cards?" And yet, he couldn't bring himself to miss what Naoko said next.

"This isn't good Sakura-chan," Naoko said gravely. "I'm sorry."

"Spit it out already Naoko-chan!" Chiharu yelled.

"Maze symbolizes confusion, turmoil, and loss of direction," Naoko said, reading from the page. "Oftentimes, the Maze card is not simply the premonition of these things, but the cause of it. Drawing the Maze as your Future card is one of the worst omens that the deck has to offer."

"That's disappointing," Rika said quietly.

Sakura looked troubled, but Tomoyo grabbed Sakura's hand in a comforting gesture. "Don't worry Sakura-chan. Whatever happens, we'll all be here for you."

The other girls nodded in agreement.

"There's some more stuff here about Maze," Naoko said. "Although Maze is generally a bad omen, there is no reason to completely

despair. Just as any real maze will have a way out somewhere, so does the metaphorical labyrinth the Maze card represents. Obstacles will always appear in our daily lives, but with bravery, confidence in our abilities, and the will to succeed, we should not fear Maze's mischief."

Sakura balled her fists and made a determined gesture. "I'll do my best!"

"You're so optimistic Sakura-chan!" Tomoyo said, looking upon her friend with admiration.

"Ooooh!" Naoko said, flipping through the pages. "Want to try this incantation Sakura-chan? It's A Request of Future Love."

The girls lapsed into a fit of uncontrollable giggles.

"You have to try it Sakura-chan!" Chiharu said, the first to recover.

"First we have to gather up all these cards," Tomoyo said, getting up and collecting her share. Everyone pitched in and had the job done in a snap.

"Hmm..." Naoko said, counting the cards. "We're missing one."

"Oh well. It probably just fell behind the bed or something," Chiharu said. "We can go on without it. It's just one card."

"Okay then," Naoko said, picking up the book once again. "Ready Sakura-chan? Repeat after me."

"I, Sakura Kinomoto, request a contract with the powers that govern these cards. I implore them to guide my hand and reveal unto me the truth of my future in love. Release!"

Again, cards went flying and the girls giggled.

"Awww..." Rika said. "There's only three in the circle this time."

"That's plenty," Naoko said. "Don't pick them up yet Sakura-chan, but turn all the cards over so we can see their faces."

Sakura turned over the cards, naming them as she went. "Illusion, Sword, and Erase."

"When you're using A Request of Future Love, half the deck is designated as 'description' and the other half is 'revelation.' The description cards will describe your future love interest, while the revelation ones will tell you something about the nature of your relationship." Naoko cited. "Lesse... Illusion and Sword are description cards. Illusion means 'mysterious and enigmatic. People described by this card are never as they seem.' Sword means 'brave and courageous, but also somewhat headstrong and stubborn.'"

"He sounds like a gallant knight who will come to your rescue when you need him most!" Chiharu said, looking into space with dreamy eyes.

"You're so lucky Sakura-chan!" Tomoyo said, smiling softly.

Sakura was blushing furiously. "You guys..."

"But Erase is a 'revelation' card," Naoko said. "It means that the person described will leave your life very suddenly and never return, unless signified by another card."

"Awww," Chiharu said. "How sad!"

"Hey, look at this," Naoko said. "The cards have syllables attached to them as well! If you read the cards in order from top to bottom, they'll reveal the name of your future love!"

"How fun!" Chiharu squealed.

"It goes Sword, Illusion, Erase," Tomoyo observed.

"Okay let's see here..." Naoko said, flipping pages. "Sword is 'sha'. Illusion is 'o' and Erase is 'ra.'"

"Shaora?" Rika said. "That's an odd name."

"Ooooh! Maybe it's a foreign name!" Chiharu said, her eyes sparkling.

"That would make sense," Rika said. "Sakura-chan will have a brief fling with a handsome, mysterious man. Then one day the two will reluctantly part when he has to go back to his home country."

"How romantic!" Chiharu exclaimed.

Syaoran couldn't take the girls' ear-piercing squeals any longer, so he made his way onto the roof. Yue was waiting for him there, the light of the waning crescent moon making him look even more mysterious and ethereal than he usually did.

"Shaora, huh?" he said. His arms were folded over his chest and his expression was unreadable, but his tone was almost playful. "That sounds remarkably like 'Syaoran,' don't you think?"

"There's nothing special about that deck of cards," Syaoran said, shrugging. He took a seat in his usual spot, letting one leg dangle over the edge. "It was just a coincidence."

"In my experience, genuine coincidences are harder to come by than the things that are meant to be," Yue said. "Whether or not the deck is really magic doesn't matter. If fate wills it, the cards will fall in the right order."

Syaoran rolled his eyes. "How can that stupid girl love me if she doesn't even know I exist?"

"No one said that *she* was the one who had to fall in love with *you* ."

It took Syaoran a few moments to find out what Yue meant, and by the time he puzzled it out, the young man was gone.

"That's ridiculous," Syaoran said to himself, fuming. "I would like nothing more than to never see her sickeningly cheerful face ever

again!"

He smoldered in silence as the girls' obnoxiously loud giggles drifted up from below him.

"Loop and Create make *baka* !" one of the girls practically screamed with laughter.

"Isn't that what you call Yamazaki-kun, Chiharu-chan?"

"And just what do you mean by that!"

"Well, it was A Request of Future Love after all!"

"Look! She's turned bright red from head to toe!"

"You guys are so cruel!"

False Information

Chapter Three

False Information

"Sakura-chan... Do you know that this house is said to be haunted?"

"HOE?"

"Naoko-chan! That's not nice! You know how Sakura-chan feels about that kind of stuff."

"But if this was my house, I'd want to know all about it! It has a fascinating history. A wealthy family from Hong Kong built it in 1950, but they moved away after only living here for four years and left the house abandoned. Rumor has it that their youngest son died of a sudden fever and then his mother went mad with grief. Ever since then they say that the soul of a young boy can be seen gazing out the windows and sitting on top of the roof during the full moon."

By this time, Sakura had pulled her covers completely over her head and lay shaking beneath them.

"Naoko-chan, look what you've done to poor Sakura-chan!" Chiharu exclaimed.

"It's just a story Sakura-chan," Tomoyo said soothingly, rubbing the huddled lump under the blankets.

"There are a ton of other stories in this town just like it," Rika said. "Aren't there, Naoko-chan?"

"Oh yeah! The school clock tower in is said to be haunted by the soul of a giant three-toed sloth and the strip-mall on Main Street was supposedly built by aliens," Naoko said eagerly. "And, of course,

there's the huge mansion up on Cherry Hill that's said to be the home of a famous sorcerer-"

"And just where did you get your information for all this, Naoko-chan?" Chiharu asked suspiciously.

"From Yamazaki-kun, of course," Naoko said matter-of-factly. "He knows nearly every urban legend of this town."

"You mean that he's *made-up* nearly every urban legend of this town," Chiharu said dully. She balled her hand into a fist and raised it in front of her face, fire sparking in her eyes. "I'm going to kill that idiot."

"Huh?" Naoko said, looking crestfallen. "You mean he was lying about all that stuff?"

"Of course he was!" Chiharu exclaimed. "Every word out of that moron's mouth is a lie!"

"See Sakura-chan?" Rika said, leaning toward the blankets. "There's nothing to be scared about."

"R-really?" A few strands of auburn hair poked out from under the covers. "There are no ghosts?"

Naoko looked like she was about to say something, but Chiharu quickly tackled her and clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Nope! No ghosts," Chiharu said, a struggling Naoko under her iron grip.

"You can come out now, Sakura-chan," Tomoyo coaxed.

"I'm so glad!" Sakura said, finally emerging the safety of her cocoon. "Uh... Chiharu-chan... Naoko-chan is turning blue."

"Oops! Sorry!"

Yue appeared beside Syaoran at his spot near the window.

"Are you disappointed that the story wasn't true?" he asked over the drone of the girls' constant giggles.

"Not really," Syaoran said. He knew he should have been interested in what the girl was saying about his history, but he just couldn't bring himself to care. His past life was just that: the past. He had as much interest in it as Living had for the person they are in a passing dream. "I am what I am now. What happened before now doesn't matter."

"That's refreshing," Yue commented. "Many spirits are so attached to their past lives that they become vengeful and angry. Their hatred and resentment of the living are what bind them to this world. They crave what they cannot have and eventually become so obsessed with the Living that they forget they are dead. They want so badly to live again that they make almost make it happen. For brief periods of time they can pierce the veil between our world and the world of the Living."

"Really?" Syaoran said, looking up at Yue. "Why would someone want to do that?"

"I'm so glad you asked that, Syaoran," Yue said, a kind of grim satisfaction in his voice. Then he disappeared, leaving Syaoran feeling as if he had missed half the conversation.

"EEEEK! IT'S THE GHOST!"

Shrill, girlish screams erupted in the room, sending blankets flying through the air. Syaoran's aura began pulsing rapidly like a panicked heartbeat. How had he pierced the veil when he didn't even mean to! Yue had warned him about this! He had to hide somewhere or he was going to become angry and vengeful! He might hurt someone!

"WHERE IS IT!" one of the girls screamed.

"THE DOOR! It's opening *by itself* !"

The door? Syaoran froze. He was nowhere near the door...

"Onii-chan!" Sakura yelled exasperatedly, her voice still breathy with fresh panic. She ran up to the door and violently pulled it open, revealing the brother standing there with a stern, suspicious look on his face. "What are you doing here! You scared us all half to death!"

The brother took a step inside the dark room, looking around with his eyes narrowed and his lips pursed disparagingly.

"I heard voices..." he said, his voice grave and dangerous. " *Male* voices."

"Hoe?" Sakura said, looking around. "But Onii-chan... there's no one in here but us."

The brother's gaze eventually fell on the spot where Syaoran sat by the window. For the first time ever, Syaoran looked directly into the eyes of a Living. Syaoran scowled while the brother's eyes widened in surprise.

"Leave me alone," Syaoran whispered, shifting over so his back was to the brother. It felt strange to address someone other than Yue directly, but he knew the brother could hear him, so he might as well voice what he thought about it.

Syaoran heard the click of the door closing and felt it safe to turn back around.

As soon as the door had shut, the girls lapsed into a fit of giggles once again.

"Your brother is so *weird*," Chiharu said through her mirth.

"Chiharu! Rika scolded, trying to sound serious despite her giggles. "That's not very polite."

Touya shut the door to Sakura's room, not exactly sure what to make of the thing he had just seen. He had suspected there was something odd about the house since they had moved in, but hadn't been completely sure until that moment.

" *Leave me alone* ."

Touya shook his head firmly as if to filter through all the thoughts in his head. It wasn't the first time he had witnessed an event like that, but each experience was completely different and left him feeling slightly dazed. Besides, he had never actually *lived* with one before. This was going to take some adjusting.

He wasn't exactly thrilled about it occupying his sister's room, though. If she somehow found out...

"Touya-kun, are you alright? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Touya couldn't help but let out a grunt of laughter. He looked up to see slightly worried, but playful golden-grey eyes under a tousled mop of silver hair.

"I did," Touya replied simply.

"Huh?"

"Never mind Yukito-kun," Touya said dismissively, leading the way back to his room down the hall. "We better get back to work. That project for chemistry is due Monday and I have soccer practice all day tomorrow."

Yukito smiled softly behind Touya's back.

"You are too cool, Touya."

The girl and her friends had finally fallen asleep in a group on the floor around midnight, giving Syaoran a chance for some peace and

quiet at last. He sat by the window reading and trying to ignore the girls' annoyingly loud breathing as they slept. Sakura's, in particular, was the most distracting.

"Why does she have to mumble like that?" Syaoran asked himself as the girl gave an especially violent toss in her sleeping bag and uttered some incomprehensible words.

Unable to ignore all the noises any longer, Syaoran got up and attempted to pass over the girls on his way out of the room. He could've easily just slipped through the floor and avoided them, but he felt somehow that going through the walls would be easier. Thinking back on it, Syaoran considered that seemingly insignificant decision to be the major turning point in his existence.

As he entered into the area of the girls, his surroundings completely changed. The room melted away, revealing a jumble of twisted worlds joined together with ill-defined borders. One moment he was standing in a small classroom with a kind-looking teacher, and the next he was in a vast field with all sorts of odd creatures running back and forth. He quickly slipped between a desert island populated with a thousand identical girls all wearing different outfits and a strange house of nothing but oddly-shaped circus mirrors and a young boy sticking his tongue out.

"Dreams," Syaoran whispered to himself, passing the mirrors. "Somehow I've gotten into their dreams..."

Syaoran felt extremely embarrassed about invading the girls' privacy in such an intimate way. Dreams were not supposed to be seen by anyone - ever. Thanks to the night's events, Syaoran knew all too well how it felt to have his privacy violated...

He figured if he kept walking he'd eventually emerge back into the house, but a considerable amount of time passed as he wandered between worlds. It was like walking on the platform of a large split-section merry-go-round in which he went around and around, but never actually got anywhere.

Thankfully, just as in the waking world, the girls he encountered didn't seem to notice he was there. Even if he walked right in their line of sight, he was completely ignored. He passed through the dream worlds of Rika, Naoko, Tomoyo, and Chiharu without incident.

Chiharu's "mirror world" abruptly ended and Syaoran found himself closed in on three sides by infinitely tall neon-green walls. He went to walk through the walls, but, to his complete surprise, found that they were impassable. This was an unfamiliar sensation to Syaoran, as walls had never been able to keep him enclosed before.

Confused, Syaoran walked down the hall in the only direction that wasn't closed off. He walked like that for quite awhile, passing endless walls of green and taking whatever direction was available at the time. Through the pressing silence, Syaoran could hear the soft sobs of someone in great distress getting louder and closer. He wanted to avoid whoever it was, but the walls forced him to keep going in only one direction. Eventually, Syaoran spotted a girl leaning against the wall, tears glistening off her cheeks in the dim, ominous lighting. There was something strangely familiar about that tousled, auburn hair...

As Syaoran approached, the girl's head snapped up and looked directly at him with large emerald eyes. It was the second time in one night that he had looked into the eyes of a Living, only this time it made Syaoran's aura shudder violently.

It was Sakura, but she looked like a horrible mess. Her eyes were puffy from crying too much and she looked like she hadn't rested in days. Her school uniform was windswept and untidy - very much uncharacteristic of her.

"Are... are you Syaoran?" she asked timidly, her hopeful, watery eyes fixed on Syaoran.

Syaoran replied to her with only stunned silence and took a nervous step back. A thousand thoughts were flying around in his mind,

bumping into each other and sparking violently where they collided. She could see him! Why could she see him? The others hadn't...

When Syaoran didn't answer, the girl shook her head wildly and went on anyway. "Please, you have to help me. I've been wandering around this maze forever and I can't find the way out. Naoko-chan said something about how to find the exit, but I can't remember and I'm scared..."

Feeling trapped, confused, and panicked, Syaoran did the only thing he could think of - he ran away as fast as he could. No one but Yue had ever spoken directly to him before, and the shock of being openly addressed by a crying, frightened girl begging for his help was more than he could take.

"Wait!" the girl called, breaking into fresh sobs and taking off after him. "Don't go!"

Syaoran just ran faster. The walls became a green blur as he passed them blindly. He took whatever opening he came by, not caring which direction it took him. But no matter how fast he ran, the girl was able to keep up.

Syaoran hadn't been running long when the walls suddenly ended. He found himself standing at the start of a huge grassy plane that seemed to stretch forever in all directions. It was a wonderful sight, especially when compared to the claustrophobic constraints of the maze.

He turned around just in time to see Sakura emerge from the maze in the distance. She looked just as surprised as he felt to have found the exit. When she spotted Syaoran she waved wildly.

"Thank you!" she yelled.

Completely and totally confused, Syaoran ran from her, feeling mortified and awkward. He was never happier when he emerged from Sakura's dream world and back into his familiar room. He

immediately slipped through the floor and into the living room below, desperate to put as much distance between him and Sakura as possible.

Syaoran climbed wearily into the seat by the living room's bay window.

"A little too much excitement for one night, huh?" Yue asked, sitting beside Syaoran.

Syaoran nodded. "What... what was all that?"

"You figured it out already," Yue said. "You were inside their dreams. I'm just surprised it didn't happen sooner."

"But she saw me," Syaoran said, his aura shuddering with the memory. He was still finding it difficult to speak in complete sentences. "She *talked* to me. Why?"

Yue shrugged. "Some people are a bit more in tune with the presence of the spirit world, especially in a psychically receptive state such as when they are sleeping. This family seems to be more receptive than normal anyway, so it makes sense that the girl would become aware of your presence should you happen to stumble into her dreams. However, I bet you were still very indistinct in her eyes. She probably didn't get a very good look at you at all."

"But why did she say 'thank you' to me at the end?" Syaoran asked. "I didn't do anything."

"I thought that would be obvious," Yue said, his serious expression never wavering. "You lead her out of the maze."

Syaoran narrowed his gaze at the floor. "But I wasn't trying to find the way out. I was just trying to get away from her."

"She doesn't know that, though," Yue said. "To her, it looked as you guided her to the exit. And she was very grateful for that."

Syaoran's aura flared with unease and he vowed never to go anywhere near Sakura's dreams ever again.

A few months passed and Syaoran began to adjust completely to the family's presence. At first he felt ill at ease around the brother and avoided him as much as possible. Syaoran didn't like the idea of being noticed, so he did whatever he could to avoid such an opportunity. However, he soon realized that he was very rarely seen or heard except during the few days surrounding a full moon. Yue's presence also drew more attention from the brother, which was probably why he had stopped showing up randomly. In fact, Syaoran would sometimes go days without even so much as a word from his only friend in the world. Syaoran couldn't say he didn't mind, but the family kept him entertained enough as to where he missed Yue's presence a lot less than he should have.

The summer months passed quickly, giving away to cooler weather. Syaoran couldn't feel the dip in temperature the way a Living could, but he did recognize the change in air pressure and constriction. The "tighter" the air got, the colder it was. The cooler temperature also seemed to make Syaoran's soul stick closer together, which made him feel more solid than in the summer months where it sometimes seemed as if pieces of himself would float off in a thousand different directions at once.

Syaoran had perfected his "ghost object" technique over the months as well. He was now able to turn something as large as an entire bed into a ghost object with minimal effort. Of course, using that much energy made the brother suspicious, so Syaoran chose to keep the ability to a minimum when the family was home.

He did find it useful, however, when he got bored during the day. He would often make his way into the girl's room while she was at school, make her bed, and pick up around the room. At first he did this simply because the girl wasn't the tidiest person in the world when it came to her own room and he hated sharing a space that was so messy, but he soon found himself doing it just to be nice. He

enjoyed doing what he could, even if it was only something very small. He also came to look forward to the girl's smile when she entered the room and found her bed made.

"Thanks, Onii-chan," she would whisper as she flopped on the bed. It irked him to no end when the brother would take credit for all Syaoran's hard work around the house, but at the same time, he was grateful that the brother wouldn't divulge his secret. Sakura was simply terrified of ghosts and spirits, so naturally Syaoran didn't want her to know about him. He was perfectly happy being left alone and ignored.

One day Syaoran sat reading by the window as Sakura worked noisily on her math homework. Since the brother and father were out somewhere, Syaoran contemplated moving down to the bay window in the kitchen to escape the racket Sakura was making. However, his thoughts were interrupted when a flash of warm, golden energy suddenly flared in Sakura's direction.

Syaoran's first thought was that it felt like the complete opposite of Yue's cool, silvery aura. When he looked up, he saw a blob of gold light floating in the air beside Sakura's right shoulder. Eventually the light subsided, revealing a tiny, toy-sized creature with huge rounded ears, a golden lion-like body, and two white wings that seemed to be there only for the heck of it.

"Now, now, Sakura," the thing said in an exaggerated Osaka accent. "Don't get frustrated. It's only math."

Although the creature was clearly addressing Sakura, the girl didn't seem to notice the tiny thing hovering beside her at all. Syaoran came to the logical conclusion that it was not on the same physical plane as she was.

Suddenly, the creature whipped around as if sensing a foul presence. His tiny, beady eyes came to rest on Syaoran.

"Hey hey hey!" the creature yelled, floating over to Syaoran and crossing its stubby forearms, trying to look intimidating. "Just who are you? You're not sanctioned to be here!"

Syaoran narrowed his eyes and glared at the creature.

"I've always been here," Syaoran said tersely. "You're the one who's barging in unannounced."

The creature looked extremely offended. "Barge! I don't *barge* ! Did you happen to miss that grand entrance? I ever so subtly *faded* into view. That was one of the best entrances ever witnessed by ghost or man."

Syaoran's practiced glare was put to good use in this situation. However, it turned out that the creature had a rather potent glare of its own. For a few tense moments, the two stared at each other in a battle of wits to see who would crack first. All that could be heard were Sakura's uninterrupted, frustrated grunts as she threatened her math homework.

"Just how long have you been around here, kid?" the creature asked.

"'Kid?' I'm no kid!" Syaoran yelled, feeling like it was his turn to be offended.

"Oh yeah? Well you sure look like one!" the creature said, a smirk breaking out on its face.

"And you look like a plush toy! What's your point?" Syaoran shot back.

"How dare you!" the thing said, a golden light flaring around its tiny body. "I am none other than the legendary Keroberos, Guardian Beast of the Soul!"

"Beast?" Syaoran repeated, staring in disbelief. "You're only five inches tall."

Keroberos's tiny brow wrinkled in frustration. "Obviously I can't reveal my true form here. If I did so, the overwhelming energy would attract undue attention. You'll just have to trust that I truly am a magnificent beast and I could easily crush you with one paw in such a form."

The creature floated back over to Sakura and hovered by her shoulder once again. Syaoran stayed where he was, pulling his arms over his chest and glaring at the thing.

"What are you doing?" Syaoran asked through grated teeth. At this rate, he wouldn't be able to get any reading done at all.

"Observing," the thing said absentmindedly.

"Observing what?" Syaoran asked, getting more annoyed by the second.

"I've been following her at school, but nothing seems to be out of the ordinary there," the creature said. "It must be something at home. At first I thought maybe it was you, but you're quite harmless. No, there is something much more sinister at work here..."

"So you're on guard duty?" Syaoran asked, trying to make sense out of the creature's enigmatic words. After years of having no one but Yue to talk to, he had gotten quite good at puzzling out riddles.

"Actually, the word 'guardian' in my title is a little misleading," the little plushie said, waving a stubby paw dismissively. "My job is to take this girl's soul when she dies. And from the look of things, that day isn't too far off now."

Syaoran froze.

"What?"

The creature turned to Syaoran. "I know. I couldn't believe it either when I heard. Usually things like this are planned way in advance, but this was very sudden. Fate's got in for this one, it seems."

The Making of a Fool

Chapter Four

The Making of a Fool

"She's... she's going to die?"

The yellow creature nodded. "Well, all humans die, of course. But Sakura is slated to go before her time. It's quite unprecedented, actually."

Syaoran couldn't understand why he was getting so upset. After all, he was dead and it wasn't all that bad. But then again, Syaoran didn't have any family or friends who loved him. It didn't take much to understand that many people would sorely miss Sakura if she happened to die unexpectedly. Not to mention Sakura herself who would never get a chance to grow up and live a full, happy life. There was always a chance that she would end up a ghost like Syaoran, but the thought of such a cheerful, energetic girl becoming something like him was even more distressing.

"What's going to happen to her?" Syaoran asked, gazing at Sakura's back with a new sense of pity and regret. She had no idea that, right at this moment, two souls were discussing her immanent and tragic death. "How will she die?"

The creature grinned sheepishly and put a paw behind his head. "Actually, we're not exactly sure."

"You don't know?" Syaoran asked, extremely surprised. He crossed his arms and glared at the creature. "Some guardian you are."

"Hey, do you think being a guardian comes with an instruction manual!" Keroberos yelled, his cute little face contorted into an angry snarl. "This is a first-time situation. How am I supposed to deal with something that's never been done before?"

"So all you can do is watch?" Syaoran asked, ignoring the creature's question.

"Yep," the plushy replied. "Observe and wait. Her death will come from a source we can't detect right now, but maybe we can prevent it with some careful and tedious observation."

A tiny flare of hope erupted in Syaoran's aura. "You mean you can stop it from happening?"

"Well, maybe," the creature said. "As I said, her death is not planned and therefore not written in stone... yet. There is a slim chance it could be prevented with some sheer, dumb luck."

"I'll watch her," Syaoran said, speaking as if he were taking on a grave responsibility. "I'll make sure nothing happens to her."

The creature snorted with laughter. "And how are you going to do that? You couldn't keep a fly from hitting a windshield. But hey, if you want to watch her, you'll be doing half my job for me. If anything happens out of the ordinary, just call for me, okay?"

Before Syaoran even had a chance to reply, the creature disappeared in a flash of gold light.

"Well, I did my part. Now it's your turn, Yue."

"And when did I agree to participate? This is your plan Keroberos, and it's not even a good one at that. It's dangerous and there's no way of telling if it would work at all. We're asking this boy to deal with things he couldn't even begin to comprehend."

"Can't you be optimistic for once? I've got it all under control."

"The very fact that you came to me with this foolish scheme is proof that absolutely nothing is in your control."

"Yue, I'm offended! After all this time of a solid partnership, you won't trust me to come up with the plan that will work best? Just follow through with your end and I'm sure everything will work out."

"For the girl, you mean. What about Syaoran's fate? How does this all end for him?"

"The kid's already dead! What could he possibly have to lose?"

"There's always something to lose. Even for the one who has nothing."

"You're being selfish by defending the kid, Yue. Can you imagine the chaos Sakura's premature death'll cause? If this isn't fixed, we could have an even bigger problem on our hands. Don't look at me like that! It's not as if I *wanted* this to happen. I don't enjoy being the bad guy any more than you do, but we can't do anything about it. Just help me out here, Yue. Please?"

"Very well. I will carry out my end. Just let it be on record that I never approved."

"Duly noted."

"You're up early kaijuu," the brother commented as Sakura sleepily made her way down the staircase and into the kitchen. "Do you have cleaning duty at school this morning?"

Sakura shook her head, rubbing sleep from her eyes. "My alarm went off early for some reason." She pulled a chair out from the kitchen table and sat down.

Syaoran felt quite pleased with himself. With all that panicked running around Sakura did every morning, she could easily run in front of a bus or something. But by setting her alarm clock back fifteen minutes, she had a better chance of getting out the door *safely* on time.

"Well, now you can eat breakfast like a normal person," the brother said, scooping some eggs onto her plate. "I think this is the first time I've ever dirtied your plate on a weekday morning."

Sakura only nodded groggily. She looked down at the food on her plate as if she didn't know what to do with it.

"Heh, but I think you're no good without that morning dash to warm your blood," the brother said, poking her roughly on the shoulder. He got no reaction.

Syaoran groaned. He hadn't thought of that. Sakura's wild morning ritual was what woke her up. Without it she was a zombie- a zombie that was even more prone to accidents than a panicked, but awake, Sakura. He could only watch helplessly as she stumbled around the house, getting ready slowly and awkwardly.

"I'm off!" the brother shouted up the stairs, followed by the sound of the door slamming.

"Hoe?" Sakura mumbled, confused. She grabbed her alarm clock from her bedside table. She stared at it in disbelief.

"HOE! I'm late!" she screamed, breaking out of her trance.

Syaoran was actually relieved to see her run around in a panic, despite the hard work he had done to prevent it. The mad dash seemed to energize her resolve and made her think clearly.

Syaoran watched her fade into the distance, feeling a bit useless and unneeded, but relieved nonetheless.

"It's hopeless, Yue," Syaoran said miserably that night on the roof. A sliver of the moon was high in the sky. "Every time I try to do something to help, I just end up messing things up even more."

"Who said you needed to help? It's her problem, not yours. You don't need to get involved."

"But I'm the only one who knows," Syaoran said, getting up and pacing restlessly back and forth. "I can't just sit back and watch her die. It just seems so... wrong. She isn't the kind of person who should die suddenly."

"There's nothing you can do, Syaoran," Yue said. "If she is going to die, then she will die - no matter what you do or her."

"No!" Syaoran said, balling his hands into fists. His voice was barely above a whisper, but it held so much passion that it sounded like a shout. "Her death is not written in stone. There has to be something..."

Yue eyed Syaoran grimly and suppressed a sigh of regret and frustration. The conversation was going much too well. Was this really the boy's fate? It seemed so cruel.

"There is a way," Yue said softly, almost as if he hoped Syaoran wouldn't hear him.

"There's a way? What do you mean?" Syaoran said.

"You must pierce the veil," Yue said. He turned his head and spoke into the shingles. "No, not just pierce it... You must rip the veil to shreds."

Syaoran sat down heavily. "But you said piercing the veil will make me vengeful and angry. I don't want that to happen."

Yue smiled faintly, despite himself. "Only the spirits who are vengeful and angry to begin with will be that way when they pierce the veil. It's the motivation behind the action that counts. Usually the motivation is anger and hate."

Syaoran looked up to Yue. "So you can teach me how to pierce the veil?"

Yue shook his head. "It's not something that can be learned. It happens on accident when the will is strong enough and sufficient motivation is present. In any case, we're not really talking about piercing the veil at all. I'm suggesting something a bit more... extreme."

"I don't understand," Syaoran said. His frustration was mounting.

"Have you ever noticed the mansion on top of that hill?" Yue asked, gesturing into the distance.

Syaoran followed Yue's gaze out into the night. There, perched on top of a hill several miles in the distance, stood the impressive sight of an old Edo-style home. Lights were on in some of the windows, but it still managed to look abandoned and ominous.

"I see it," Syaoran said. "But what does an old house have to do with anything?"

It took Yue a few moments to answer. "A powerful magician lives in that house. Rumor has it that he has been experimenting with a new type of magic that can make a ghost corporeal. In other words, he can bring a disembodied soul back into the physical world. It would make you as close to a Living as you could possibly get."

"You mean people could see me? Hear me?" Syaoran asked, his aura wavering uncertainly.

Yue nodded slowly. "You would be able to manipulate objects much more efficiently than you can now."

Syaoran stood up, resolution and gravity pulsing in his aura. "I'd be able to protect her. I could watch out for her and prevent her death. I have to do this, Yue. I have to go see the magician."

With that, he turned to jump off the roof and head toward the old house in the distance.

"Wait, Syaoran. Listen to me," Yue said, swiftly moving to block Syaoran's path, his wings flared. He wore the same stoic expression as always, but his eyes carried a desperate, pleading quality Syaoran had never seen before. "You think you have some burden, some tremendous obligation to right a cosmic mistake, but the reality is that you are the last being in the universe who should have to deal with this. This situation doesn't concern you. It's not too late to forget what you heard and save yourself a lot of pain and heartache."

"What are you talking about?" Syaoran said, his aura flashing dangerously.

"Nothing comes without sacrifice. You will pay a great price to gain what you seek."

Syaoran paused, glaring at Yue. "Sacrifice? I have nothing to give."

"You would be surprised Syaoran," Yue said grimly. "The universe isn't picky. Anything and everything you have - even things you don't even know you possess - will be sufficient to make an equal trade."

Syaoran turned his head to look at the roof. He couldn't stand that horrible look in Yue's eyes. "I can't just forget. I can't let her die and then pretend like I did all I could. I've made up my mind, Yue. Get out of my way."

After a beat of reluctant hesitation, Yue obediently stepped out of Syaoran's path. "Do what you will."

Syaoran nodded firmly, as if to confirm the decision he had made with himself, and then made his way onto the lawn below. It was strange to look at the street from ground level, since it had been decades from the time when he had been on the lawn (not to mention outside the house.) The journey all the way to the mansion

on the hill was a daunting task in itself, but Syaoran simply got his bearings and started into the distance.

Yue watched him go, a heavy feeling of regret weighing on his being.

"You tried to stop him," Keroberos said, appearing beside Yue in a flash of gold light. "That was noble of you."

Yue turned his back on Syaoran's retreating figure. "He wouldn't be going anywhere if I hadn't told him about the magician in the first place. The burden of his downfall still lies with me alone."

"Aw, Yue, don't be so hard on yourself," the little yellow creature said, trying to sound comforting. "The kid's just stubborn. You warned him of the consequences and so will the magician. In the end, the final decision is on his head."

Yue shook his head, his eyes closed. "He's ignorant when it comes to the concept of sacrifice and consequence. He won't have any idea what he has given up until the time comes to let it all go."

"Yue, you really are too serious for your own good. The kid has long been dead and forgotten. He has nothing to lose," the little creature disappeared in the same flash of gold light in which he had arrived.

Yue could still see Syaoran's rapidly retreating aura in the distance.

"Good luck Syaoran. I can only hope that I'm wrong about all this."

It wasn't hard for Syaoran to find the mansion. It was radiating a strong magical energy from miles away. The pull was so powerful that even if Syaoran hadn't intended to go to the house, he probably would have ended up there anyway. It was kind of like a ghost magnet.

Up close, the house was even more forbidding than it was at a distance. A tall, heavy-looking iron gate stood in front of the property,

making the mansion seem unwelcoming and cold. However, despite the ominous exterior, Syaoran hardly hesitated to pass through the bars and into the house itself.

The first thing he noticed was that it was very dark inside. A long hallway stretched out before him, lit only with small candles spaced far apart along the wall. It was down the hallway that Syaoran felt the strongest energy, so he continued in that direction, even though every remaining instinct he had from when he was alive told him to retreat.

Eventually Syaoran came to a set of double doors at the end of the hallway. He could feel the source of the powerful magical energy was strongest on the other side of the doors. It was here Syaoran paused. He knew that once he passed through the door there was no way he could back out and not feel like a failure. The ghost stood in front of the doors for some time before finally gathering the courage to step through into the other side.

It was a large room with hardwood floors and a huge window taking up nearly the entire north wall. The room was almost empty except for a single red armchair that was turned toward a roaring fireplace on the east wall. From his vantage point, Syaoran couldn't see if anyone was sitting in the chair, but the energy was most potent at that spot. The ghost approached with caution.

"Hello there," a deep, but friendly male voice said from the direction of the chair. "Well, don't hesitate. Come closer, my friend."

Syaoran's first instinct was to look around the room for who the voice was addressing. However, there was no one else in the room. It took several minutes before it finally dawned on Syaoran that the voice was addressing him.

"Yes, that's right. I'm talking to you," the voice beckoned. "I understand. It's been a long time since you've been addressed directly."

Curious and surprised, Syaoran approached the chair. As he did, the person sitting in it slowly came into view.

Syaoran had expected to see a grizzled old man, but he was quite astonished to find that the magician was only in his early thirties. He had iridescent, long black hair that was tied up in a loose, untidy ponytail. Thin-rimmed glasses were placed over his soft brown eyes and he was wearing several layers of heavy-looking, intricately embroidered robes. When Syaoran wandered into his line of sight, the man smiled softly and looked directly at the ghost. His friendly, lighthearted gaze distressed Syaoran much less than it should have.

"Well now, I don't believe we've met," the magician said, putting down the journal he was writing in. "I suppose this house still has a few surprises. I thought I already had the pleasure of meeting all the spirits who inhabit this home."

It was a few moments before Syaoran processed the man's words and composed his own. He simply wasn't used to talking to Living directly. Responding on cue was extremely difficult.

"I don't inhabit this house," Syaoran said, self-conscious of his own words. His voice didn't echo off the walls like the man's did. "I came from a different place."

"Ah, I see," the man said, nodding deeply. "To what do I owe the pleasure then?"

"You're the magician, right?" Syaoran asked, looking the man over. He was drastically different from what Syaoran had imagined a sorcerer should look like.

"Yes, I am sometimes known as The Magician," the man said, smiling sardonically. "But I go by Clow Reed most of the time. As long as we are getting to know each other, do you have a name? I should call you something."

It took Syaoran a moment to remember. "Yue calls me Syaoran."

"Syaoran it is then," Clow said, smiling that strange smile that showed mostly in his eyes. "Certainly there's a reason why you came all this way, Syaoran. Unless you're just stopping by?"

"Yue said that you can help me pierce the veil," Syaoran said, eyeing the odd man more every second. "He said you have magic that will make me like a Living."

Clow Reed nodded without hesitation, putting a hand on his chin. "That's right. It's a new technique that can focus a spirit's energy to a very specific point in space, allowing the energy to take form and become solid. It's only in the experimental stage, but I've had great success with test subjects in the past."

Syaoran could care less about the specifics. "I want to become a test subject."

Clow studied Syaoran closely, still smiling. "I'm sure any ghost would, but I don't think you understand the risk involved. You see, every spirit - embodied or disembodied - has a certain amount of energy stored inside. When an embodied spirit's energy runs out, that is when the body dies and the spirit is released into the afterlife until its energy is restored. However, when one dies young or unexpectedly, his energy is not fully depleted, thus he is unable to pass on until the excess energy is used up. This process can sometimes take centuries.

"Now here's where I come in. My technique takes all that excess energy and focuses it down to a point in space, making the subject solid and tangible for a short amount of time. However, you must understand that once the energy is focused, it cannot be scattered again. And when the energy is depleted, it cannot be replenished."

Clow leaned forward off his chair toward Syaoran, still smiling softly.

"In other words Syaoran, my magic would first restore you, but then it would eventually bring about your systematic destruction," Clow said with that horribly out-of-place soft smile playing on his lips. It was like

he was trying to be completely serious, but couldn't keep a straight face. "I would be happy to perform the procedure for you, but I can't morally do so until you fully realize what it would mean."

Syaoran furrowed his brow in confusion. The concept was hard to grasp. "How can I get deader than I already am? How can there be more than one level of death?"

"Once your energy is spent on this plane of existence, you - your spirit - will return to the cosmic energy source it came from," Clow explained patiently. "At that point, you will lose your identity and become one with the Void once again. Your energy will no longer be yours - it will belong to the Void. This is what you must consider before you undergo such an irreversible procedure."

"But... this will eventually happen to me anyway, right?" Syaoran said.

"This is true," Clow responded. "Procedure or not, your energy would exhaust itself in due course and send you back to the void."

"Then what does it matter?" Syaoran said. "Either I go now or I go later. Why not go now?"

"You have to ask yourself if it's worth it," Clow said seriously, his eyes sparkling with mirth.

Syaoran glared at the man, his aura flaring. "I wouldn't be doing this in the first place if it wasn't worth it. I've made a promise and I can't keep it if I'm like this."

"Tell me more about this promise," Clow said. It was very hard to tell, but there was a subtle change in his expression that was hard to read. Was it surprise?

Syaoran felt like the man was judging him in some offhanded way. It made Syaoran irritable. "I promised a plush toy that I would protect this girl-"

"Ah, say no more. There's a girl involved," Clow said, his eyes flashing knowingly.

Syaoran paused, confused and wary. "Why does that matter?"

The man's eyes flashed even more intensely, as if he were reading a mystery novel that had just started to get good. "Never mind. It seems I was mistaken."

Syaoran was about to make him elaborate, but the magician stood up and tossed his journal dramatically into the fire. Then he began to walk away.

"Hey wait!" Syaoran said, turning around and fuming. "Where are you going?"

"To gather a few things," Clow said, speaking to the wall in front of him. "The spell you have requested is very complicated. Please be patient while I prepare."

Syaoran glared and crossed his arms tightly. Living were so *weird* .

"Ah, Madoushi. I didn't know you had arrived."

"Don't be coy, Magician," the frowning woman in flowing robes said, her gaze narrowed and annoyed. "We both know that's a lie."

"Very well," Clow replied, turning his back on her. "I will be careful to disregard all pleasantries concerning you in the future."

"Another lie."

"You've come to watch the procedure," Clow said. "Am I right?"

"Perceptive as always," the woman said, sighing exasperatedly. "I see an eruption of sadness in this ghost's future. I was surprised to find that you decided to go through with such a fruitless endeavor. In the end, he will gain nothing but pain and misery."

"I've never been averse to causing pain and misery," Clow said.
"You, of all people, should know that."

"Yes, well I've never known you to do so without a greater goal in mind," the woman said, gathering her arms over her chest. "What horribly twisted facet of this event am I missing?"

"Let's just say that... It'll be fun while it lasts."

Clow wandered back into the room about fifteen minutes later.

"Are you ready, Syaoran?" he asked, looking as serious as his expression would let him. "I don't ask lightly. Once I begin, the process can't be paused or reversed."

Syaoran simply couldn't understand why everyone was being so wary. Why did everyone care about what he did with himself? They acted as if what he did mattered in the greater scheme of things. He was dead and his house had been taken over by Living. He had nothing to lose.

"I was ready the moment Yue told me about you," Syaoran said seriously.

"Then let's begin," Clow said.

The man made no discernible gestures or sounds, but suddenly an intricate, glowing circle appeared and began to revolve slowly around Syaoran. There was something familiar about this circle...

"This is going to be quite unpleasant," Clow said gravely. "Please bear with me."

As soon as Clow had finished his sentence, a tremendous weight fell on Syaoran's head and seeped into his spirit. This was a new sensation because nothing ever had weight or depth to Syaoran. The weight forced him to the ground on his hands and knees. Hands

and knees... that meant he was forming a body. He watched with fascination as his limbs appeared and took shape, his spirit swirling around inside like colored water in a plastic bag. He was surprised to find that he could reach out with a hand and touch the other. His body was becoming solid and real...

But he felt constricted and trapped by the changes. It was like being locked in a tiny room with very little air. He felt as if he were being stretched thin and pulled in a thousand different directions all at once. And the pressure just kept building... Something had to give...

Suddenly, everything constricted. Every fiber of his being bunched up into a single point in space, gathered momentum, and then propelled him at an inconceivable speed - almost as if weren't even moving - back into the circle. It was a hard sensation for any solid object to understand - the feeling of passing through every plane of existence and picking up pieces of life in each one. It didn't hurt - pain wasn't a possible sensation for a ghost - but it was certainly... unpleasant. Unpleasant and unnerving. And it never seemed to end...

Then the pressure returned with a vengeance, smashing Syaoran into the ground. Through the unbelievable sensation of pressure, Syaoran felt the hard surface of the floor beneath him. This was also a new feeling, as walls and floors had never been solid for him in the waking world.

When would it end? Was this really even worth it?

The white noise drone suddenly became deafening. The air had become gel-like and the bubble of pressure began to collapse in on him, clogging up his ears and pressing against his eyes. He began to feel as if were being crushed between the cold steel sides of a trash compactor. If this kept up, he would be smashed so thin that he wouldn't exist...

And suddenly, amidst all the pressure and static noise, Syaoran's mind went blank.

"Wake up, Syaoran."

Syaoran opened his eyes - another completely new sensation - and looked up to see Clow's beaming face hovering over him. Syaoran sat up, using instinct alone to operate his solid body.

"What happened? How come there's a blank spot in my memory? Did something go wrong?" Syaoran asked, almost panicked.

"No, nothing like that," Clow said, clapping a hand down on Syaoran's shoulder. Syaoran jumped at the sudden pressure. "The procedure was a complete success. The shock was too much for your spirit, so you shut down, much in the way a Living goes unconscious in times of extreme stress."

Syaoran ducked out from under the magician's hand, promptly tangled himself up in the bed sheets, and fell heavily to the ground. Syaoran looked around in confusion, not quite sure what had just happened.

Clow extended his hand. "It's going to take some getting used to. It's been a long time since you have been susceptible to the laws of physics, but I'm sure you'll adjust."

Syaoran ignored Clow's hand and got up on his own. He straightened his clothing and caught sight of his hands. He stared at them for several moments, moving his fingers and marveling at the way they responded to his thoughts. He had never seen his hands before.

"It really worked..." Syaoran said quietly.

"Remember that people can see you now, Syaoran," Clow said, a smile dancing in his eyes. "Don't stare at your hands too much. You could make people uncomfortable."

Syaoran reached down and gingerly grabbed the sheets that were on the floor, half expecting them to slip through his grasp. But instead, he was able to grip them and lift them up onto the bed.

"There's a few things you need to know," Clow said as he watched Syaoran go around the room and lift any object that wasn't nailed down. "You don't need to eat, drink, or sleep. In fact, you won't be able to do any of those things, even if you tired. You cannot sustain bodily injury and you still can't feel physical pain. There are a few things I'm forgetting, but you'll discover them as you go."

Clow got up and put his hand on Syaoran's head to get his attention. Syaoran couldn't feel his hand, exactly, but he could sense the pressure.

"Now this part is very important," Clow said, looking directly into Syaoran's eyes. "Your energy level was fairly high, but it will only give you thirty days at the most. The full moon seems to slow the process of deconstruction, but once it wanes, you will begin to slip back into the void. Do you understand, Syaoran? You have until the new moon to take care of your business. After that, it's all over."

Syaoran nodded solemnly. The concept of time was still foreign to him, but he figured he'd catch on eventually. "I understand. Until the new moon."

The magician smiled softly, a knowing twinkle in his eye. "You have no idea what that really means, do you? But you will. It's hard not to count the days as you live them. The new moon will come faster than you think."

The man walked a few steps, then turned around and gestured slightly to Syaoran. "Come with me. I have something to show you."

Curious and just a bit wary, Syaoran followed the magician into the next room. It was much smaller and held only a baby grand piano, a bookshelf, and a tall floor-length mirror with intricately carved

mahogany wood around the border. Clow was standing next to it, his eyes dancing mysteriously.

"Step up here Syaoran," he said, gesturing to the mirror. "Have a look."

After a moment's hesitation, Syaoran walked up to the mirror and gazed into it, not sure what he was supposed to be seeing.

A boy with untidy, sandy-brown hair and intense amber eyes stared back at Syaoran. The boy was wearing a light blue blazer, a tie, and black pants. Syaoran narrowed his gaze, but the boy continued to stare emotionlessly.

"What is this?" Syaoran asked, gesturing to the boy. He was taken by surprise when the boy copied his every move. Realization finally dawned on him. It was Syaoran's reflection. He'd never had a reflection...

"You've never seen an image of yourself, have you?" Clow asked, his expression soft and soothing. "It's not surprising. Not many ghosts know what they look like. I thought you'd enjoy the experience."

Syaoran just found it disturbing and knowing what he looked like just made him feel more self-conscious than ever.

"What am I wearing?" Syaoran asked, lifting the material gingerly off his skin. Now that he realized he was wearing something, it became distracting.

"Funny you should ask," Clow said, his eyes flashing mischievously. He began to speak very fast. "I've been very busy while you were recovering. That's the uniform for Tomoeda High School. I took the liberty of enrolling you in the school under the name of Syaoran Reed and, incidentally, you'll be late for your first day if you don't leave right this instant."

With that, Clow grabbed Syaoran's collar and steered him down the long hallway and out onto the front doorstep in the sunshine. This all happened faster than Syaoran could get an intelligible word in.

"Oh, and I'm afraid you're on your own from this point on," Clow said, stepping back into the shade of the house and closing the large door halfway. "While the mention of my surname won't raise any suspicions, you will most certainly become talk of the town if you are heard calling this place home."

Clow lowered his voice and his gaze. "They say a magician lives in this house, you know," His expression changed abruptly, his eyes dancing with suppressed mirth once again. "I wish you only the best Syaoran. Make sure to live your brief life to the fullest. I'm sure I'll be making it harder on you for the interim, but you'll understand eventually."

Seconds later, Syaoran was staring at the shiny wood surface of Clow's front door. The loud click of a lock snapping into place told Syaoran that he was indeed no longer welcome. Drowning in every unpleasant emotions known to man, Syaoran carefully treaded down the front steps and headed toward the sound of school bells in the distance.

"That was cruel," Madoushi said, glaring.

"It seems that way, doesn't it?" Clow said, smiling mischievously.

Staring Problem

Chapter Five

Staring Problem

"Morning Tomoyo-chan!" Sakura exclaimed, dropping her things on her desk by the window. She had the second-to-last seat in the last row opposite of the door. It was one of the best spots in the room. The teachers didn't notice her because she was off to the side, which made it easy to daydream- especially during math lessons.

"Good morning Sakura-chan," Tomoyo replied. She sat next to Sakura one row over. "You seem much more cheerful this morning. Yesterday you were not quite yourself."

Sakura took her seat, hanging her small black book-bag on the hook attached to her desk. "That's because my alarm clock went off on time this morning."

"So you got up too late yesterday?" Tomoyo asked.

Sakura shook her head. "I got up too early."

"Too early?" Tomoyo repeated, holding a finger to her chin.

Sakura grinned and was ready to explain further, but the class respectfully quieted and moved to their seats as the teacher entered the room.

"Good morning everyone," the tall man with a shock of orange hair said, setting his brief case on the desk at the head of the room.

"Good morning sensei!" the class chimed.

"Before we get started, I'd like to introduce a new addition to our class," the teacher said.

Sakura sighed inwardly. From what she had been told, Terada-sensei used to be an elementary school teacher, so some things he did in the classroom had carried over from working with younger kids. One of his worst habits was that he felt compelled to make each new student stand in front of the class as he introduced them. It was one of the most nerve-racking experiences in Sakura's recent memory, as it hadn't even been a year since she transferred to Tomoeda High School. Whoever the new kid was, Sakura already had a certain level of sympathy for them.

"Come on in," Terda-sensei said, gesturing to the door.

A tall, rather pale boy stepped into the room and moved uneasily to the front of the class. He had a mass of disheveled, chocolate-colored hair that fell messily over his serious amber eyes. His face was completely blank, almost as if he didn't have much practice using facial expressions. In fact, the only thing that gave his appearance any life at all were his eyes. They seemed to display emotions far more efficiently than his face could (which wasn't really all that helpful,) but without them he might as well been a zombie.

Sakura probably wouldn't have paid so much attention to his eyes had they not been staring directly at her. She blinked and awkwardly looked down at her desk, but could still feel the boy's eyes on her. It was disturbing.

"Sakura-chan," Tomoyo whispered lightly, her gaze skipping back and forth between Sakura and the boy. "Do you two know each other?"

Sakura shook her head firmly, as if she could shake off the boy's stare in the same gesture.

"This is Syaoran Reed," Terda-sensei said, after what seemed like a thousand year long silence to Sakura. "I hope everyone will give him a warm welcome. Now let's see... The only desk that is vacant at the moment is the one behind Kinomoto-san. Please have a seat."

Sakura went ridged. The boy headed back in her direction, his eyes never leaving her general location. Sakura hadn't even seen him blink once since he entered the room. Even as he passed her to sit down, his eyes followed her until he got to his desk and was able to stare intensely at the back of Sakura's head. She could feel a heated gaze burning a hole through her hair.

What did I do to make him stare at me like that ? Sakura wondered wildly, feeling self-conscious and awkward.

It had been an extremely stressful morning for Syaoran. When he had arrived at the school, he had no idea where to go or what to do. He considered simply going into a classroom and sitting down, but that didn't seem right. Thankfully, a teacher found him walking aimlessly around the grounds and took him to the office to find his classroom. Before he knew it, he was being introduced to the class. To his surprise, there was the Kinomoto girl, sitting in front of the only empty desk in the room. Either this was a big coincidence or Clow had something to do with it. Whatever the case, it did make his job a lot easier.

He was determined that she would never leave his sight. He had no interest in talking to her or socializing with anyone else, but he figured he could protect her without drawing attention to himself. He was still getting used to the fact that the Living could actually see him now, however, and often forgot. This led to a lot of jumping and anxiety when the teacher would call on him to answer questions. It seemed that the teachers liked to pick on the new kids because he was called on quite often throughout the day. He could usually answer the questions fairly accurately, thanks to all the reading he did from the Kinomoto family's book collection. The teachers were always telling him to speak up, though. It was annoying.

He hated the way all the students would turn around and look at him when he was asked a question. Why couldn't he just be ignored?

When the recess bell finally rang, Sakura nearly ran out the door to escape the new boy's staring.

"Maybe you remind him of someone," Rika said logically as the usual gang sat under the large tree in the courtyard.

"Or maybe you had something on your face," Chiharu said, studying Sakura's face with squinted eyes.

Sakura's hand went flying to her face. "Is there something on my face?"

Tomoyo shook her head, smiling. "You look as cute as always, Sakura-chan."

"I wonder where he's from," Naoko said. "He's kind of weird-looking, isn't he?"

"Yeah," Chiharu said. "He never smiles or anything. It's like that blank look is plastered on his face."

"And he won't speak above a whisper," Naoko commented. "The teachers are always telling him to talk louder. I don't know how they hear him."

"I don't think he's feeling well," Rika said. "He's so pale. It doesn't suit his complexion. It seems like he should be a little bit tanner than he is."

"But that doesn't explain why he won't stop staring at Sakura like she ran over his dog or something," Chiharu said.

"Maybe it's simply a case of 'hate at first sight,'" Tomoyo said, a finger on her chin.

"But I didn't do anything!" Sakura said, feeling distressed.

Tomoyo patted Sakura's knee in a comforting gesture. "It's okay Sakura. He's new. Maybe he just needs some time to adjust."

"Hey, Sakura, don't look now," Chiharu said. "But New Kid is back and just as blank-eyed as ever."

Sakura gingerly turned her head. He was sitting across the courtyard on the steps to the school. And those amber eyes were as intense as ever and trained right on her. A shrill of alarm danced down her spine.

"What was his name? Syaoran?" Naoko wondered, trying her best not to stare back.

"Yeah. Syaoran Reed," Chiharu said. "Reed is an odd name, don't you think?"

"It sounds English," Rika commented. "But he doesn't look English, does he?"

"Why does he keep looking at me like that?" Sakura mumbled.

"Maybe you should go talk to him," Tomoyo suggested.

"That sounds like a good idea," Rika said.

"Oh no, it's too late," Chiharu said gravely. "Yamazaki-kun got a hold of him. Poor Reed-san."

Yamazaki was dragging Syaoran away by his arm.

"What's so bad about that?" Naoko said. "He needs someone to show him around school."

"That idiot's not gonna show him anything *useful*," Chiharu said, her fists balled.

At least I get a break from those eyes, Sakura thought to herself.

"And this stuff isn't really chalk," Yamazaki was saying. He had led Syaoran into the classroom and was now introducing him to the

chalkboard. "Here at Tomoeda High, we try our best to cut down on the careless expenditure of natural resources. That's why this 'chalk' is really made out of used eggshells instead of real shells. You'll sometimes hear the students call this stuff 'chick' instead of 'chalk' for that reason."

"Really? These are made out of eggshells?" Syaoran said incredulously, looking at the white substance that rubbed off on his fingers.

"Yes," Yamazaki said, raising his index finger and looking very learned. "And to wipe the board every week, one must use a mixture of cooking oil and paint thinner to remove it. That's why we all have to wear masks and keep the room well-ventilated or we could die."

Syaoran nodded gravely. "The weekly chores at this school sound hard."

"Oh, well, you'll get used to the fumes after awhile," Yamazaki said. "Feeding the giant three-toed sloth in the school clock tower, on the other hand, takes some practice."

Syaoran nodded, feeling a bit more nervous as Yamazaki kept talking. He had no idea that going to school would require so much extra work. He would have to balance his time wisely between the school chores and watching Sakura.

He would've been a little more apprehensive about leaving Sakura alone had he not been able to see her out the window. She was sitting right where he had left her: by the oak tree with all her friends. This school was obviously a very dangerous place, what with all the giant monsters and poisonous fumes. No wonder she was destined to die so unexpectedly. He had his work cut out for him to keep her alive.

"Hello Eriol-kun," Yamazaki said, pulling Syaoran's attention back to the classroom. He was speaking to a very pale, sapphire-haired

young man who had just entered the room. "I was just telling Reed-kun here about the giant three-toed sloth in the clock tower."

"Ah yes," Eriol said, smirking slightly. "I almost lost my arm to it just the other day. When he gets hungry, he gets greedy."

"You wouldn't be the first one to lose a limb," Yamazaki said casually.

Eriol approached Syaoran and extended a hand. "Hello Reed-kun. It's nice to meet you. I'm Eriol Hiiragizawa. I hope we can be friends."

"Yeah," Syaoran said, unsure of what to do with an outstretched hand like that. It must have been some foreign custom he wasn't aware of.

Eriol dropped his hand, still smiling warmly. "I'm sorry, your surname sounded English. Where did you say you came from?"

Syaoran didn't like the look Eriol had in his eyes. He looked friendly enough, but Syaoran felt as if he were being... analyzed.

The bell signaling the end of recess suddenly rang shrilly, giving Syaoran an easy way out of answering Eriol's question. Syaoran took a moment to watch Sakura from the window as she got up and headed back into the classroom. Her friends were still around her, so Syaoran felt like it would be safe to head back to his seat.

As he passed Eriol, the boy leaned close to Syaoran in a casual way, as if to grab something from the teacher's desk. Instead, he whispered something very faint in a mysterious and oddly resonate tone towards the table.

"Be careful around sunset."

Syaoran's head snapped back around to look at Eriol, but he was already heading back to his seat. The exchange had happened so quickly and subtly that Syaoran couldn't really be sure if Eriol had said anything at all. Maybe hearing things was a side effect of his

transformation. As the classroom filled with noisy, hyper students, Syaoran became less and less sure that Eriol had really said something.

Regardless, Eriol was defiantly someone to watch carefully. He was exactly the kind of person who could cause Sakura the most trouble. Syaoran continued to stare at him as he took his seat. He hadn't noticed that Eriol sat right next to him the next row over. In fact, he hadn't noticed anyone else in the classroom besides Sakura. He resolved himself to become more observant. He couldn't really protect Sakura by staring at her and her alone. The plush toy said that Sakura's death would come from an outside source. It was important to take note of everything in her environment that could be deemed a hazard.

Syaoran wandered back to his desk and sank into it. This guardian thing was a lot harder than it seemed.

"What a day," Sakura said, walking beside Tomoyo as they left the school behind. She had her roller blades slung over her back. "I'm already exhausted."

"It seems you can't relax just yet either," Tomoyo said, an amused smile playing on her face. "He's right behind us."

Sakura cringed and turned casually, as if she were getting something out of her backpack. The Reed boy was indeed several paces behind them, although he wasn't staring directly at her any longer. Instead, his gaze was wildly flittering around, looking at everything *but* Sakura. This was probably the reason why she hadn't been able to tell he was there. His gaze seemed to burn holes into whatever it landed on.

"Do you think he's following us?" Sakura asked, sounding anxious.

Tomoyo put a finger to her chin. "It could be that he just lives in this direction as well."

Sakura nodded. Maybe any second now, he would turn off onto a side street...

"Syaoran Reed..." Tomoyo said slowly, as if analyzing every syllable. "It's a very strange name, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Sakura said. It didn't really matter what his name was as long as he stared like that.

"Sakura-chan, do you remember the card game we played at your house during the slumber party?" Tomoyo asked offhandedly.

Sakura cocked her head in confusion. Why was Tomoyo bringing this up?

"Of course I remember. I'm still looking for that one missing card," Sakura said.

"Syaora... n..." Tomoyo said quietly and slowly. "Hmmm... That's very interesting."

"Hoe?" Sakura said, completely confused. "Tomoyo-chan, what are you talking about?"

She took her finger from her chin and turned to Sakura, a smile beaming on her face. "Nothing, never mind. Have a safe trip home, Sakura-chan."

With that, she crossed the street toward her house, her lilac hair bobbing in time with her energetic step. She mumbled absentmindedly as she walked away. "I'll have to start bringing my camcorder to school, it seems."

"Wait Tomoyo-chan!" Sakura said, calling after her. "What do you mean by that?"

"See you tomorrow Sakura-chan!" Tomoyo said, grinning manically and waving.

Sakura sighed helplessly. Tomoyo was a very caring, wonderful friend, but she could be so *weird* sometimes.

Sakura was getting tired of people acting weird.

Syaoran refused to let Sakura out of his sight until she safely got into her house. It was officially her house now. From the outside, it looked completely foreign. Syaoran had a hard time believing that he had spent countless years wandering alone and forgotten in that house. Clow's words suddenly came back to him, resounding in his head.

"You have to ask yourself if it's worth it."

Syaoran continued down the sidewalk, not sure where he going. It didn't really matter, anyway. He just knew he didn't belong at this place anymore. It was... sad.

Syaoran frittered away the afternoon by wandering around town. Some of the locations, like the park with the giant penguin slide, seemed vaguely familiar, even though he had never been beyond the borders of his home.

He found that most animals were simply terrified of him. Dogs would growl viciously as he approached and birds would scatter from trees as he passed by. Cats seemed to be able to tolerate his presence, but they would eye him suspiciously and eventually leave the area. He figured that this was one of the side effects Clow had neglected to mention. He could only hope it was one of the only ones.

Syaoran eventually found himself wandering back to the park as the sun neared the horizon. He noticed a small nook under the penguin slide, so he crawled into it. Breathing a sigh of relief, Syaoran leaned up against the smooth, curving wall of his enclosure. He felt comfortable and at ease in small, cramped spaces. There was so much world out there that it made him feel dizzy. For a while, he was

content simply to sit under the slide, watching the line of sunlight slowly drift down the wall.

Suddenly, however, Syaoran felt like a huge weight had lifted off him. At the same time, he fell backward through the wall he'd been leaning on and into the sand surrounding the slide. Confused, Syaoran stood up, passing through the slide as he did. He looked down at his hands and found they were half-transparent and fading away.

Syaoran looked up to the sky. It couldn't possibly be the next new moon already! Was this another side effect?

"You have violated the delicate process of life, death, and rebirth. For this, a sacrifice is required."

Syaoran whirled around to face the voice coming from behind him. The deep, menacing sound made him feel as if he should be anywhere but where he was.

A large, panther-like creature sat majestically before Syaoran, its tail twitching irritably back and forth. Giant, semi-transparent butterfly wings were unfurled on its back, which would've looked ridiculous had the creature not been giving off such a malicious air.

"You have willingly participated in a selfish act that threatens to breakdown the cycle of life as it now exists," the creature said gravely, its voice so deep that it seemed to shake the ground. "Such a violation will not be tolerated. A replacement must be found. A sacrifice must be made."

Syaoran was ready to ask just about a billion questions when the weight suddenly returned and his body became visible to him again. The creature faded from view.

By now, the pink of the sunset was rapidly giving away to the black nighttime sky. Syaoran wandered over to the penguin slide and

gingerly laid his hand on the surface. His hand didn't pass through. He was solid again.

" Be careful around sunset."

Syaoran narrowed his eyes at the memory. Just who was this Eriol kid anyway? He obviously knew that at sunset something would happen. This must be another side effect. For some reason he would temporarily slip back into the metaphysical plane during sunsets.

The light of the moon melted most of Syaoran's anxiety away. There was only a sliver of it hanging in the sky, but it was enough to keep him from boiling over with frustration.

Yue and Clow had both mentioned a sacrifice, just as the panther-thing had. But Syaoran had nothing to give. What could the universe possibly want from him?

He hadn't meant to throw off the balance. He was just trying to save Sakura from an early, unscheduled death. Didn't that mean he was *correcting* the balance?

Apparently, someone didn't think so.

Finding the Balance

Chapter Six

Finding the Balance

The night passed much too quickly for Syaoran. He spent most of it laying flat on his back in the sand with his arms behind his head and staring at the sky. He wasn't particularly looking at anything, but the night sky was comforting and something familiar in his new world. No matter where he went, the sky was the same. He didn't need to be on the roof of his house to enjoy it.

"You have to ask yourself if it's worth it."

Syaoran squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head firmly. Why did that memory plague him? It would surface at the most unexpected times and bring all his thoughts to a grinding halt.

Syaoran sat up in the sand to watch the sun rise over the trees. He never really paid attention to the sunrise or sunset when he existed on the metaphysical plane in his house. It just wasn't something that concerned him; just like he couldn't care less when the grandfather clock in the living room of his old house would strike the hour. Back then, time was one of the last things on his mind.

But now time had become a menacing concept. He only had so much of it to get the job done. Time... what is time exactly? To Syaoran, time wasn't measured by the number of gongs a clock makes every hour, but by what condition the sky was in. If the sun was in the sky, it was daytime. If the moon was in the sky, it was night. That's as far as Syaoran's concept of time went. However, the Living measured time differently: with gears and ticking noises. It didn't make much sense to Syaoran, but if it was how the Living's world worked, he must learn to adjust.

There was a courtyard clock in the park beside the penguin slide. Syaoran knew what the big and little hands on a clock represented. He knew that each tick mark on the clock's face represented ten minutes or the start of an hour, depending on where the little hand was. Syaoran could easily tell you how many minutes were in a day or how many days in a year.

However, he had no idea what these numbers actually meant.

So he watched the park's clock closely as the sun began to rise. The clock read that it was about six o'clock. If that was the case, then it meant that the sun begins to rise at about six o'clock in the morning. Syaoran made a mental note that the day began at sunrise, which was at six o'clock in the morning. Based on this information, he could begin to approximate other significant times in the day, such as when school begins and when it ends.

Just as the sun peaked over the horizon, Syaoran felt the same release of pressure and weight that he had felt the night before at sunset. Once again, he drifted out of the physical world as his spirit drifted from the enclosed bounds of his "body." The feeling was actually kind of nice when he wasn't panicking over it.

"It must be during sunset *and* sunrise," Syaoran reasoned, watching his body turn transparent and intangible. The sand no longer touched him.

"That's right," a familiar, cool voice said from behind him. Syaoran turned around, never happier to hear that voice. "Sunrise and sunset represent an intermediary time when the sun and the moon eclipse each other. This disrupts your energy flow and causes you to slip back into our world. The energy is still being used and focused, but it's being diverted from its original path."

"Yue!" He exclaimed, jumping up. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

A shadow of a smile that barely tugged at his lips appeared on Yue's face. "I didn't think I'd have a chance to talk to you again either. But it seems fate is being kind for once."

Yue wouldn't look directly at Syaoran. Instead, he turned toward the rising sun. "We have about six minutes to talk while the sun rises."

Syaoran nodded. There were a million things he wished he could discuss, but he had to narrow down his questions to what mattered most. "Something strange happened last night at sunset..."

Syaoran described the panther-like creature with butterfly wings to Yue and the horrible malicious aura that radiated from it. Yue kept staring straight ahead, never making eye contact with Syaoran.

"That creature was the Guardian Beast of the Cycle, Spinal Sun," Yue replied, a shadow over his face. "He's angry with you for disrupting the cosmic balance."

"Why should he angry?" Syaoran asked, narrowing his eyes at the sand. "I'm correcting the balance by saving the Kinomoto girl, right?"

Yue shook his head, still gazing at the sunrise. "To Spinel Sun, you're only making a mess out of the Cycle. The Cycle demands that a soul goes through a set and inflexible process: life to death to rebirth. You have come out of turn by going from life to death to life again. It's disrupting the process and it could cause problems."

"What kind of problems?" Syaoran said, struggling to keep his frustration in check.

"It's hard to explain without knowing about the intricacies of the Web of Life," Yue said, putting a hand on his hip. "The only important thing you need to know is that to correct this disruption, there needs to be a replacement."

Syaoran nodded his head vigorously. "That's what that creature told me: 'A replacement must be found.' What did he mean by that?"

It took Yue a few precious moments to answer. "It's a life for a life, Syaoran. You have to understand that existence itself is essentially a mass of billions upon billions interconnected and codependent souls. To have even one life added to the Web is a very delicate process and must be treated with the utmost care and planning. For a soul to be displaced in a matter of seconds without warning is creating Chaos. Chaos in turn sets off a series of uncontrollable events that often have disastrous consequences for all life. Thus, the life that was displaced needs to be balanced. It means that another life must to be removed from the Web to compensate for the sudden addition."

Syaoran stepped forward as the sun rose over the horizon. He could feel the weight starting to come back, but a sinking feeling was also starting to develop in Syaoran's being that had nothing to do with the effects of the sunrise.

"What life?" Syaoran asked quietly. Why wouldn't Yue look at him?

"The life that will have the most impact when removed from the Web," Yue said. "It must be the disruption's complete opposite. Because fate is cruel and unyielding, there happens to be someone very close who is your opposite."

"The Kinomoto girl?" Syaoran asked, a forbidding feeling sinking into his being like a shadow falling over him. "She can't be my opposite."

"She *is* your opposite, Syaoran," Yue said in an odd, emotionless tone. "In almost every way. Her removal from the Web will correct the imbalance. It will stave the impending Chaos."

Syaoran's mind was reeling. His frustration and anger had reached a breaking point. "That makes no sense! I did this because the plush toy told me she was going to die and I wanted to stop that from happening! Now you're telling me that I'm the one who's going to cause her death? That makes no sense, Yue!" His fists were balled and pinned down at his sides, shaking. If he could have, he would've hit Yue.

"It's a paradox, Syaoran," Yue said, calm as ever. "Keroberos knew Sakura was going to die unexpectedly, but the mystery lay in where her death was going to come from. It turned out that when you crossed the veil to save her from this unexpected death, you - however unknowingly - became the cause of her unexpected death."

"That... that can't be!" Syaoran screamed. "It just can't!"

"I tried to warn you, Syaoran," Yue said, his eyes blank and glassy as he stared into the sunrise. "Everything requires a sacrifice. Your choice seemingly came with an unexpected price, but it's just equal trade. And, in the end, all the universe cares about is equal trade. As long as a balance is struck - that's all that matters."

"But I'm going back!" Syaoran cried, trying somehow to disrupt Yue's logic. If Syaoran could prove Yue wrong, none of this would be happening at all. "When the new moon comes, I'll be gone! The balance will be made then!"

"But in the interim, Chaos will reign free," Yue said. "Sakura needs to die as soon as possible to keep Chaos at bay. Another life can simply be added once you are gone, Syaoran. People's lives are just placeholders in the grand scheme of things. Nothing more."

Syaoran felt as if a rug had been pulled out from beneath him and instead of falling to the ground, he was falling into the sky. He felt disoriented and weak.

"Our time is up, it seems," Yue said, turning his back on Syaoran and flaring his wings. "Just remember that nothing is hopeless. You've made a decision that can't be undone, but continue on the path you've set for yourself. There's no other alternative at this point..."

The weight fell on Syaoran's head like a lead brick. It was so surprising and sudden that Syaoran fell to his knees, even though there was no real physical why he should. He looked around, finding that his body was solid and Yue was nowhere in sight. Feeling hopeless, Syaoran fell on his back in the sand and stared at the

rapidly brightening sky. For several minutes, Syaoran just stared upwards, not really looking at anything and keeping his mind completely blank. He didn't want to think. He didn't even want to be aware...

But he could only keep his mind blank for so long. Soon the thoughts began to seep into his mind like rapidly multiplying bacteria. First, there was one thought that spit into one direction, then those two thoughts split, and then they split until his mind was drowning in a billion questions that had no answers.

A paradox... The sacrifice he had been warned about was the very thing he had come to save. It was stupid. It made no sense. It was unfair. Why should Sakura have to suffer for his dumb mistake?

She shouldn't. She wouldn't. Syaoran's resolve began to harden. He wouldn't let Sakura become a placeholder. He was going to do what he had come to do in the first place: save Sakura. He wouldn't let the chaos have her as payment. If anybody should pay a price, it was him.

Syaoran's thoughts suddenly cleared and everything came back into focus. If he could keep her alive until the new moon, then he would disappear and the balance would correct itself. He sat up, clenching his fists. That was his plan. It wasn't a very good one, but it was all he had. All he had to do was keep the chaos from Sakura until he was gone.

That way, there wouldn't have to be any sacrifices.

Tomoyo was waiting anxiously for Sakura by the gates to the school. Of course, she always waited anxiously for Sakura, but this day was special. Today Tomoyo had her video camera. She had the lens trained on the spot where Sakura would appear over the hill and head towards the school. It was just about time for school to start, so Tomoyo expected her at any moment.

Just as predicted, Sakura came skating over the hill, her head down and her face beet-red. Tomoyo nearly squealed in joy at being able to get this precious expression on camera, but forced herself to calm down as Sakura approached.

"Good morning, Sakura-chan," Tomoyo said, adjusting the focus now that Sakura had gotten closer. "Is everything okay?"

Sakura shook her head wildly at the ground, causing her auburn hair to swing about in the most graceful way.

"He... he followed me," Sakura said, seemingly unable to lift her head. "The whole way."

Tomoyo didn't move her camera off Sakura's cute expression, but looked with her own eyes to see Syaoran Reed clear the hill, his expression blank and unreadable.

Tomoyo chuckled. "He must live near you."

Sakura hung her head. "I just wish he wouldn't stare like that."

They made their way into the school to change shoes. Sakura was constantly looking behind her.

"He must hate me," Sakura said, removing her rollerblades and putting them inside her locker. "He must really, really hate me. I can feel his gaze burning holes in my head."

Tomoyo reluctantly shut off her video camera and placed it inside her locker. "His expression is hard to read. I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out to be something quite different."

"Hoe?" Sakura asked, making an expression that made Tomoyo want to rip through the metal of her locker door for her camera. "What do you mean?"

Tomoyo smiled softly but didn't say anything. After all, she wouldn't want to ruin all the chances to film that adorable face. "We'll be late

to class if we don't hurry."

"Tomoyo-chan!" Sakura yelled in frustration at the retreating figure.

"Terada-sensei made up a new morning cleaning schedule to compensate for your arrival," Yamazaki said, dangling a piece of paper in front of Syaoran's face. "He has you down for the fourth day of every month."

Syaoran took the piece of paper, reading it with one eye while watching Sakura with the other from the window. She always spent recess in the same spot with her friends, it seemed. Keeping an eye on her was almost... boring.

"The fourth day..." Syaoran said, reading the schedule. "What does that mean?"

Yamazaki raised an eyebrow. "The fourth day is the fourth day. What else would it be?"

Syaoran shook his head. "I don't understand."

Yamazaki raised a finger and opened his mouth, but a voice from the front of the classroom broke him off.

"When the sun rose this morning, it began the third day of this month."

Yamazaki turned around, stepping out of Syaoran's field of vision.

"Ah, Eriol-kun," Yamazaki said cheerfully. "Good afternoon."

Syaoran lowered his gaze at the blue-haired figure. The aura this guy gave off was unsettling. Despite his friendly eyes and frail exterior, something about him was... odd.

"The date is written on the board here," Eriol said, gesturing to the lower right hand corner of the chalkboard and smiling warmly. "Today

is the third day of this month, so naturally tomorrow will be the fourth day. The month ends on the 31st. It's a simple enough system to learn. I'm sure you'll catch on quickly."

"You don't know how to keep track of the date, Reed-kun?" Yamazaki asked, looking a bit surprised.

Syaoran continued to glare at Eriol as he came closer. This aura...

"It's not that," Syaoran said, trying to come to his own defense.

"You just keep time differently where you come from," Eriol said, the smile never leaving his face. "Am I right?"

Syaoran turned his head to look out the window. Staring into those sapphire eyes was disturbing. They looked like ice.

"Yeah..." he said. What else could he say?

Eriol followed Syaoran's gaze out the window. Without even realizing it, he had been watching Sakura. She was getting up and heading back inside with all her friends. The bell rang just then.

"I wish you luck with your ordeal."

Syaoran brought his gaze abruptly back to Eriol. He was still staring out the window, but turned to look at Syaoran with that stupid smile on his face.

"What did you say?" Syaoran hissed.

"I said 'good luck,'" Eriol repeated, smiling. "You know, with the chores tomorrow. They can be quite an ordeal."

"Oh, right," Syaoran said, keeping his gaze narrowed. Was that really all Eriol meant to say?

"Is he there?" Sakura asked as she walked with her head down, staring at the sidewalk.

"Of course," Tomoyo said cheerfully, her camera squarely on Sakura.

Sakura visibly shivered.

"Maybe you should go talk to him," Tomoyo suggested. "I'm sure he needs some new friends since he just moved here."

Sakura shook her head wildly. Her blood turned to ice just thinking about it.

"I wonder if he really is following me..." Sakura said. Her head snapped up. "I know! Let's pretend like we're going to your house, Tomoyo-chan, and see if he goes the same way. Then we'll know for sure."

"Good idea," Tomoyo said, adjusting the color settings on her camcorder.

Sakura headed in the direction of Tomoyo's house, preparing to cross the street. The roads were devoid of traffic. No one drove very much in Tomoeda since everything was within walking distance.

"Wait for one moment please, Sakura-chan," Tomoyo said, rummaging through her shoulder bag. "I need to change the battery on my camcorder."

Sakura stopped and turned around. "Why did you even bring it to school? Are you working on a project?"

Tomoyo smiled coyly. "If you want to call it that, then yes."

"Is it going to be one of your montages?" Sakura asked. "Those are always so awesome!"

"No, it's something much more ambitious," Tomoyo said, recording Sakura's confused expression and she rummaged through her bag

with one hand.

"Well, I'm sure if you're recording it, it'll be great!" Sakura said, smiling.

"Let's hope so," Tomoyo said, turning off the camera to replace the battery.

A woman came running past the two girls, obviously in some very big rush. She was barely paying attention to where she was going and didn't see Sakura or Tomoyo on the curb until the last minute.

"Excuse me!" the woman yelled rudely as she roughly brushed passed the two girls without stopping. Sakura was jarred so badly that she lost her balance and fell into the road.

"Sakura! Look out!" Tomoyo yelled frantically.

Sakura, dazed from her fall, looked up just in time to see a small white car rapidly approaching. It was so close that Sakura could clearly make out the driver's shocked face. There was no time to move.

Sakura squeezed her eyes shut and heard brakes squealing. She braced herself for a violent impact, but instead she just felt a rough yank on her arm. That was it. No horrible crashing noise or pain. All she felt was pressure on the crook of her arm.

Slowly, carefully, Sakura opened her eyes. She was back on the sidewalk, staring up at two very intense, emotionless amber eyes. The pressure on her arm let up and Sakura took two frantic steps backward.

"Idiot," the Reed boy said, turning his head to the side. His voice was very soft, almost a whisper. "Don't be so reckless."

"Uh..." Sakura articulated. Her mouth just didn't seem to want to work. Her arm hurt where he had grabbed her. She refused to look

up at him.

"Is everyone okay?" the driver of the car had gotten out and come over to the group, obviously very shaken.

"Sakura-chan, are you hurt anywhere?" Tomoyo asked, touching her shoulder.

Finally coming out of shock, Sakura shook her head in answer.

"I'm fine," She said, turning to the driver. "And I'm very sorry."

After making sure that Sakura was okay and giving a stern lecture about the dangers of being careless around traffic, the driver finally got back in his car and slowly drove away.

Sakura sighed shakily. "I thought I was going to die!" She slowly and hesitantly turned around to face Syaoran.

"Thank you, Reed-kun," she said, wringing her hands behind her back and still refusing to make eye contact. "I'm very sorry that we had to meet like this..."

"Sakura-chan," Tomoyo said quietly. "He left already."

Sakura lifted her head to see a deserted sidewalk.

Syaoran ran down the sidewalk in the direction he had seen her go.

That woman who bumped into Sakura... That hadn't been a coincidence.

Nothing was ever a coincidence.

That woman...

Syaoran slowed to a stop. He would never find her. She was gone now. Perhaps she had only existed for those few moments in an

attempt to correct the balance.

That woman had been Chaos. He had never been more certain of anything. Chaos incarnate had tried to kill Sakura. It had failed, but it would try again.

It would never stop chasing Sakura until the imbalance was corrected.

Syaoran narrowed his gaze at the air.

He would never let Chaos have Sakura. Ever.

"He's already caught on. He's a fast one, isn't he, Suppi-chan?"

"Don't call me that, Ruby Moon. It makes me want to hurt you."

"Well, at least this makes my job a bit more interesting. Simply being splattered by a car is so mundane. I'm going to have to come up with something a bit more creative to get around that boy's attention."

"It doesn't matter how you do it, just as long as it gets done."

"I know, I know. But that doesn't mean I can't have fun while I'm at it! You act like I have to be all serious about this. Being solemn and stern is so boring."

"But being flippant and lighthearted is time-consuming. This must get done as soon as possible."

"Don't worry. I'm already working on the next step."

Chaos Theory

Chapter Seven

Chaos Theory

Sakura approached her house, finally, after Tomoyo had spent nearly half an hour examining her for injuries after the near miss with the car. She had even offered to walk Sakura all the way home and put her to bed. Tomoyo only reluctantly let up after Sakura insisted she was fine for the billionth time.

Sakura walked up the short flight of steps in the front yard with her head down and rubbing the crook of her left arm. It was kind of tingling where Syaoran Reed had grabbed her. It didn't hurt exactly, but it was weird the way that she could still feel his hand on her arm. She tried to rub the feeling away, but it only seemed to make the sensation more intense.

"Hey kaijuu. You're late getting home."

Sakura's head snapped up from the pavement to see Touya leaning against the oak tree in the front lawn. His eyes were narrowed and his arms were crossed tightly over his chest. He was looking at her as if he'd just caught her skipping school.

"Onii-chan..." Sakura mumbled, forgetting to be mad at him for once. "Don't you have to be at work?"

He shrugged and tilted his head to take some of the pressure out of his gaze. "I have a few minutes." He let his words hang in the air while the birds chirped in the trees overhead.

Touya had some kind of weird big brother radar that could detect when Sakura got herself into trouble. He was always the first one to notice when she was getting sick or when she got hurt. In fifth grade, Sakura fell down during PE and sprained her ankle. Touya showed

up fifteen minutes later to pick her up, even though no one had called him. At the time, Sakura had been very grateful that he had that uncanny intuition...

"Anything interesting happen today?" Touya asked, looking at Sakura sideways.

"Not really," Sakura said after only a moment of hesitation. She continued up the steps to the house.

Touya turned back to look at her directly. His brown eyes smoldered and he pursed his upper lip slightly.

About that radar... It also never failed to detect when she was lying.

Sakura couldn't explain exactly why she wanted to keep the accident a secret, but it had something to do with the fact that if she explained the story, then she'd have to explain who Syaoran was. And for some reason, she didn't want to do that.

"Fine then," Touya said, climbing onto his bike. "I'll be home around eight. See ya."

"Bye," Sakura said, smiling warmly to show him that she really was okay, despite what he may think. "I'll put dinner in the fridge for you."

He rode off without giving a second glance to Sakura. To most people it would seem like he was angry, but Sakura had grown to recognize the subtle gradient between anger and defeat in Touya's manner. When it was plain that Sakura didn't want to talk about something, he usually gave up quickly. It was his way of balancing out the control. He could always tell when something was wrong with Sakura - whether she be hurt, sick, or just lying - but he always made a point never to abuse the instinct. If Sakura didn't feel like elaborating on a point of her life, he never forced her to do so. It was Touya's subtle, offhand way of letting Sakura know that he respected her ability to think for herself. Somehow, in a very indirect and

indistinct way, Sakura knew that Touya trusted her to make her own decisions.

However, as Sakura walked into the house and up to her room, she wondered just how much she trusted herself and her own feelings.

For instance, despite the fact that her father and Touya were out for the day, the house seemed somehow... empty. Well, not empty, exactly. More like something was missing.

Sakura had tried to find out what was wrong. It was as if someone had subtly rearranged the furniture in the house without telling her, but she could still tell that something had changed. Her father had insisted that he hadn't moved anything, but the feeling still nagged at Sakura. It nagged way more than it should. And when Sakura had asked Touya about it, he had replied in a way that made it seem like he knew more than she did.

"Now that you mention it," he had said, his eyes getting small and darting around the room. "It is missing, isn't it? I wonder where it went..."

Sakura had tried to press him for more information, but he just put his hand on her head and said, "You wouldn't be able to handle it."

She stomped down hard on his foot then, but it didn't help anything. She finally came to the conclusion that Touya was just pulling her chain. He did that a lot, but she wished he wouldn't joke about this one thing.

The emptiness almost... hurt.

Syaoran sighed from his seat on the bench in the park, willing the sun to go down faster. For the past several hours, he had been pacing back and forth in front of the penguin slide, but that really didn't help matters very much. The people who passed by tended to stare at him when he paced like that. It was better just to sit still and

avoid the uncomfortable gazes. He found when he sat still, people ignored him.

The events of the accident ran over and over in his mind. He kept seeing the woman who had pushed Sakura into the road. He hadn't seen her face - it all happened too fast - but the presence of her aura was burned into his memory.

Auras can't be described in the usual sense. They don't have colors or a temperature. They don't have a scent and they don't make noises. The only way to describe an aura without witnessing it yourself is through synesthesia; that is, to express one sensation in terms of another. To Syaoran, the woman's aura reminded him of a tiny wave that cascaded into infinity to become a tsunami, or the first crack that appears in a stained glass window that causes the entire thing shatter violently under its own pressure. And even that wasn't exactly right. The aura wasn't the wave or the crack. It was what *causes* the wave and the crack.

Chaos. A sudden gust of wind that scatters a stack of carefully organized papers. The one tiny screw on an otherwise perfectly barren road placed in just the right position to cause a flat tire. The unloaded gun that, for some inexplicable reason, had one more bullet left inside...

The aura had turned one brief moment and seemingly innocent gesture into a potential untimely and unexpected end. Even though Syaoran had been waiting and watching just for that one moment, the situation had still blindsided him. Had he hesitated just one moment longer-

Syaoran shook his head violently as if to shake the thought out of his mind. It was just wasting energy to dwell on situations that never happened. He had, in fact, saved Sakura. Nothing would change that.

Syaoran half hoped that Chaos only had a one-time shot at Sakura. Was there any chance that Chaos would give up after failing? What

were the odds that he had interfered enough to change Sakura's fate?

This was only one of the reasons why Syaoran needed to talk to Yue so desperately.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Syaoran felt the release of his spirit as the sun melted into the horizon. He felt the tendrils of a presence behind him, so he turned around, expecting no one else but Yue.

But in the seconds that it took to turn and think for only an instant, Syaoran knew that this presence was not Yue's. It was like an over-filled tire, a misguided bullet, or a horde of stampeding animals.

It was exactly like being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Chaos.

She was taller than the average human female with huge, glossy butterfly wings flared behind her. They were like Spinal Sun's, only they were garnet instead of blue. She stood with one hand on her hip and her perfect figure cocked to the side. It was kind of like what Yue did sometimes, only on the opposite side. She had huge, focused scarlet eyes that were flecked with black. Her hair was put up in two fist-sized balls on top of her head with the rest of her long hair flowing down her back and a few tufts framing her face. Her tiny mouth was pulled back in a childish smirk.

"What's wrong kiddo?" she said, her voice like shattered glass. "Expecting someone else?"

Syaoran simply glared. "Where's Yue?"

"Oh, I'm sure he's around here somewhere. But because of your weakened metaphysical state, you two won't be able to converse until sunrise. That's his time, you know. That's the only time you can see him."

Syaoran let the silence hang in the air. He wasn't exactly sure what he should say. It seemed like an unwise idea to push the conversation along himself. He wondered exactly how much information he could get if he just let her talk.

"Sunset is our time," the woman said after a few moments of silence. Her voice sounded childish and playful. "Mine and Suppi-chan's."

"Suppi?" Syaoran repeated, resisting the urge to curl his lip in disgust. It sounded like some ridiculous name that a child would call their pet.

"You know him better as Spinal Sun, the Beast of the Cycle," she said, her smile reaching into her eyes. "And what about me? You already know who I am, right?"

Syaoran narrowed his gaze so much that he could barely see out of his eyes. "You're Chaos."

"Very good kiddo! I prefer to be called Ruby Moon, but Chaos is hitting the nail in the coffin," the woman said, putting her hands behind her back and beaming. "I told Suppi-chan that you were smart."

Syaoran didn't know what to say to that, so he let the silence hang again. Ruby Moon's smirk widened.

"Well," she said. "Don't you have something to say to me? You're so eager to talk to Yue, but perhaps I can help out as well. I've been around just as long as he has."

"I don't have anything to say to you," Syaoran said, not able to stop himself.

"Aw, I'm hurt. I really am," she said, not looking hurt at all. "I'm just doing my job kiddo. It's nothing I can really help. Of course, I *do* enjoy my job immensely, but that doesn't mean we have to hate each other."

"You enjoy killing people?" Syaoran asked.

"Well, my job doesn't always involve killing people," Ruby Moon said, flicking some of her long garnet hair over her shoulder. "But when it does, things get interesting. Usually things aren't *this* interesting, but normal, everyday disasters get boring."

Syaoran could do nothing but glare. He wished he could just walk away and not have to talk, but Sakura's future depended on his conversation with Chaos. He had to stay.

"Will you give up now?" Syaoran asked. This was the million-dollar question. "You failed once already. And no matter how many times you try again, I'll make sure that you always fail."

Ruby Moon shook her head, the smirk on her face reaching into her eyes. "I won't stop until my job is done. In fact, the next part of my brilliant plan is already underway. You can't keep me away forever, kiddo."

"It doesn't have to be forever," Syaoran said. "Just until I'm gone."

Ruby Moon looked like she was going to burst into wild laughter. "You really think you can keep me from doing my job? Granted that you aren't a normal human being, but you can't possibly think there's something you can accomplish that a normal human being couldn't. No one can stop fate."

"Usually no one knows what fate has in store for a person though," Syaoran said carefully, trying his best to sound intimidating. "But I do. I know what your goal is. I know who you're after. That's why I have a better chance of stopping you than any normal human being."

Ruby Moon shook her head and chuckled a bit. "And let's say you succeed. Just for argument, let's say somehow you stop me and Sakura Kinomoto never has to die. Then what? You two live happily ever after? I don't think so. You'll suddenly disappear from her life. Of

course, you're going to disappear no matter what the outcome, so why not let Sakura come with you? Why not die together? Then you wouldn't have to be alone."

Syaoran was already dead and he'd rather stay lonely. He didn't want to tell Ruby Moon this, though. Personal feelings such as these only made a bad situation worse. "I understood the sacrifice I had to make to do what I did. It's my pain only. No one should have to suffer because of me." Syaoran studied Ruby Moon's expression carefully as he finished the sentence. How she reacted would show just how much she knew about the situation.

Her eyes seemed to un-focus. Was that confusion? Syaoran's aura flared. What could she possibly have to be confused about?

"Oh yeah!" Ruby Moon exclaimed as the weight began to fall onto Syaoran again. "I almost forgot. Suppi-chan wants me to give you a message."

She cleared her throat and when she spoke again, she was imitating Spinal Sun's deep, rumbling voice.

"Do not attempt to correct your own mistake by tampering further with the Cycle. Harsher measures will be necessary if you continue your reckless interference. The most effective solution to the disruption has been found and is already being carried out. Any further disorder will be met with severe consequences."

Syaoran glared at Ruby Moon as she began to fade away. She waved as if to say, "See you around," and then disappeared from sight completely as all the pressure came back on Syaoran. The sun had set.

Syaoran made his way back on the bench by the courtyard clock and sat down heavily. He draped his arms over the back of the bench and tilted his head to the sky to watch the stars blink into existence one by one. The streetlights flickered on, filling the air with a slight buzzing noise.

There was so much to think about that Syaoran simply cleared his head and refused to dwell on any one thought. He resolved to take things as they came. That's what Yue would suggest. The situation was too complicated. He couldn't simply form a plan of action because he had no idea what to expect.

But there was one thing that was certain.

No matter what the consequences - no matter how much he upset the balance - Sakura wasn't going to pay for it. It was unfair that she had to suffer for his mistake. Syaoran suddenly squeezed his eyes shut and buried his head in his hands.

What was this feeling? Why did that thought make it seem like his soul was being torn in two?

"I knew you were there, Order."

"You can drop the formalities, Ruby Moon. You sound so insincere when you're trying to be polite."

"You're such a bummer, Yue. Here I am, trying to be serious for once and you have to go ruin my fun."

"I've never known you to be serious for even a moment."

"Well, as long as we're talking about things that aren't like us, why don't we talk about your actions as of late? Such as the fact that you're playing favorites with your charges. Or that you're violating the balance you helped to create. Or that-"

"Who are you to question our methods?"

"Ah, getting defensive now, are we? This is fun, Yue! I haven't had a stir-up in our old routine in ages. Suppi-chan is practically seething with frustration and here I am, the effect coming *before* the cause."

Usually it's Order who has to come clean up after Chaos, but now it's the other way around. I'd ask why, but I'm having way too much fun."

"I can always trust you not to ask too many questions as long as I keep you entertained."

"You know me so well. But I can't get over the fact that the kid thinks I'm a bad guy. Not that I really care, but you and Keroberos are the ones who messed this up, not me or Suppi-chan. It wasn't the kid's fault either. But it's funny. He's sitting there feeling so guilty about this situation anyway. You wouldn't have anything to do with that, would you?"

"Sometimes deception is necessary. But then again, what I told him is not entirely a lie."

"Heh. Even *I'm* starting to wonder about you now, Yue. And when I start using my brainpower, you know it's bad. Just what exactly is going on in that twisted little mind of yours?"

"It doesn't really matter. The universe will take its price in the end. Just go do your job Ruby Moon. All I can do now is hope that I'm wrong about everything."

"I've never known you to be wrong, Yue."

"In that case, I'll just hope that you don't know me as well as you think you do."

Sakura hugged herself against the early morning cold, wishing she'd worn a heavier jacket. The weather was steadily transitioning from the comfortably brisk fall days into the chilly winter ones. The next good rainstorm would probably bring snow instead. Sakura grinned at the thought of Tomoeda covered in a blanket of fresh, fluffy white snow. Little towns like this were always so pretty after the first snowstorm of the year.

As she passed by the crosswalk where the accident had almost happened the day before, a shiver ran down Sakura's spine that had nothing to do with the weather. She could vividly see the white car racing toward her and feel the yank on her arm...

She kept on skating, ignoring the tingling on the crook of her arm. If she focused hard enough on the sidewalk as it went flying by, she could almost erase those intense amber eyes from her thoughts. Almost.

She skidded to a halt outside the school gates, her cheeks already flush from skating against the cool air. She glanced at her wristwatch and frowned.

Tomoyo usually waited outside for her on the days when they had morning chores together, even when Sakura was horribly late. After a few minutes of waiting, she shrugged and headed inside. It was probably just too cold for Tomoyo to wait outside this morning. She changed her shoes and headed up to the classroom. She passed a few kids in the hall, but for the most part the school was empty and eerily quiet.

The one good thing about being at school so early was that she didn't have to deal with being followed. She wondered what she would possibly say to Syaoran Reed when she saw him later that day. She had to say something, right? Well, at least that wasn't until later. She'd have the chance to talk to Tomoyo about it too. Tomoyo always knew what to say.

"Good morning Tomoyo-chan!" Sakura said, entering the room and grinning so widely that her smile forced her eyes closed. Tomoyo would get worried if she wasn't cheerful, especially the day after the accident. So she smiled brightly, letting Tomoyo know right off that she felt just fine.

"Uh... good morning," a voice that was not Tomoyo's replied awkwardly. This voice was quiet and deep. It made the crook of Sakura's arm itch.

Sakura's smile slowly faded from her face, allowing her eyes to fall open. Syaoran Reed was staring at her with a piece of chalk in one hand and a calendar in the other. He was in the middle of writing the date on the board.

"R-reed-kun?" she said, her mouth falling open. Why did it seem like the world was falling from beneath her feet when he stared at her like that? "What are you doing here?"

"Chores," Syaoran said simply, still staring. Did he ever blink?

"Where's Tomoyo-chan?" Sakura asked, brushing past Syaoran to where Terada-sensei kept the cleaning schedule. She leafed through it almost desperately.

"Sensei changed the schedule," Syaoran said, finally turning back to the board. He stepped back and studied his work with his arms at his sides. It was as if he were checking it for errors.

Sakura found her name. Sensei had indeed changed her cleaning partner from Tomoyo to Syaoran. Why hadn't Tomoyo said anything?

Sakura put down the schedule and slowly turned back to Syaoran. He was looking at the morning chore to-do list.

"Where do we get the water for the plants?" Syaoran asked, picking up the watering can by the door.

"There's a spigot in the chemistry lab next door," Sakura said. "Or you could fill it up in the bathroom."

Syaoran nodded and wandered out of the room. Sakura felt like sighing with relief. Her arm was tingling like crazy, but she ignored it. She set her things on her desk and then got the broom out of the closet.

Syaoran returned a few minutes later, lugging the watering can. He hefted it up onto the teacher's desk, spilling water everywhere.

"You didn't need to fill it up that much," Sakura said, forcing down a smile.

"I didn't?" Syaoran said, looking at the water on the floor.

Sakura shook her head. "We don't have that many plants."

Syaoran didn't say anything, but he lifted the pitcher and carefully watered the plants. He didn't spill any more water.

Sakura steeled herself. Now would be a good time. Right now.

"Um..." Sakura said to the floor quietly as she swept. "I just, you know, wanted to thank you for yesterday with the car. I don't know what would've happened if you weren't there."

"It wouldn't have happened if I wasn't there," Syaoran said. He had responded quickly, but it took him a while to get the words out.

"Huh?" Sakura said, looking up. Syaoran had his back to her while he watered the big ficus in the corner of the classroom.

"I mean," Syaoran said quickly. He turned around and stared at her. "It wasn't a big deal what I did. It's not like you could help it."

"But I guess it was pretty stupid to just fall into the road like that, huh?" Sakura said, remembering how he had called her an idiot.

"Kind of," Syaoran said, his face completely blank. Did he ever smile?

Sakura went back to sweeping.

"So when do we have to feed the sloth?" Syaoran asked after a few moments of awkward silence.

Sakura paused in mid-sweep. She wasn't sure she had heard him right. "Sloth?"

"Takashi-kun told me about it," Syaoran said. "The one in the clock tower."

Sakura just blinked at him. "There isn't a sloth in the clock tower. At least, I don't think there's one... Sometimes it's hard to tell if Yamazaki-kun is joking or not. I get confused all the time."

"Oh," Syaoran mumbled, looking at the floor. "Well, that's a good thing I guess. Feeding a giant sloth sounded really dangerous."

Sakura giggled nervously. "Yeah. You never know with me. I would probably trip into its mouth and get eaten, right?"

"That's what I was afraid of," Syaoran said, much too seriously.

Tomoyo suppressed a squeal of delight. Sometimes Sakura was so cute, it hurt.

She had only regretted her deception for as long as it took Sakura to get up to the classroom. Her expression when she saw Syaoran Reed standing there was absolutely priceless. If she hadn't caught that face on film right at that moment, she would've regretted it for the rest of her life.

In true candid fashion, she had set up her tripod in the next classroom over with the door just slightly ajar. It was the perfect angle. From this vantage point, the widescreen lens could capture the entire room in one shot. All Tomoyo had to do was stand back and try to muffle her squeals.

"Good morning Daidouji-san," a voice said from behind her. "You're here rather early."

"Good morning Hiiragizawa-san," Tomoyo said, not needing to turn around. Eriol's presence seemed to fill up the room. Besides, she didn't want to take her eyes off her camera for even an instant. "You are here early yourself."

"You're not spying on them, are you?" Eriol said with amused tone. He took a peak into the room.

"Spying is such a nasty word," Tomoyo replied, her eyes sparkling. "I prefer to call it a... candid documentary."

"I see," Eriol said, a shadow of a smirk crossing his face.

"Did I take your spot, Hiiragizawa-san?" Tomoyo asked, glancing at him sideways.

"We can share it," Eriol replied. He sat on the table closest to the door so he could see out the crack. "Did I miss anything?"

"I can play back the tape for you later," Tomoyo assured him.

"I can always count on you, Daidouji-san," Eriol said.

Tomoyo smiled. "Of course."

They were silent for a moment as Syaoran asked Sakura when they'd feed the giant sloth. Tomoyo and Eriol chuckled softly, beginning and ending at the same time.

"Why do you have such an invested interest in this situation, Hiiragizawa-san?" Tomoyo asked softly, slightly adjusting the focus on her camera. "My personal feelings about this matter are no secret, but I have a hard time imagining why you care. Am I missing something?"

"Let's just say that... it'll be fun while it lasts," Eriol said, a slight tone of melancholy in his voice, despite the fact that he was smiling.

"I didn't expect a straight answer," Tomoyo said, turning back to the camera.

"Have I become that predicable?" Eriol asked, pretending he was hurt by the comment.

"Just to me," Tomoyo replied offhandedly.

Syaoran hadn't realized he was supposed to have a partner during the morning chores, but when she had shown up in the doorway, it all suddenly made sense.

It was a good thing, really. He was worried about Sakura walking to school alone. Chaos had warned him that she was already implementing another plan. It could be anything. He had to stay alert and watch her closely.

For a few seconds he considered telling Sakura everything, but quickly rejected the idea. It sounded ridiculous - even in his own mind. Besides, knowing something like that was a very weighty responsibility. Syaoran felt more comfortable being the only one to have to carry the burden. Sakura shouldn't have to be bothered by it.

Sakura looked up from sweeping and caught Syaoran's eye. She bit her lip and looked like she was about to say something, but then stopped.

Syaoran hefted up the water pitcher. "I'm going to empty this out."

"I'll come with you!" Sakura yelled, a little too forcefully.

Syaoran stared. "Okay..."

She followed him out of the classroom and into the chemistry lab next door. There was a basin sink near the front of the room. Syaoran lifted the watering can into the sink. Sakura grabbed hold of one end and helped tip the pitcher so the water could empty out.

"I can do it," Syaoran said shortly. It was his fault that he had filled the can too much. Sakura shouldn't have to help him.

Sakura instantly let go of the can and left Syaoran pour the rest of the water down the sink. Sakura stood behind him, her hands behind

her back.

"Reed-kun..." she said quietly. "Did I... did I offend you somehow?"

Syaoran paused. "Huh?"

"Because I'm really sorry if I did!" she practically yelled, her hands over her heart. "Whatever happened to make you hate me, I'm sure it was all a misunderstanding."

Syaoran turned around. The sunlight was streaming in through the windows behind Sakura, silhouetting her frame. Her crystalline emerald eyes were wobbling slightly as if she were about to cry, but her face was serious and determined.

What was this all about? Why in the world did she think he hated her?

"I..." Syaoran was so surprised that he had a hard time getting the words out. "I don't hate you."

There was a beat of awkward silence.

"You don't?" Sakura said, her hands falling from her chest. She looked almost... disappointed.

Syaoran shook his head slowly.

"But..." she said, recoiling backward. "But what about all the staring? Or the fact that you follow me to school *and* when I go home? And what about all the staring!"

"I've been staring?" Syaoran asked, feeling his aura slip a beat.

Sakura nodded frantically.

Syaoran ran a hand through his hair and looked to the side. "I didn't realize..."

But when he thought about it, it made sense. She hardly ever left his sight when he was around her. Of course, it was for a perfectly legitimate reason, but he couldn't tell her that.

"Just, you know, try blinking every once in a while," Sakura said, a little smile lighting up her face. She looked a lot better when she smiled.

Syaoran nodded. "Okay, yeah."

He had never even thought of blinking, but people did it all the time. It was just one more thing to remind him that, no matter how much he looked the part, he wasn't really human and never would be. Normally, that thought wouldn't bother him...

What was this feeling? Why did it seem like his soul was being torn in two?

Accidental Fate

Chapter Eight

Accidental Fate

Sakura and Syaoran finished their chores in strained silence. Eventually, their peers began to trickle into the room one by one. Tomoyo was one of the first to enter, grinning from ear to ear. As soon as she came in, Sakura gave her a death stare, grabbed her arm, and ushered her into the hallway. Eriol almost collided with them as he attempted to get through the door. He followed them with his eyes and chuckled softly before ambling back to his desk.

Syaoran took his time putting the broom and cleaning supplies away so that he wouldn't have to sit next to Eriol when they were virtually alone in the classroom. The last thing he needed was another one of Eriol's prophecies.

"Why didn't you tell me about the change in the schedule Tomoyo-chan?" Sakura asked, yanking down on her friend's arm. "You must've known. Imagine my surprise when I walked in and *he* was standing there!"

"I don't have to imagine your surprise," Tomoyo said, noting Sakura's tone when she said "he." Judging by the lingering anxiety attached to the syllable, Tomoyo still had a lot of work ahead of her.

"Hoe?" Sakura said, blinking at Tomoyo's mysterious choice of words.

Tomoyo grinned inwardly. Sakura was an extremely intelligent and focused person, but she tended to be ignorant to what was going on right under her nose. One cryptic comment and she lost her focus.

Tomoyo took every opportunity to exploit this one flaw (but only for Sakura's own good, of course.)

"We better get back to class or we'll be late," Tomoyo said, leaving her befuddled friend behind.

"Alright everyone. May I have your attention?" Terada-sensei's voice brought everyone out of their morning stupor. Study hall was just about over and math class was next. However, it was strange for Terada-sensei to make an announcement just before the study hall period was over. An air of uneasiness infected the room.

"Last night Tsutsumi-sensei had an accident in her home. She slipped on a wet spot on her kitchen floor and broke her ankle."

A murmur of concerned whispers flared, but Terada-sensei held up a hand and quickly stifled the noise.

"Needless to say, she won't be able to teach math for several weeks while her ankle heals. However, we were able to find a substitute for you, even on such short notice."

Terada-sensei turned to the door. "Come in please."

The door opened and a woman with pale skin and long shockingly red hair that flowed past her waist stepped daintily inside. She had a rather long neck and a bright smile on her face. Her hands were folded innocently in front of her as she bowed deeply to the class.

A wave of dread crept over Syaoran like a swiftly approaching summer thunderstorm. The aura was exactly the same as it had been the night before when he spoke with Ruby Moon. This woman's presence practically choked his soul and seemed to seep into every corner of the room. And Syaoran couldn't be sure, but her gaze seemed to hover around Sakura's location as she scanned the faces of the room.

"Hello everyone. My name is Kaho Mizuki," she said in a voice smooth like silk and just as elegant. A few strands of hair fell over her face as she spoke. Syaoran watched in fascination as she weaved her spell on the class. "I hope I can meet your expectations of a good math teacher while your regular instructor is away. Shall we get started?"

She nodded gracefully to Terada-sensei who smiled and left the room. As he shut the door, Syaoran felt as if he was being locked inside the tiger's cage.

There's no mistaking this aura, Syaoran thought to himself as the woman energetically lectured the class. It's muffled, but that's just because she's trying to hide it. I know she's Chaos and now she's closer to Sakura than ever.

With a shudder, Syaoran realized just what this meant. Chaos had taken a vital position of power in Sakura's life. As a teacher, this woman could direct Sakura's actions much more effectively than any other force in Sakura's life. It was only a matter of time before Chaos exploited her influence.

"Well, I think that's enough for today, huh?" Mizuki-sensei said, closing her book for emphases. The students sat captivated. Math had never seemed more interesting. "I think I'll let everyone out early for recess just this once." She winked. The class cheered and headed for the door. Syaoran was the only one who didn't move.

"Oh, Sakura Kinomoto-san," Mizuki-sensei said over the din of the classroom rush. "I would like to speak with you before you leave."

Sakura froze as she was passing the teacher's desk.

Syaoran tensed as if ready for battle. Already Chaos was using her position to influence Sakura's actions. He was determined not to move from the spot. What would she attempt to do while Syaoran sitting right in front of her?

Tomoyo gave Sakura an encouraging smile and left the room with the rest of the class. Suddenly the three of them were alone.

"Reed-san," Mizuki-sensei said, her voice rippling through Syaoran's aura. She stared straight back at him. As he looked into her eyes, he had no doubts. This was Chaos in disguise. "This is a private conversation. I'm sure Kinomoto-san would feel much more comfortable if you kindly left."

Sakura slowly turned around and looked at Syaoran as if it was the first time she had noticed him. Then she quickly turned back to Mizuki-sensei.

"Uh, it's fine if Reed-kun would like to stay," Sakura said meekly. "He always sits in the classroom during recess. I don't want to bother him."

For an instant, Syaoran was positive that Mizuki-sensei's face had broken into Ruby Moon's wild grin, but it quickly disappeared, replaced by the woman's warm, disarming smile once again. "Very well."

"Kinomoto-san," Mizuki-sensei began. "May I call you Sakura?"

Sakura nodded. Syaoran cringed inwardly.

"Sakura-san, it seems your math scores are a tiny bit below average. It's nothing major, but you seem to be struggling. Am I right?"

Syaoran could see Sakura wring her hands behind her back. "Uh, well, math isn't my best subject. I wish I was better at it."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. We all have our weaknesses."

Did her eyes just flick in Syaoran's direction?

"If you feel you could benefit, I'd be happy to give you extra lessons after school. I always find that a little one-on-one attention helps

students find out exactly where they're having trouble. How about it?"

"Really?" Sakura said, leaning forward. Syaoran could practically see the light that was emanating from her face. "I'd like that a lot."

"Okay then," Mizuki-sensei said, smiling softly. "Take this form home and have your father sign it. Then we can start after school tomorrow. Sound good?"

"Yes!" Sakura said, grabbing the paper. "Thank you very much!"

"You're very welcome Sakura-san."

Sakura cried "thank you" a few more times before finally leaving the room. Syaoran could hear her skipping down the steps.

As soon as she was gone, Syaoran got out of his seat and moved to the front of the room. Mizuki-sensei smiled serenely as he walked up and placed his both hands on the teacher's desk. He leaned forward.

"I feel like I could benefit from some extra lessons as well," Syaoran said, his aura flaring.

"Syaoran Reed-san," Mizuki-sensei said, still smiling. "Your math scores are exemplary. There is absolutely no indication that you need any tutoring. You seem to be grasping all the concepts with ease."

"I feel as if I'm not being challenged," Syaoran said, switching gears abruptly. "Maybe you could give me some extra instruction that is above the average level."

Mizuki-sensei shook her head, her red hair glistening hypnotically in the sunlight. "I use what little free time I have to tutor those who are falling behind. If you feel you aren't being challenged, I can always recommend you to a higher grade level. This school has an excellent math club as well."

Syaoran resisted the urge to glare. She was making this really difficult.

"However," Mizuki-sensei continued. "If for some unexplainable reason your math scores were to drop significantly, I would have no choice but to offer you the same help that I offer to any other struggling student."

Now Syaoran couldn't help but glare. It had to be some sort of set-up. Why would she so openly give Syaoran the loophole he needed?

But it didn't really matter. Syaoran felt he could handle anything Chaos threw at him, as long as he could keep an eye on Sakura at all times.

"It's only a matter of time before I start falling behind because of your horrible teaching methods," Syaoran said seriously, turning to leave.

"Now, now, Reed-san," Mizuki-sensei said, drawing her hands up under her chin. "Is that any way to talk to your new teacher?"

"You're no teacher," Syaoran said, clenching his fists.

"On the contrary," Mizuki-sensei said sweetly. "Education exists solely to help children prepare for their adults lives. And if life can be defined by a series of chaotic events, then I think I'm more than qualified to teach a high school math course."

Syaoran whirled around, shocked that Chaos would reveal herself so readily. But Mizuki-sensei just smiled.

"I never meant to hide my identity from you, Syaoran. It's much more fun this way," Mizuki-sensei turned her head to stare wistfully out the window. Then her expression changed abruptly, as if realizing something that disturbed her.

"I think I left my bags by the gym door. You know, the one that opens up into the courtyard?"

The woman turned back to Syaoran, smirking. "Sakura-san uses that door a lot, doesn't she? I hope she doesn't trip and fall somehow..."

Syaoran gritted his teeth and then took off down the hallway. Sakura *did* use the gym entrance to the courtyard a lot, but he could hardly trust what Chaos was telling him. So instead of heading directly after Sakura, he used the front entrance to the courtyard and came around to the gym entrance.

Sure enough, a big, black rolling briefcase was sitting obtrusively right next to the door. Syaoran quickly approached it and wheeled it out of the way. Feeling satisfied that he had saved Sakura again, he was about to head back to the classroom when the door sprang open and violently collided with his entire left side. He couldn't feel any pain, of course, but the force of the impact swept his legs out from under him and he fell to the ground on his stomach. There were a couple more impacts to his ribs and then a muffled "Oof."

Syaoran lay there for an instant, stunned by the series of rapid events and pondering the awesome power of physics. It was a few more seconds before he realized that Sakura was laying askew about a foot away from him, just as stunned and confused. They seemed to become conscious of each other at the same moment.

"Are you okay!" Syaoran said, pushing himself into a sitting position.

"Are you okay!" Sakura said at the same instant, getting to her knees and wincing slightly.

"You're not okay," Syaoran said, glaring at Sakura's wince. He looked her over carefully, his eyes coming to rest on her raw, bloody left knee. "You're bleeding!"

"Hoe?" Sakura said, following Syaoran's gaze to her knee. She wrinkled her nose at it. "I guess I should've kept my knee pads on..."

Syaoran stood up and held out his hand. "You should go to the nurse."

Sakura hesitated for just an instant before taking Syaoran's hand. It was really cold and light, as if he were hollow inside.

"It's just a scraped knee," Sakura said. She pretended to dust herself off, but she really just wanted to wipe away the feeling of Syaoran's ice-cold hand on her palm. "No big deal. But what about you, Reed-kun? I know I hit you pretty hard with the door and I'm really sorry! Are you sure you're alright?"

"I didn't feel a thing," Syaoran said dully, still eyeing Sakura's bleeding knee. It looked awful and he felt awful when he looked at it. How could he be so stupid to fall for such an obvious trap? Sakura could have been seriously hurt. What if she had hit her head on a rock or something? With a twang in his aura, he wondered if she was more injured than she looked.

"You should go see the nurse," Syaoran repeated, a little more forcefully. "I'll go with you."

"I'm fine," Sakura said, twirling around on her heel for good measure. "See? And look, the blood's started to clot already."

Syaoran continued to glare and was about to say something when a yell from behind them cut him off.

"Sakura-chan!" Tomoyo's voice drifted up to them. She was smiling widely, but the grin waned when she saw Sakura's knee.

"Sakura-chan, are you hurt?" Tomoyo asked already going over Sakura like a worried mother.

Sakura blushed. "I fell."

"Come on, put your arm around me," Tomoyo said, grabbing Sakura's arm. "I'll help you to the tree so you can sit down."

"I can walk just fine on my own, Tomoyo-chan," Sakura said with an embarrassed smile. She walked a few paces ahead of Tomoyo to

demonstrate.

"Reed-kun, could you please go get a few wet paper towels?" Tomoyo asked as Sakura walked ahead. "We should at least clean the gravel off her knee."

Syaoran nodded firmly and headed back inside. On his way to the men's restroom, he passed Terada-sensei and another teacher talking softly to each other in the hallway.

"How is Tsutsumi-san?" asked the teacher Syaoran didn't know. "I heard she had to go to the hospital."

"She's in pretty bad shape," Terada-sensei replied gravely. "Her husband found her lying unconscious on the kitchen floor yesterday afternoon. No one knows how long she was there, but she hasn't come out of her coma yet. I just didn't have the heart to tell her students about it. They seemed to really like her."

"How awful," the other teacher replied. "But the students seem to be taking to this new teacher pretty fast. I've heard a lot of good things and she's only taught the one class."

"It was a miracle we found her," Terada-sensei replied. "We thought finding an indefinite substitute instructor would be downright chaos, but she just kind of fell into our laps. We were really lucky..."

Luck isn't the word I'd use, Syaoran thought to himself as he gathered paper towels. It seemed that you all got more chaos than you bargained for.

"Does it hurt, Sakura-chan?" Tomoyo asked as she dabbed the wound carefully with a wet paper towel.

Sakura winced. "Not until you started touching it."

"It needs to be cleaned," Naoko said. "Otherwise it could get infected."

"Are you *sure* you don't want to go see the nurse?" Chiharu asked, eyeing the broken flesh. The wound looked really painful in her eyes.

Sakura sighed. It was the car thing all over again! "I'm *fine* you guys! Stop making such a big deal out of this. It's just a scraped knee. I think I'll live."

"If you say so," Rika said. She looked over to Syaoran who was sitting silently a few feet away. Turning back to Sakura, she asked, "Now how did this happen?"

Sakura glanced over to Syaoran. "Actually, I'm not really sure. I was coming out the gym exit and I must have hit Reed-kun so hard with the door that he fell to the ground. Then I tripped over him and scraped my knee." By the end of her explanation, she was blushing furiously.

"Why were you in front of the gym exit, Reed-kun?" Tomoyo asked. "As far as I know, Sakura-chan is the only one who ever goes out that way."

Syaoran pulled a few blades of grass out of the ground. "Mizuki-sensei left her briefcase by the door. She was afraid someone might trip over it, so she asked me to move it for her." It wasn't exactly a lie.

"And instead of the briefcase, *you* became the hazard," Chiharu said, laughing.

"Still, it was really nice of you to help out Mizuki-sensei," Rika commented.

"Yeah, and don't worry about Sakura-chan," Chiharu said with a grin. "She's always getting in the way of something."

"Hey!" Sakura said, raising her fist in mock anger as the girls burst into giggles.

Syaoran pulled up a handful of grass. He didn't see what was so funny.

"What did Mizuki-sensei want, Sakura-chan?" Tomoyo asked after the laughter had died down.

"I almost forgot all about that," Sakura said, pulling the consent form enthusiastically from her pocket. "Mizuki-sensei says she'll help me with my math. We'll have extra lessons every day after school."

"That's really nice of her," Rika said. "But you don't need help *that* badly, do you?"

"Yeah, Sakura-chan," Chiharu said. "I mean, I know you're not exactly acing the class, but you must be at least pulling a *B* right?"

Sakura bit her lip and lowered her gaze. "Actually, my grade's... a little lower than that."

"Really?" Naoko said. "That doesn't seem like you, Sakura-chan."

Sakura nodded. "Well, you guys were a little bit ahead of the school I transferred from. I was able to keep up for a while, but now you've kind of lost me. And I've never been that great at math in the first place."

"Well, Mizuki-sensei seems to be the best person to learn from," Rika said. "Her class was so interesting. She's a pretty good teacher, huh?"

The girls murmured an agreement as Syaoran glared at the ground.

"You seem to be pretty good at math, Reed-kun," Tomoyo said, turning toward Syaoran. "What do you think of Mizuki-sensei?"

Syaoran stood up. "I don't like her."

There was a beat of awkward silence.

"You don't?" Naoko said.

"Why not?" Chiharu asked.

Syaoran paused for a second. "I don't like her methods."

"Her teaching methods, you mean?" Rika said.

Syaoran nodded slightly, staring straight ahead. "That too." He turned to Sakura.

"I'm sorry about your knee," he said, looking down to her. "I won't let it happen again." He turned to walk away.

"Leaving so soon, Reed-kun?" Tomoyo said, a hint of disappointment in her voice. "Why don't you stay and have lunch with us?"

"No thanks," Syaoran said over his shoulder. "I'm not hungry."

Sakura watched him walk away, her mouth hanging open slightly.

"He's... kind of weird, isn't he?" Chiharu said once Syaoran was out of earshot.

"Chiharu-chan!" Rika said scoldingly.

"Well, he is!" Chiharu said.

Tomoyo chuckled and looked over to Sakura. She was still staring after Syaoran, her eyes narrowed in thought.

"Are you alright, Sakura-chan?" Tomoyo asked softly.

"He acted like it was his fault," Sakura said, flexing her knee. "But it was just an accident. Why was he so upset?"

"I think he just feels guilty," Tomoyo said. "It's not that unusual."

Sakura shook her head. "It's not like he just feels guilty... I think he feels like it was his fault, you know? Like this accident couldn't have happened to anyone else at any other time."

"Hmmm..." Tomoyo said, putting a finger to her chin. "Then that would mean that Reed-kun doesn't believe in accidents. He must be a man of fate."

"A man of fate...?" Sakura said, her thoughts lingering on the words. Then she nodded to herself.

Yeah. Somehow, that sounded just about right.

Syaoran walked around aimlessly for a few minutes, not exactly sure where to go. He couldn't go back to that classroom because Mizuki-sensei could still be there. He couldn't stay with Sakura and her friends either because...

Well, he wasn't sure why, but he knew he just couldn't stay there. Something about the situation made him anxious. Maybe it was the fact that being so close to Sakura meant he couldn't keep an eye on her surroundings. He much preferred to keep his distance.

Syaoran paused under a tall oak tree and leaned against it. He looked up to see the sunlight streaming through the gaps between the leaves as the branches swayed easily back and forth. Something about the sight panged in his aura, making him feel uneasy. It was like there was some kind of hidden code inside the leaves and the sunlight; something he just couldn't quite grasp...

He turned around and touched the tree trunk. There was no feeling in his hand. He may as well have been touching a brick wall or a slab of sheet metal.

And yet, he knew what it *should* feel like. The bark should have been rough, abrasive, and not entirely pleasant. It should've broken his skin and made it bleed.

But it didn't. There was no pain. There was no feeling at all.

With a shrug, Syaoran grabbed onto a lower branch and hoisted himself up the tree. He found a particularly thick bough about a fourth of the way from the trunk that made a great resting spot. He let one leg dangle over the side and put his arms behind his head.

In his earliest memories of being alone in his old house, he used to climb the trees in the backyard a lot. It was hard during the day because the sun made his ghostly body weak, but he always found his way up a tree at night. It was a habit; almost like an irresistible urge. Syaoran remembered being very confused and uncomfortable in those days. He felt as if he had simply appeared one day out of nowhere and just began... being. He always remembered he was himself, always known that he was *somebody*, but there was nothing in his head. Not even a name. If it hadn't been for Yue, Syaoran may have lost his mind entirely.

"Yue, my head feels empty," Syaoran said softly one night over the wind that hummed through the branches. "I don't know who I am."

Yue had looked down at him, his arms crossed and the moonlight dappling his features. It looked like he was full of holes. "Why do I find you in the trees every night, Syaoran?"

Syaoran looked up to him, his aura twisted in confusion. In those days, he wasn't used to the way Yue tended to talk around a subject until he lead Syaoran full-circle through his thoughts. Eventually he shrugged. "I just like to climb them is all."

"Does anyone order you to get into the trees? Are you ever forced up here?" Yue asked, his voice prodding.

Syaoran shook his head, still completely oblivious as to why Yue was asking.

Yue gave Syaoran one of his super-rare smiles where the corners of his mouth ever-so-subtly curled upwards. "Well, there you have it

then. You are a person who enjoys climbing trees. It's part of who you are. And this is only one aspect of you that makes up your being. You say your head feels empty, but that's because you aren't in your head. You are *here* Syaoran. You are in these trees and in that house." Yue dropped his arms to his sides and flared his wings. "You belong here, Syaoran. Never think otherwise."

Eventually, Syaoran didn't feel the need to climb the trees as often anymore. Once in a while he would sit in one just for a comfortable change of pace, but it was no longer a habit. In time, he began to form an identity and that sense of individuality never left him again. The confusion subsided and the emptiness in his head filled with ideas and emotions. He finally felt like he didn't need to be in the trees all the time to be himself.

"Diadouji-san said something very profound about you today, Reed-kun."

Syaoran looked down to see Eriol squinting up at him against the sunlight. His aura rippled a bit in frustration. How had Eriol known he was up in the tree?

"She said that you are 'a man of fate.' Don't you find that interesting, Reed-kun?"

Syaoran glared down at Eriol. The blue-haired boy looked particularly pale against the deep brown tree trunk.

"I'm not fate," Syaoran said.

"No, she said you were a man *of* fate," Eriol said. "I think that has a whole different meaning. Diadouji-san means to say that you believe in fate. Do you have faith in fate, Reed-kun?"

Syaoran crossed his arms. Something about the way Eriol spoke to him made him irritable. He wasn't even paying all that much attention to what Eriol was saying. "Not really."

"Is the way I address you bothersome, Reed-kun?" Eriol asked.
"Would you rather I called you something different?"

"It doesn't matter," Syaoran said. His identity wasn't in his name. Whatever Eriol called him was going to be just as maddening.

"How about I call you..." Eriol drew out the last syllable for a few seconds as if searching for the right word.

"Xiao Lang Li."

Time stopped and the world went black.

" Xiao Lang! Where are you? Dinner is getting cold!" A pretty woman with long black hair and a strange accent crunched through the leaves below him. Syaoran snickered and clutched the tree branch tight, even as the bark scraped his fingers raw.

The woman's head snapped up and looked at Syaoran right in the eye. " There you are. Now get down here this instant and inside for dinner."

Syaoran groaned sadly and deftly slid down the tree trunk to the ground. The sun was setting and the air was chill. The woman put her arm lovingly around Syaoran as they approached the house - his house.

" It's cold out here. You need to start wearing a jacket outside, Syaoran," the woman said, switching from the foreign dialect back to Japanese. "Otherwise you'll catch cold."

" Okay, okay..." Syaoran was saying.

The blackness lifted and Syaoran found himself lying on his back in the grass with Eriol's pseudo-concerned face hovering over him. Instantly, Syaoran slid out from under the boy's gaze and got on his feet.

"What the hell was that?" Syaoran hissed, his aura flaring.

Eriol smiled gently as he rose to his feet as well. "I thought the information could be useful to you in the future."

"What information?" Syaoran asked, glaring.

"That was your real name, wasn't it?"

Flashes of the woman from the dream came back to him in still-shots. He remembered the rough bark under his fingers and the chill in the air. He had actually *felt* those things. They were real once.

"Real?" Syaoran repeated.

"Don't forget about it now," Eriol said over his shoulder, walking toward the school's entrance. "It's important."

Syaoran glared after Eriol, wondering for the millionth time who he was and why he knew so much.

He turned back to the tree trunk and put his hand on it.

Nothing.

And yet, he knew what it *should* feel like.

A Search for Life

Chapter Nine

A Search for Life

"I'm home!" Sakura yelled, shutting the door behind her. The sound rang hollow through the house. No one answered.

"That's right..." Sakura said, looking at the schedule board. "Otou-san is at a late meeting and Onii-chan works until 7."

Sakura sighed and hunched her shoulders. "Looks like I have the house all to myself... again." Her voice echoed flatly off the hardwood floor.

It wasn't that she desperately yearned for company; it was that the silence got to her. She often found herself talking out loud when she was alone, simply to fill the void in the air.

Sakura picked up her book bag and dragged it upstairs to her bedroom. She dumped it just inside the doorframe and was about to go back downstairs when the box on her bed caught her eye. Groaning, she wandered over to the bed and sat down.

The box contained the cards and manual to the game that Sakura and her friends had played during a slumber party nearly six months before. While they were playing the game, one of the cards went missing. Sakura couldn't bring herself to put the box away until she found the missing card. Something about having an incomplete deck made her anxious.

"Well, now is as good a day as any to look for that thing," Sakura said, opening the box and taking out the cards. She began to count them again for the billionth time. She counted slowly and diligently, placing all the cards face up in rows of ten on the floor.

"... 48, 49, 50, 51," Sakura said, placing the last card on the floor. She sighed. Same count as always. Fifty-one out of fifty-two.

"One card is definitely missing," Sakura said. "Now just which one is it..."

She hefted the game's manual from her bed and leafed through a few pages. "Here we go," she said, stopping on the page that listed the card names.

She went down the list, checking off each entry on the page as she found the actual card on the floor. In the end, fifty-one little check marks riddled the page. Sakura searched for the only entry that didn't possess a little check mark...

"Return," Sakura said, tapping the page on the spot. She laughed briefly at the irony. The one card that didn't come back to her was the Return card. It was actually kind of funny.

"Okay," Sakura said, getting off the bed and looking determined. "Now where to start looking...?"

She turned her entire room upside down and inside out. She moved her bed, nightstand, and dresser to see if maybe the card had fallen behind one of them. Then she ransacked her closet, sifting through all the boxes and papers she had stacked inside. She even went as far as to make sure that the gaps in the hardwood floor weren't wide enough for a card to slip through.

After nearly forty-five minutes, Sakura finally threw up her hands and declared that the card couldn't possibly be in her room. It took her another half hour to straighten the mess she'd made.

Then she wandered into the hallway, lifting up the area rugs and checking the waste bin.

"Cards don't just disappear," Sakura mumbled to herself as she opened the bag in the vacuum to see if someone had accidentally

sucked it up while cleaning the rugs or something.

The grandfather clock in the living room struck six. Sakura sighed and called off the search for the day. She began to pull pots and pans out for dinner just as the sun was setting.

Syaoran put up his guard as the sunset tugged at his soul and released it back into the spiritual plane. It had been a few days since Yue or even Ruby Moon had visited him during his transitional phase. He had no desire to speak with Ruby Moon, of course, but she could be off causing trouble for Sakura whenever she wasn't in Syaoran's view. The thought made him uneasy.

Seeing Yue, on the other hand, was one of Syaoran's top priorities. Syaoran had so many questions that needed answers, especially concerning what had happened earlier that afternoon...

However, the spiritual plane was just as barren as the physical one. Syaoran slumped involuntarily. Another day had officially passed with no answers to a rapidly mounting pile of questions.

Six minutes later, the light of the moon imprisoned his soul once again. Feeling restless and uneasy, Syaoran climbed one of the tall oak trees by the penguin slide and watched the stars fade into existence through the gaps in the leaves.

The images from his blackout that afternoon were still vivid and fresh as if he could reach out and touch that cool autumn day. Syaoran felt like he had witnessed something that was very important to him, but the world he had visited was alien and strange. It was as if those images belonged to another person.

And yet, he had been in the body of the person in the vision. He had seen through that boy's eyes and felt what he felt. His mouth had moved to form the words he spoke. The sensation of the woman's arm around his shoulder was kind of still there, like the shadow of a memory. The warmth in her words and actions was so strong that it

was almost tangible. Affection even laced the annoyance with which she called his name. That name...

"Xiao Lang," Syaoran said quietly, mimicking the woman's foreign accent.

The very mention of the name aloud panged deep in his soul. No doubt about it, that name meant something important. And it wasn't just coincidentally important. The name had special meaning just for him.

Could it be... Syaoran wondered silently, staring intensely at the tree bark. That those were real memories of when I was still... alive? Is that possible?

Syaoran shook his head. It didn't matter! Whatever happened in the past didn't matter at all.

With a shock, Syaoran realized that this must've been Eriol's plan: to confuse him, to make him stray from his original objective. And that objective was...

Sakura. She was still in danger.

Syaoran looked over where he could see the moon hanging in the clear night sky. The thin crescent was losing its delicate shape and expanding clumsily like a pig fattening for slaughter. It would be half-full in just a few short days. Syaoran sighed through his aura. A forth of his time was already spent and he had accomplished next to nothing. In fact, he had ended up *endangering* Sakura's life at one point...

Below him, fireflies flickered in the bushes like stars and the grass in the field nearby rippled under the moonlight in the breeze. The leaves played gentle percussion as the wind shook the branches.

When he really looked at it, the world was actually kind of... beautiful. It would be a terrible thing for anyone to have to leave this

place before their time. Syaoran balled his fist, trying to force a sudden feeling of guilt out of his spirit.

What exactly was this feeling?

Sakura opened her eyes to find herself enclosed by bright green walls. The air was stale and the silence pressed in on her ears.

She was back inside the maze.

"This place again," Sakura said quietly, staring down the endless pathway before her. "Why am I here?"

She was aware that she was dreaming only in the way a fly knows it is beating its wings. Besides, at that moment, her dreams seemed more real than reality. She had been having this dream more and more frequently ever since the slumber party. That was the only time she ever found the exit to the maze, even though at the moment she couldn't remember how. Since then, she had been returning to this place almost every night and wandering the paths until she awoke covered in sweat.

"Have I always been alone here?" Sakura wondered aloud, trying to drown out the deafening silence with her own voice. The loneliness was almost unbearable.

Her legs moved her forward on their own, even though she knew there was nowhere to go. No matter which path she took, it would end at the center of the maze. There was *something* in the center, something that made the bottom of her stomach drop out and filled her being with a sense of inevitable dread. Whatever it was, she was getting closer to it all the time.

She could only hope that she'd wake up before she reached it.

"Good morning Sakura-chan," Tomoyo greeted her friend with her usual cheerful smile. She sat down in her desk. "You're here early."

"Morning Tomoyo-chan," Sakura said, smiling back. "I just felt restless this morning, so I decided to take the long way to school."

"Is something wrong?" Tomoyo asked, her face contorting into worry.

"No! Nothing at all," Sakura assured her. She shrugged. "I had some stuff to think about, that's all. You know, I start extra math lessons today and I'm really excited."

Tomoyo chuckled. "Only you would be excited about extra lessons, Sakura-chan."

In truth, Sakura had awoken from the maze nightmare at six in the morning and couldn't get back to sleep. But now in the light of the day, it seemed ridiculous to be so disturbed by a little nightmare. The only real trouble was dealing with the lack of sleep.

"Good morning Reed-kun," Tomoyo said cheerfully.

"Morning," Syaoran said in his usual barely audible monotone manner from behind Sakura.

Sakura turned around in her seat. She had almost gotten used to Syaoran's ominous presence. Besides, it would've been rude not to say hello after Tomoyo had already acknowledged him.

"Good morning Reed-kun," Sakura said, smiling widely. She couldn't be sure because he wasn't breathing hard or anything, but he looked a little disheveled, as if he had run a marathon before coming to school.

"How's your knee?" Syaoran asked quietly, almost like he was afraid of the answer.

"Huh? Oh yeah," Sakura said. "It's fine. I even forgot all about it." She flexed her leg for emphasis.

Syaoran's ever-static expression lost some of its tension and he sat down.

"Good morning everyone," Terada-sensei said cheerfully as he walked into the room. Kasugano-sensei, the class' History teacher, trailed behind him. "We're going to do something a bit different today. Your thirty-five minute study period will be suspended - just for today - so that Kasugano-san could have an early word with you." He turned to the other man. "I'll leave them to you." Terada-sensei left the room, quietly shutting the door behind him.

"Good morning class," Kasugano-sensei said, pushing his glasses further up his nose. "I'm sorry to suspend your normal class schedule, but I hope this enjoyable assignment will make up for it. The sixty minutes allotted for the History block would not allow me enough time to properly explain, thus I petitioned Terada-san to permit me use the study period as an extension of the our class time.

"In class we have been studying the genealogy of the royal families throughout the history of Japan. However, as we delve further into the technical aspects of royal family trees, I thought it would be prudent to study this subject from a more personal point of view. This will allow you to make stronger connections to the material as we begin to unravel increasingly complex trees.

"As some of you may know, Tomoeda Public Library has one of the best genealogy departments in the nation. It boasts an impressive collection of family records from all over the nation and many abroad. I highly doubt that anyone in this classroom will have a hard time finding extensive information on his or her family tree.

"Thus, during our regular allotted History class time, we will all take a brief tour of the genealogy department at the library so you may begin to look up your family records. The librarians are very knowledgeable and eager to help you complete this project. No extensive prior knowledge of your family history is necessary, since you will begin with yourself and work backward through the generations..."

Kasugano-sensei continued to ramble on as Syaoran became more and more uneasy. A genealogy project was the most impossible assignment he could possibly be given. He knew so little about his life that it was laughable. And even if he were somehow able to get the actual information, he'd still be turning in a family tree that stated he had died over 50 years ago. How could he explain something like that? Could he maybe make a fake family tree?

"The assignments will be due six weeks from today..." Kasugano-sensei's voice drifted in and out of Syaoran's attention span.

A wave a relief washed through Syaoran's aura. He glanced over the large calendar hanging up by the doorway. Six weeks would put him well beyond his stay on this plane. He'd be gone by then.

Of course, that was disturbing in itself.

Kasugano-sensei rambled on and eventually study hall came to an end. The instructor excused himself and Mizuki-sensei took his place for math class. Syaoran didn't try to conceal his glare as she swept vibrantly into the room.

"Good morning!" she said cheerfully. She picked up a large stack of papers off the desk. "I hope everyone has been looking over their notes from last class because I have a short quiz I'd like to give you."

Mizuki-sensei's disarming smile stifled the small eruption of groans that came from the students. "It's nothing to groan over. I just want to make sure everyone is grasping the material okay."

She handed out the quizzes to each student individually. As she put a quiz down on Syaoran's desk, she said loudly, "Take your time and don't worry too much if you can't answer a question. I'm always available for extra help after school if you're having trouble."

Syaoran glared up at the woman, but she wasn't looking at him. When she got further up the row, Eriol leaned over to Syaoran.

"Do your best, Reed-kun," he whispered behind his hand. He had the same stupid smile on his face as always, but there was a warning tone to his voice that clashed with his expression.

"Mind your own business," Syaoran said gruffly, focusing on his quiz. He had absolutely no intention of following any advice given by that kid.

The questions were laughably easy, even for someone who wasn't good at math. Putting down the wrong answers was almost painful.

But this was the chance he'd been waiting for. If he failed this quiz, especially something this easy, Ruby Moon would be forced to let him take extra lessons with Sakura. The woman may be Chaos incarnate, but she was still bound by the rules of the school system. It would look like she was playing favorites with her students if she didn't offer Syaoran the same things she did Sakura.

However, it bothered him a little bit that Ruby Moon had given him exactly what he wanted. Could it be that she was so caught up in her "teacher" role that she didn't realize what she was doing?

No, the chances of that were slim to none. Ruby Moon came off as a very ditzy person, but Syaoran knew better. Underneath that silly expression was a cunning mind that was always in control.

And yet, Syaoran couldn't help but think he had the advantage in this situation.

"Good afternoon everyone," the librarian said, addressing the class standing before her. She looked quite young and had short brown hair. "I'm Takako Ayase, the head of the genealogy department for this library. You'll find that the layout here is very straightforward and user-friendly. All the books on particular family surnames are located on the shelves that line the wall. However, most of the research you'll be doing is with the computers here. Simply type in your last name for a search on your family history, or you can even search for

an individual by typing in his or her entire name. You are all probably too young for yourselves to show up in a search, but try your grandparents or great-grandparents. It's that easy. I'll be walking around in case you need me. Please feel free to ask me anything, all right? I'll let you get started."

A few kids broke from the crowd to search the bookshelves, but most headed for the computers. Syaoran hung back, not sure what to do.

"Now, now Reed-san," Kasugano-sensei said, steering Syaoran towards the computers. "Don't be shy. Just type in 'Reed' and go from there." He gave Syaoran an uncomfortable pat on the shoulder and walked over to where another student had his hand in the air.

Syaoran shrugged. Why not get some information on that crazy magician? He typed "Reed" into the box and hit the enter key.

No matches.

Syaoran narrowed his gaze. He tried typing in "Reed, Clow" at the profile page.

No matches.

Syaoran sighed through his aura. Of course someone like Clow Reed wouldn't exist in a genealogy database. That would be too normal.

He had yet another bright idea. He typed in "Hiiragizawa."

To Syaoran's surprise, one link popped up on the search page.

Entire Families Flee Tomoeda's Troubles

Intrigued, Syaoran clicked the link, which brought him to a newspaper article from 1943.

The mysterious illness spreading through Tomoeda and, indeed, much of the nation has forced many to flee Japan altogether.

"You just never know who will succumb next," said a spokesperson for the Hiiragizawa family, the name carried by some of the town's most promenade citizens. "The best thing is to leave the town - and hopefully the illness - behind. Of course it's hard to leave, but the family believes they are making the best decision."

The illness has claimed some 100 victims with the number rising every day. Perhaps leaving the nation really is the best decision?

"Of course not! Leaving Tomoeda is the last thing on our minds. This is our home and nothing is going to force us away from it," said Yelan Li, a recent immigrant to Japan from China.

Syaoran felt weight on his shoulders as if someone were holding him. He whirled around, but no one was there. The feeling stayed with him and his aura began to pulse wildly. He felt like he was hanging between staying conscious and blacking out like he had the day before.

Yelan Li . She was very important. Syaoran could almost see her face.

Almost frantically, Syaoran clicked out of the page he was viewing and started a new search. He typed "Li" into the search box.

Several links, including the one he had just been to, popped up on the screen. Syaoran clicked the first one. It lead him to yet another newspaper article dated December 15th, 1948.

Tomoeda Youth the Latest Victim of Illness

Xiao Lang Li, 15, marks the youngest victim to die of the illness rapidly sweeping the nation. This flu-like illness has taken a terrible toll on the nation's economy and has forced hundreds to flee Japan. It causes a high fever and eventually induces a comatose state in which the victim expires in less than a week.

The Li family is a recent addition to the Tomoeda population, having emigrated from China in 1940.

No one at the Li residence could be reached for comment.

Syaoran stared at the screen for a very long time, reading the short article over and over. Was he Xiao Lang Li? Was that how he had died?

There was no way to know for sure, except for the ominous feeling that weighed in his aura. In any event, this was something important. If only he could remember more about his life...

Eager for more information, Syaoran opened some of the other links. Most of them were just different articles covering Xiao Lang's death, but one dated March 21st, 1950 seemed relevant.

No New Outbreaks of Illness

The mysterious illness seems to have claimed its last victim with 15-year-old Xiao Lang Li of Tomoeda in December of last year. The panic induced by the illness has abated and many who fled are returning to Japan.

"We believe the illness has been contained," said Dr Watanuki. "It seemed that the virus would mutate every time it infected a victim. This is why we could never create an effective antibody. However, in the case of its last victim, young Xiao Lang died before the virus had a chance to mutate. In effect, this stopped the virus from reaching epidemic levels."

"Ayase-san," Syaoran said, stopping the librarian as she passed.
"Can I print this?"

A Run in the Park

Chapter Ten

The Madness of Chaos

"What happened, Reed-san? This quiz score does not match up with your usual work."

Just as he'd hoped, Mizuki-sensei had asked Syaoran to stay after class to discuss his quiz grade from the day before. This was just the chance he'd been waiting for.

"Tsutsumi-sensei had a different way of teaching it," Syaoran replied. "I'm having a hard time switching between teaching methods."

"I see," Mizuki-sensei said, nodding her head sympathetically. "Well, perhaps some after school lessons will help you get used to me. How does that sound?"

"I'd like that very much, sensei," Syaoran replied, forcing himself to sound sincere. "Thank you."

It was like the two were acting out their parts on a stage, even though no one was around to see their performance. Mizuki-sensei was playing the perfect "deeply concerned teacher figure" and Syaoran followed her lead by playing the perfect "politely grateful student figure." Like any good actor, Syaoran took his cues from Mizuki-sensei and played off her facial expressions and the inflection in her voice. It was like they were a student and teacher playing the role of immortal enemies who were playing the roles of a student and teacher. Syaoran would have described the situation as surreal-- had his entire existence been anything less than surreal itself.

Somehow Syaoran felt that, aside from Ruby Moon's out-of-character performance the day before, Mizuki-sensei was bound to a whole different set of rules than Chaos was and she had to act the

part of a normal human while in this form. It made a stupid kind of sense. Yue once told Syaoran that the universe was made up of billions of crazy and unintelligible rules that were infinitely contradicting and negating themselves. Chaos wouldn't have been able to take human form without a major sacrifice- like a sacrifice of her own personality, for instance.

"I would be more than happy to tutor you, Reed-san," Mizuki-sensei said warmly, reaching for a folder on her desk. "Just take this form home to your parents and have them sign it. We can get started on Monday."

Syaoran's aura rippled with frustration as he took the form feeling defeated. So this was Chaos' checkmate. He knew it couldn't have been this easy.

"I'll see you Monday," Mizuki-sensei said. There wasn't a hint of maliciousness in her warm, disarming smile or in her tone of voice. "Have a nice weekend."

Syaoran lost his composure for just a moment, glaring at the woman as she swept out of the room.

He sighed through his aura and wandered over to the window. He rested his forehead against the glass, watching Sakura in her usual spot with her friends. She was laughing at something.

Syaoran had been nervous about Sakura being alone with Mizuki-sensei for forty-five minutes after school, but she had emerged from the classroom completely unscathed. However, Syaoran just felt like she had been lucky this time around. Chaos was definitely planning something-there was no mistaking that. While the character of Mizuki-sensei may very well legitimately care about her students, Chaos was still just playing the part and had a much broader plan in the works.

But it was impossible to know what that plan could be, since it really could be anything. In theory, Chaos could simply drop a meteor on

Sakura's head and get rid of her that way. However, Chaos was obviously bound by certain rules that wouldn't allow her that kind of freedom. If it had been that easy, Sakura would definitely be dead by now. Chaos was making it pretty apparent that she had to go about her plans in a very sly and backhanded way. And, by extension, Syaoran had to be sly and backhanded as well to keep up with her.

After a few minutes of seething, Syaoran noticed that he was crushing the consent form in his hands. He was about to toss the worthless thing into the waste bin when a snippet of the text near the bottom caught his eye. As he looked at the form more closely, the gears in his head began to grind. Mizuki-sensei had said that one of his parents had to sign the form, but the signature line at the bottom clearly read "Guardian's Signature."

Syaoran didn't have any parents, but he *did* have a guardian...

The rest of the day seemed to creep by until the last teacher of the day finally dismissed the class. Everyone packed up and left, except for a few stragglers who preferred to stay and chat for a few minutes before leaving.

"Sakura-chan," Tomoyo said, packing her things slowly. "A new trinket shop opened downtown. Maybe we could go down there and take a look this weekend?"

"That sounds great!" Sakura said cheerfully. "I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay," Tomoyo said. "See you then."

She fidgeted for a second, like she was going to say something else, but then decided against it. She slipped her book bag on her back and got up.

"Have fun with Mizuki-sensei, Sakura-chan," Tomoyo said. Then she turned to Syaoran. "See you Monday Reed-kun."

"Yeah, bye," Syaoran said as she left the classroom.

There were a few moments of silence in the classroom. The Sakura turned around in her desk to face Syaoran. The gesture caught him a little by surprise.

"So what plans do you have for the weekend, Reed-kun?" Sakura asked casually.

She was making conversation. Syaoran had never really understood why Living did this. Talking on and on without purpose didn't seem very constructive.

"I don't really have any plans," Syaoran said, wary of his answer. "I'm hoping to meet up with a friend tomorrow morning, but I don't know if he'll be there."

Sakura opened her mouth to say something, but stopped as Mizuki-sensei swept into the room.

"Hello again Sakura-san!" she said brightly. She looked over Sakura's head to Syaoran. "And you Reed-san. Was there something you wanted?"

Syaoran shook his head and stood up. Her presence made him nauseated.

"See you Monday," Syaoran said to Sakura and he left her with the tiger.

He considered staying until Sakura got done with her lesson, but quickly decided against it. The odds that Mizuki-sensei would do anything to Sakura seemed unlikely for some reason. The sense of urgency surrounding Sakura's death didn't seem so imminent at the moment. He just had to wait.

Besides, the end of Sakura's lesson ended just before sunset. Syaoran wouldn't have enough time to get back to the park- just in

case Yue decided to show up randomly. Syaoran wanted to be in the same place where they met up the first time... Just in case Syaoran proved hard for Yue to hone in on.

Syaoran made his way back to the park and climbed his now-favorite tree by the penguin slide. He sat on a high branch, scrutinizing the consent form for the fifteenth time. Nowhere did the form mention "parents," it just reiterated "guardian" over and over again.

Syaoran basked in the loophole. Now all he had to do was get Yue to show up and make him sign the form somehow. Of course, this was much easier said than done. Yue's presence had been scarce lately, to say the least. But maybe this time...

He was reading the form once more when a large box kite came crashing into the branches next to him. Startled, Syaoran clutched desperately at the bark, trying not to fall off.

"Sorry!" a voice drifted up to him from the ground. "I didn't- Reed-kun, is that you?"

Syaoran peered through the leaves to see Sakura looking up to him from the ground. She held a spool of string in her hand that lead up to the kite stuck in his tree. When they made eye contact, Sakura smiled warmly.

A ripple reverberated through Syaoran's aura. The sensation was extremely uncomfortable. And yet, Syaoran couldn't help but be relieved. Sakura had once again survived a meeting with Chaos. At that moment, Syaoran would've chosen Sakura's presence over Yue's- had he been given a choice.

"What are you doing in the tree?" she asked, yanking on the string to see if the kite would dislodge itself.

Syaoran began to untangle the string from around the branches to help get the kite out. "I was just resting..."

"Aren't you cold up there?" she asked, rubbing her arms for emphasis. Her cheeks were slightly red from the chilly air.

Syaoran shook his head as he finally got the kite loose. He jumped from the branch to the ground and handed the kite to Sakura. It was a box kite with many bright, cheery colors and a plethora of similar-colored tales.

"What's the kite for?" Syaoran asked as he handed it over.

"I made it yesterday with Mizuki-sensei," Sakura said, turning the humongous thing over in her hands. "We worked on geometry with it, but then she asked me to skip today's lesson and come to the park and try to work out these equations by using the actual wind speed and the velocity of the kite." She held up a piece of paper attached to a clipboard. "You know, all that wind speed and velocity stuff we've been learning in class."

Syaoran was a little taken back. Was Mizuki-sensei really giving Sakura a practical math lesson? What sinister intention could be behind this?

"How's it going?" Syaoran asked, curious as to whether Sakura was actually learning anything from Mizuki-sensei's lesson.

Sakura bit her lip, staring at the clipboard. "Not that great. I think I know which variable means what, but I'm still getting really weird answers."

"Let me see your paper," Syaoran said.

Sakura handed it over. And then she stepped close to Syaoran so she could read her work over his shoulder. Syaoran's aura rippled oddly again. It got hard to think.

"Uh, well, first of all," Syaoran stumbled over his words. He was preoccupied with the fact that Sakura's aura was mingling with his

own. "Your... the wind speed needs to get turned in a decimal because it's supposed to be measured by percent."

"Oh yeah!" Sakura exclaimed as the recollection dawned on her. But then she wrinkled her nose at the paper. "I forgot all about that. I really am hopeless with this stuff."

"Everything else looks fine, though," Syaoran said, scanning the rest of the paper. "You have the variables down and the equation's set up right." He grabbed the pencil hanging from the clipboard and changed the numbers to decimals. "See? Now the answers work out."

Sakura looked at the paper as if she was concentrating really hard on it. "Do you mind helping me out with this a little more? I mean, if you're not busy..."

"No!" Syaoran exclaimed instantly.

Sakura looked completely downcast.

"I mean," Syaoran said, stuttering. He put a hand behind his head, fidgeting nervously. "What I meant to say was, 'No, I'm not busy.' Let me help."

Sakura smiled brightly. "Really?"

Syaoran nodded vigorously. Sakura's teeth were really white.

"Great!" Sakura said, picking up the kite. She held out the spool of string. "First of all, help me get this thing back in the air."

This was easier said than done. There was absolutely no wind so late in the day. Sakura ran back and forth in the field several times until she got winded from running around in the cold winter air.

"Sheesh," Sakura said, collapsing on a bench. "I didn't have this much trouble last time. I can't run anymore."

"Here," Syaoran said, holding out the spool to Sakura. "You hold this and I'll run."

Sakura just nodded breathlessly and took the spool without complaint.

This turned out to be a much better idea. Syaoran could run forever and not get tired since he didn't have muscles that got sore or lungs that ran out of air. Even the frigid winter air hitting his face didn't bother him in the slightest.

"Aren't you getting tired? You want me to take over again?" Sakura yelled as Syaoran ran past her for the twelfth time.

"No, I'm fine," Syaoran said. Actually, he was better than fine. He felt like, for the first time in his existence, he was being useful to someone. And not just to anyone, but the only person on earth who mattered.

A strong gust of wind blew over the field just then, lifting the kite out of Syaoran's hands. He picked up speed and threaded the kite into the air. Finally, after fifteen minutes of racing up and down the field, the kite was floating peacefully against the orange-tinted clouds.

Syaoran wandered back over to Sakura, who was grinning widely.

"Finally!" she said. "Thanks. How did you keep that up? I didn't even see you stop for breath."

Syaoran shrugged. "I just have good stamina, I guess."

Sakura lifted an eyebrow at him, but then turned back to the kite. The two stood there, listening to the flapping noise the tails made as they fluttered in the wind. For the first time since the two met, they were able to stand side by side in silence without a pressing sense of awkwardness.

It was... nice. Much better than making strained conversation.

"Pretty sunset," Sakura commented after a few minutes.

"Yeah," Syaoran said, looking at the way the orange and pink in the air played off Sakura's auburn hair. The low light kind of made it glow.

Then it hit him. Sunset! Panic welled up in his aura as he felt himself begin to slip away from the physical plane.

Syaoran backed away from Sakura. "Uh, I'll be right back, okay? Give me six minutes."

"Okay," Sakura said distractedly, looking at her math paper.

Syaoran sighed in relief as the tension in his body gave way and he spilled back onto the spiritual plane. He watched Sakura candidly as she wrote down the wind speed and tried to work out the equation on her own.

"She forgot to make it into a decimal again," Syaoran said to himself, amused. "She really is hopeless."

"Oh, isn't that the truth? Hopeless indeed."

Syaoran spun around to see Ruby Moon standing a ways off, her blood-red butterfly wings flared and a malicious grin playing on her face. Her scarlet hair fluttered in the wind, even though the wind was on a different plane.

A dark cloud fell over Syaoran's being. This was bad. The grin playing on Ruby Moon's face was downright triumphant.

"Once again, there's that aura of surprise," Ruby Moon said, taking a few confident steps forward. "Why is that?"

Syaoran wasn't about to make a fool of himself by trying to answer one of her rhetorical questions.

"Could it be because... I always show up when you're least expecting me?" she wandered forward a few more feet. "But that is the nature of Chaos, isn't it? I am always unplanned, unexpected, and unwanted."

Syaoran backed up protectively against Sakura, knowing full well that there wasn't much he could do if Ruby Moon decided to make her move now. Panic pulsed in his aura, but he stood his ground and glared. He gathered all the energy he could in preparation for whatever was making Ruby Moon look so gleeful. He was determined that he wouldn't let Sakura go without himself going first.

Suddenly, Ruby Moon faded from view. For a moment Syaoran thought that the sun had set, but a slight pulling sensation from behind him made him think otherwise. He spun around to find Ruby Moon standing behind Sakura with her hands resting on her shoulders. If it had been any other situation, the gesture would have looked kind and friendly, but right then it was just mocking and perverted.

Sakura, of course, was oblivious. Her only reaction was that she reached up and brushed her shoulder as if to sweep something away. But her hand simply passed through Ruby Moon's ghostly body. Finding nothing physical to brush away on her shoulder, she shrugged and went back to piloting the kite.

"Oh, she's perceptive, this one," Ruby Moon said, amused. "Most people don't even give me that much attention."

"Get away from her!" Syaoran said, charging forward. He passed right through Sakura's body in an attempt to push Ruby Moon's spirit away. He didn't even know if this was possible, but he wasn't really thinking- just reacting.

However, he found himself swinging at empty air. Sakura had stayed in the same spot, but Ruby Moon had disappeared. Syaoran spun wildly, looking for Ruby Moon's new location.

He found her leaning against "his" tree a few feet from where he and Sakura were standing.

"Wouldn't it be a shame if this old tree suddenly gave way?" Ruby Moon said as if just making conversation. "Sure, it looks sturdy enough, but what if the root system is rotting? What if the ground is still saturated from all that rain and getting weaker as we speak? The two unfortunate circumstances combine to create a terrible tragedy. It's what they call 'a freak accident.'"

Syaoran did a couple quick calculations. If the tree fell directly toward Sakura's location, she would be crushed by it. It was that simple. He had to make her move somehow. Just a few feet would do it.

"Most people think Chaos is totally spontaneous," Ruby Moon said in a lecturing tone. "But they fail to see all the perfect chain reactions that lead up to the spectacular chaotic event. In reality, Chaos relies more on Order than people tend to think. And conversely, Order only manifests when there's some Chaos that needs to be put in its place. So it's like this: Order begets Chaos and, of course, Chaos begets Order. Isn't the universe grand?"

Ruby Moon crossed her arms and grinned. "My point is that there's a method to my madness, kiddo. But there is no feasible way for you, as a creature of these few simple dimensions, to comprehend the bottomless depths of my madness. I've already begun the series of chain reactions that will lead, inevitably, to Sakura's death."

She disappeared and reappeared by Sakura's side, placing a loving arm around her shoulder. "When I want her, I will have her. It's that simple."

She turned to the sunset. "Aw, it looks like our time is up now," she was mockingly sad. "Remember kiddo, I'm still around, even when the sun sets. Just because you can't see me doesn't mean I'm not there."

Syaoran wanted to punch her stupid grinning face, but just stood his ground, glaring. Trying to hit her would just be wasted energy, really.

"I'll figure it out," Syaoran told her as the woman faded away.

To his surprise, Sakura turned around and looked at him.

"Hey. How long have you been standing there?" She asked, cocking an eyebrow.

It took a few moments for Syaoran to get his bearings. He resisted the urge to make sure he could touch solid objects again.

"I just came back," Syaoran said. He was nervous as hell about Chaos hovering around them unseen, but was determined to stay casual. "Did you get any further on the math?"

"Yeah," Sakura said, looking over her paper on the clipboard. "I think I'm about done."

"It's getting dark," Syaoran said. "Maybe you should be getting home."

Sakura nodded and began reeling in her kite. "It's getting really cold too. I can finish at home now that I have all the wind speed information."

They spent the next few minutes getting the kite to come down. Syaoran subtly moved Sakura out of the range of the tree.

"Well, thanks so much for your help Reed-kun," Sakura said. "I couldn't have done it without you. I'll... see you Monday, right?"

Syaoran panicked as she reluctantly began to walk away. He felt like she was moving out of his zone of protection. He had no choice...

"Let me walk you home," Syaoran said, feeling his aura flare with embarrassment. The guy always made this offer to the girl after a date.

"Really?" Sakura said, her face lighting up.

"Well, it's just getting dark and all..." Syaoran said, repressing the urge to fidget. "Besides, someone needs to help you carry that thing." He gestured to the kite that was bigger than Sakura.

Sakura laughed. "Yeah, I was wondering how I was going to lug it home. I'm not even sure how I got it here."

Syaoran picked up the kite and he led her back into suburbia.

"So, do you live around here?" Sakura asked as they- carefully! - crossed the street. "You're always behind me when we walk to school."

Syaoran was a little surprised. She had noticed him all those times? He scrambled to answer her question. "Yeah, I live really close to the park," he lied. More like he lived *in* the park. And he didn't really "live."

But Sakura was satisfied with the answer. "How long have you been in Tomoeda?"

"Actually, I can't remember not living here," Syaoran said. He didn't want to lie anymore. "I used to live in your house."

"You did!" Sakura exclaimed. "Really?"

Syaoran nodded. "A long time ago."

"Wow," Sakura said. "I had no idea. So that's why you're always hanging around my house. You should've said something, Reed-kun! I wish I'd known sooner."

Syaoran shrugged. "It's not really that important."

"But we have something in common now," Sakura said. "It's kind of like I'm living your old life or something."

That hit Syaoran hard. "Yeah..."

Too soon, they were standing in front of Sakura's house.

It really is Sakura's house, Syaoran reminded himself.

"Thanks for everything," Sakura said, taking the kite from Syaoran.
"For the math and all."

"I'm glad I could help," Syaoran said sincerely.

"Goodnight," Sakura said, walking up the steps.

"Yeah..." Syaoran said, feeling just a little bit sorry for himself.

Sakura paused on the porch and turned around. "I'm supposed to meet Tomoyo downtown tomorrow. We're going to probably have lunch and then visit the new shop that's opened around there. Do... do you want to come too?"

"Yeah, sure," Syaoran said slowly, feeling a bit relieved. It was just another opportunity for him to keep an eye on her.

"Okay!" Sakura said brightly. "How about we plan on meeting at the Penguin Slide at noon?"

"Sure," Syaoran said.

"Okay," Sakura said, turning back towards to door. "See you tomorrow."

Syaoran just watched her disappear inside the house as feeling of relief washed over him. Somehow he felt like nothing could harm her while she was in there. It was like this place was out-of-bounds for Chaos.

It didn't make any sense, but nothing ever did.

"How was that, Yue? Now I'm playing completely by the rules. Whatever results from this will be permanent."

"You didn't give him very much to work with, Ruby Moon."

"I think I gave him plenty, considering he has you, Keroberos, and the Magician backing him. Being vague is the only defense Suppi-chan and I have."

"That's funny. I thought we were on the defensive side."

"Usually you are. Only this time you're not. You and Keroberos are the ones who initiated this war, not me. I don't understand what is so important about this girl named Sakura Kinomoto, but obviously you feel very strongly that she should live. However, Suppi-chan feels just as strongly that she should die. And who am I to go against the operations of my dearest partner in eternity?"

"Don't act as if all this is a burden to you. Taking human form? Making plans and carrying them out? It all must be very exciting."

"Of course you're right. You're never wrong. I'm having a blast. I'm even getting a little frustrated down here. Can you imagine? Me, frustrated? Kaho Mizuki, you know, the personality I created for living on earth? She's all bent out of shape now about my plans. She has no clue as to what's going on, but she's beginning to rebel against what I programmed her to do. It seems that soon you'll have yet another ally on your side. Isn't that great? Then we'll really have to jump on the defensive."

"There's more to being defensive than simply reacting to disaster, Ruby Moon. It's also about prevention."

"Prevention? What does that word mean to me?"

"Have your fun Ruby Moon. Get it all out of your system. Make your plans, get frustrated, experience the world again for the first time in 700 years. I know you've been dying to give it a shot again."

"Are you really saying what I think you're saying? You want me to give it my all?"

"I'm issuing you a challenge. Do your worst, Chaos."

"And can you really handle my worst, Order? Because this Kinomoto girl is tricky to bag. Despite all the roadblocks you put up a long time beforehand, she's nearly impossible to take out in a normal way. She has a brother who can sense me coming from miles away, a luck status that's through the roof, a beautiful brain that won't let her wander into stupid situations, and an immune system that would keep mayfly alive through the rest of the century. If you're telling me to take out all the stops, I can do that. But once you let me out, no one can cage me again until I'm good and ready. Can you all handle that, Yue?"

"Do your worst."

"You'll certainly regret saying that."

The Little Details

Chapter Eleven

The Little Details

Syaoran didn't go back to the park when he left Sakura's house. He was too restless to sit a tree all night. There was too much to think about. Sitting made his mind numb, but walking helped clear his aura.

The last thing he wanted to think about, however, was his latest conversation with Chaos. But it was hard to simply put it out of his mind.

She seemed to have been hinting at something. Something was hovering between her words... Some meaning that Syaoran didn't quite understand.

One thing that did leap out at him was Ruby Moon's insinuation that Sakura was as good as dead. The thought sent the last of Syaoran's confidence to the wind.

" I've already begun the series of chain reactions that will lead, inevitably, to Sakura's death. "

What chain reactions? As far as Syaoran could see, nothing major had happened in Sakura's life. The most exciting thing that had happened to her was getting tutoring lessons with the new math teacher. And, despite all the bad vibes he got from Mizuki-sensei, she didn't seem so harmful to Sakura's *life* . Her free time, maybe, but not her *life* . People didn't die from taking extra math lessons.

But there was something Syaoran was missing, some tiny detail he was overlooking...

Why hadn't Chaos ended it back in the park? There wasn't much that Syaoran could've done if the tree fell right then. Chaos must have known that.

The only conclusion Syaoran could come up with was that either Chaos was waiting for a specific moment in time to kill Sakura, or she couldn't bend the rules enough to make the tree fall right then. Maybe it was some combination of the two.

Syaoran rubbed his face. This was all his fault. If he hadn't made the stupid decision to come to this plane in the first place, Sakura wouldn't be in trouble and Syaoran would still be floating around in his house, unseen and unnoticed.

A few unpleasant emotions washed over Syaoran right at that moment. The first one he finally recognized as guilt. It was a pulling sensation in the pit of his spirit that turned his aura into a black hole out of which happiness could not escape. He had felt the same emotion a few times before, like during those long nights he had spent holding his head in his hands wondering what in the world he was doing here. How he had suddenly come to realize this emotion was beyond him- maybe he had just spent too much time around the Living.

The other bad feeling, however, was still unidentifiable. It didn't have a name, so Syaoran just called it "the ripple." It was like a pebble was tossed into the center of his spirit and the emotion amplified as the ripples washed over his aura. It wasn't so much as a bad feeling as an unpleasant one and it happened every time he thought about anything relating to his mission or Sakura.

With that, a new series of "ripples" disturbed his being. Syaoran did his best to shrug off the feeling, but it was getting harder and harder. The emotion was stubborn and didn't want to leave.

Syaoran didn't even realize the sun was rising until he felt himself spilling out on to the spiritual plane. Had he really been walking all night?

A presence faded into view before him. Syaoran's initial instinct was to prepare himself for yet another conversation with Chaos, but the cool, calm aura was like an instant disarmament.

"Yue!" Syaoran said, running up to the winged man.

"Hello Syaoran," Yue said, stone faced as ever. "Good to see you aren't in a tree this morning."

"Huh?" Syaoran said. "Oh, I just felt like I needed to walk a little."

"But it also means that you don't feel completely hopeless, even after what Chaos told you last night," Yue said.

"You were listening?" Syaoran asked.

"Of course," Yue said, crossing his arms tightly. "Just because you can't see me, doesn't mean I'm not there."

Relief washed through Syaoran. It was a huge weight off knowing that Yue was always hovering around him.

"Where have you been?" Syaoran asked. "It's been days."

"I'm sorry Syaoran, but this situation is keeping me very busy," Yue said. "Sunrise is a very hectic time for me. There's a lot to get done."

"I wish you were around more often," Syaoran said.

"Well, I'm here now," Yue said. "And now is all we have."

The words seemed final, rather than just some random phrase Yue pulled out of nowhere. Syaoran wanted to press him for more information, but their time together was limited and there was other stuff to talk about.

"Yue, did you know me before I died?" Syaoran asked spontaneously.

"I knew this would come up, living with mortals," Yue said. He seemed annoyed.

"But did you?" Syaoran asked.

"Yes," Yue said after a moment's hesitation.

"Did I really die from an illness?" Syaoran asked.

"Yes," came the hesitant reply.

"But the night of that slumber party, when that one girl was talking about how the house was haunted," Syaoran said, speaking slowly. "You told me it was all a myth, that no boy had ever died from an illness in that house."

"No, I simply asked you if you were disappointed that the story was presumably false," Yue said. "And do you remember your answer to me?"

Syaoran shook his head. It all seemed like such a long time ago.

"You said, 'I am what I am now,'" Yue said, his wings flaring slightly. "'What happened before now doesn't matter.'"

Syaoran shook his head. "I didn't know anything back then. Now it does matter. I didn't end up at that library for no reason and that memory of that woman... Yue, I think this is something really, really important. It's important to me and it's important to my mission here. I only need to know why!"

Yue looked off to the sunrise and mumbled, "So it's still just a mission to you."

Syaoran could barely hear him. "What?"

"Don't think your answers will come from the usual places," Yue said, speaking in a normal tone again. "I'm not the reservoir of information

you think I am. I believe in you, Syaoran. I know you'll figure all this out before it's too late. Just don't let it get very much before too late."

"So I'm right," Syaoran said, working through Yue's cryptic words. "This *is* important!"

Yue nodded. "This may be the last time we talk for a while, so I want to say this."

He paused for a few moments and looked at Syaoran. Then he drew his arms tight around his chest and looked off into the sunrise, as if unable to look Syaoran in the face. "I... I feel that I must apologize to you. You don't deserve this. If you feel that you should hate me, trust your feelings. It would actually be more beneficial to both of us if you came to hate me."

"What?" Syaoran said, totally confused and a little wary. "Yue, I could never hate you."

"Just like you swore that you'd never grow to enjoy Sakura Kinomoto's presence?"

"She's just a nice person, is all," Syaoran said, feeling that unpleasant ripple in his aura again. "She's worth saving."

Yue nodded. "Absolutely. Goodbye, Syaoran."

"Good-" the Syaoran suddenly remembered why he wanted to see Yue in the first place. "Wait!"

He fumbled around, finally finding the tutoring consent form floating around in his rapidly solidifying aura. It seemed that anything touching him when he slipped into the spirit world consequently became a spirit object itself. "You have to sign this!"

"Sorry, Syaoran," Yue said, a bemused smile playing on his face, despite the supreme sadness in his eyes. "Spirit guardians don't

normally carry around pens. These hands may look solid enough, but they're all for show."

"But then what can I do?" Syaoran said, feeling slightly panicked. "I need to get into that class. Something's happening in that classroom, I know it is!"

"You're on the right track, just the wrong station," Yue said as the sun began to wash out his presence. "You have a human guardian too, you know. Someone had to sign some forms to get you enrolled in school, after all."

"Clow?" Syaoran said, a little taken aback. "He won't help me. He told me to stay away."

"You won't know if you don't ask..." Yue said, finally being drowned out by the sunlight altogether.

Syaoran stood in the middle of the road, clutching the consent form in his solid hands. He felt a little dazed, but nonetheless headed in the direction of Clow Reed's mansion on Cherry Hill.

"I am warning you, Magician," Spinal Sun said to the back of Clow Reed's oversized chair, his tail twitching irritably against the hardwood floor. His ears lay flat and he bared his large, glistening teeth threateningly as he spoke. "If there is any further interference from you in this situation, you will regret it."

Clow calmly sipped his tea, enjoying the warmth of the roaring fire in the hearth. He made no gesture to acknowledge the panther-like creature's presence in his living room.

The doorbell suddenly rang throughout the house, echoing like a death toll. A strained silence stretched between both man and beast as they sat like stones.

As the doorbell rang for a second time, Clow's face broke out into an amused smirk and he raised his right hand into the air. The ghost of a feather pen appeared in his hand as he wrote "Clow Reed" in graceful, rolling script on empty air. The two words glowed brightly for a few moments before disappearing, much as the hand mark from a slap on the face takes awhile to fade away.

"Don't think this will go unnoticed," Spinal Sun said, flaring his butterfly wings in frustration.

"I'm sorry, Spinal," Clow said, still facing the fire and smiling serenely. "But I have debt to settle with an old friend. This is what he wants and I feel obliged to assist him."

"Keroberos is going against the Cycle," Spinal Sun said, rising threateningly off his haunches. "This is madness, Clow."

"Where would the world be without madness?" Clow said, taking a long sip of tea from his little English cup. "Flawless logic leads to total insanity. The world can't handle perfection."

"The world may not be able to comprehend perfection, but the universe runs on a perfect balance between Chaos and Order," Spinal Sun said as if he were explaining quantum physics to a ten-year-old. "This balance has been disrupted and the very fabric of the universe is slowly breaking down-"

"Not breaking down," Clow interrupted plainly. "It's coming apart like someone is pulling at both ends of a delicate piece of thread. One of two things can happen to this piece of thread: either the pressure lets up, or it snaps in two."

"Obviously you are more in favor of the dissolution of time and space," Spinal Sun said bitterly. "Because this is where Keroberos and Yue are leading you."

"No, Spinal," Clow said to the fireplace. "I am in favor of lessening the pressure on time and space. We both know this pressure has

been building for quite some time. The old methods aren't working as well as they used to. You are always working to slow the process, but something needs to come along to *reverse* the process- something that will keep the thread from snapping for generations to come."

Spinal Sun flicked his ears savagely. "You, Keroberos, and Yue are all being naïve with that idealistic outlook."

"We'll see soon enough. Give my regards to Ruby Moon, will you?"

Spinal Sun answered only with a deep, rumbling growl and disappeared in something that resembled a black hole.

Syaoran brooded on the steps to Clow Reed's home for a few minutes before finally getting up the courage to ring the doorbell. He waited several moments, but the house remained eerily quiet in the early morning atmosphere.

"Do magicians sleep?" Syaoran asked himself as he rang the doorbell for the second time.

As the chime echoed through the house, a light coming from the consent form caught his eye. Syaoran stared, mystified, as "Clow Reed" slowly spelled itself on the paper as if written by some invisible hand. At first the signature glittered gold, but as the sparkling died away, the ink faded to a mundane, official-looking black.

Admittedly, Syaoran was a little puzzled. But he supposed that if he had magic powers, he wouldn't bother to come to the door to sign a form either. Besides, Syaoran had gotten what he wanted and that was all that really mattered.

"Uh, thanks," Syaoran said quietly to the door.

He turned to leave, but then the door started to glow too. The same sprawling script appeared on the door one character at a time.

Don't make coming here a habit, the door read.

"I won't," Syaoran awkwardly promised the door.

And with that he slunk away from Clow Reed's mansion, hoping that he never had to see this place ever again.

"So you really don't mind, Tomoyo-chan?" Sakura asked, holding the phone with her shoulder as she pulled a cute pink skirt up around her waist.

"Why would I mind?" Tomoyo's distorted voice came from over the earpiece. "The more the merrier, you know!" She sounded particularly gleeful. "So you're getting over his creepiness, huh?"

"I guess so," Sakura said, fiddling with the fringe on her blanket. "He probably still thinks I'm a moron though, seeing as how I can't do math and I keep running into things. You should've seen how long it took us to cross the street last night. He looked both ways a million times and then dragged me across the road like he expected me to wander in front of a car on my own."

"I don't blame him," Tomoyo said, sounding amused.

"Hey!" Sakura said in mock anger, raising a fist to the air. "But he's really a nice guy. He must've run up and down that field like fifteen times to get my kite to fly. It was so nice of him. I just wish he would show some facial expression, you know? He looks so bored and serious all the time. If he'd just smile..."

"At least he's talking now," Tomoyo said. "That's an improvement."

"Yeah," Sakura said, fluffing her hair in the mirror. "And now that he's talking, I know why he's been staring. He used to live in my house. It

must be weird to know the person who moved into your old house."

"I wonder why he moved out," Tomoyo said.

"I dunno. Maybe I'll ask him today," Sakura replied.

"Speaking of today, should I meet you two in the park, or should I drop by your house first?" Tomoyo asked.

"Why don't you just come by? We can head to the park together," Sakura said.

"Sounds good," Tomoyo replied. "I'll see you in about an hour then."

The door to Sakura's room opened and Touya stepped inside. Sakura threw a pillow at him, signaling she was on the phone and didn't want to be bothered. But he just caught it and acted like he didn't notice anything.

"Breakfast is ready," Touya said, throwing the pillow back onto the bed. "Come down and eat before you get grumpy. You know kaijuus get grumpy when they don't eat breakfast."

Sakura glared at him as he wandered back down the stairs. "I've gotta go Tomoyo-chan. I'll see you here around 11:45, right?"

She hung up the phone and stalked downstairs. "I really need to get a lock on my door."

The kitchen smelled like flour and eggs. Sakura's father sat in the breakfast nook, reading the newspaper and sipping his coffee. Touya was loading pancakes onto his plate. Sakura sat down and inhaled the smell before diving in herself.

"These are so good, otou-san," Sakura said, stuffing a few bites in her mouth.

"I didn't make them," Fujitaka said, smiling. "It was Touya's turn to make breakfast."

Sakura swallowed and then grabbed her throat. "Gah! They taste good enough, but it's like swallowing broken glass!"

Touya grinned. "I made the ones with the glass shards just for you."

"How are your lessons going, Sakura-san?" Fujitaka asked Sakura as she stuck her tongue at her brother.

"Pretty good," Sakura said, pausing to drink some of her orange juice. "But I still would've been lost if not for the boy from school helping me."

She thought of Syaoran, and then remembered what he had told her the night before.

"Oh! Guess what?" Sakura said, brimming with excitement. "There's this new boy named Syaoran who transferred to our school. He's really good at math and helped me out yesterday with an assignment. He's kind of creepy and he stares at me a lot, but then he told me that he used to live in our house. What a coincidence, huh? Maybe I should invite him over so he can see the inside again."

Touya and Fujitaka exchanged doubtful glances.

"What?" Sakura asked, wary of their weird reactions.

"Sakura-san, no one had lived in this house since 1951," Fujitaka said.

"Yeah, didn't you see this place when we first moved in?" Touya asked. "It was practically abandoned."

"But... why would he lie about that?" Sakura asked, feeling downhearted.

"Well... maybe he did live here," Touya said. "Maybe, you know, he's homeless."

Sakura's heart skipped a beat. That would kind of make sense... He was always in the park, didn't carry anything to school (he borrowed a pen from Yamazaki every morning,) and never talked about his home-life. Maybe he really was homeless...

"No, he couldn't have lived here," Fujitaka said, breaking Sakura's thoughts. "The city did weekly maintenance on the house. They also checked for squatters."

"Tomoeda isn't known for its bums, either," Touya said, shrugging. "Maybe he just got this house confused with another."

"Yeah..." Sakura said, but she didn't think so. Syaoran didn't seem to be the kind of person who got anything confused.

Sakura mulled it over as Touya and Fujitaka made conversation about school and work. They rarely had time to talk anymore, so weekend mornings were spent catching up on each other's lives. Sakura usually joined in, but now she was simply too disturbed and distracted by what she'd just been told.

There was still half a pancake left on her plate, but she didn't feel like eating anymore. She got up and wandered over to the sink to wash her plate.

The thing was that Syaoran didn't seem to be the person who'd lie, especially over something so stupid as to pretend that you lived in someone's house when you never did. Syaoran didn't seem like the pathological liar type.

So there *had* to be some other explanation, something that would validate Syaoran's claim that he lived in this house at one point and still make perfect sense.

Sakura nodded to herself. That was all there was too it. And the more she became friends with him, the closer she'd come to the answer. She just had to be patient and let the answers come to her.

Besides, the stupid little details of Syaoran's life didn't matter that much. She still really wanted to be friends with him.

"I'm off!" Sakura yelled from the kitchen, planning to wait outside for Tomoyo. "I'll be back in time for dinner!"

"Don't forget that it's your turn for dinner tonight," Touya said, bringing his plate into the kitchen. "You have to make up for your late tutoring lesson last night."

"I didn't forget," Sakura said casually, even though she had, in fact, forgotten about it entirely. "I'm going to pick up something on the way home."

"I want dumplings and rice!" Touya yelled after Sakura as she headed for the front door.

"I'm the one making dinner! I'll get whatever I want!" Sakura yelled back as she swept out the door and down onto the sidewalk outside the house. "Sheesh. Someday I'll-"

"Crush him under your foot, right?"

"HOE?" Sakura jumped, looking around for the echo to her thoughts.

She found Syaoran leaning against the stone wall that separated the yard from the street. He was just as blank-faced as ever, but his eyes were just a little bit wider than usual as Sakura took deep breaths and tried to calm herself.

"Sorry," Syaoran said, staring. He leaned forward a little. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Sakura shook her head. "You didn't," she lied. She paused. "Wasn't I supposed to meet you in the park?"

Syaoran shrugged. "I was in the area... Why? Is it a problem?"

"Nope," Sakura said, smiling to reassure him. "We just have to wait for Tomoyo-chan."

"Okay," Syaoran said, shifting his position against the wall. Sakura put her back against the wall and clasped her hands in front of her.

The late morning air was very brisk and crisp. The grass by the sidewalk had a fine sheet of frost on it. The trees were bald and pale, but set against the clear, bright-blue sky, looked clean and elegant. A chilly breeze rolled down the sidewalk, making Sakura wish she'd worn pants instead of a skirt. She looked at Syaoran sideways. He was still dressed in his school uniform: a light-blue blazer and black pants, neither of which did very much against the cool weather. He seemed a little underdressed for the cold, but didn't even flinch as the frigid air ruffled his hair and his jacket. It was as if the cold air passed right through him.

"I wish we would've had this breeze last night, huh?" Sakura said, laughing a little.

"Yeah..." Syaoran said.

Sakura glanced at him sideways some more. Something was different about him this morning, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. He just looked a little bit more... lively. Despite the cold expression and the emotionless eyes, it was like he was actually experiencing the world instead of just drifting through it.

"Good morning everyone."

"Tomoyo-chan!" Sakura said, turning around to find herself looking directly into a camcorder lens. She laughed. "Still working on your project, huh?"

Tomoyo smiled brightly and peeked over the camcorder's eyepiece. "Yes. And I feel like I'm going to get the perfect shot today. Everything's coming together nicely."

"You'll let me see it when it's done, right?" Sakura said anxiously. Tomoyo really did know how to make an interesting film. She always had such an interesting angle on things. Sakura never saw the world in quite the same way as Tomoyo did.

"Of course I will," Tomoyo said. "But I hope you'll be able to see it for yourself all on your own."

"Hoe?" Sakura said, mostly to herself. Tomoyo had been saying stuff like that a *lot* lately. What the heck was she talking about?

"Good morning Reed-kun," Tomoyo said, training the camera squarely on him.

"Morning Daidouji," Syaoran said quietly, fidgeting a little under the lens.

Sakura grinned. He acted the exact same way that Sakura did when she first encountered Tomoyo's obsessive hobby. Eventually she got used to it, though. Syaoran probably would too. He just needed some time to adjust.

"So, shall we go?" Tomoyo said, lifting up her arm to emphasize the basket on her arm. "I brought lunch."

"Okay," Sakura said, setting off down the sidewalk. "Let's go eat in the park."

"Not the park!" Syaoran yelled in his quiet way.

"Hoe?" Sakura said, a little surprised. "Why not?"

Syaoran looked a little lost, but sounded determined nonetheless. "We... we were just in the park. Let's go somewhere different."

"How about the picnic tables outside the ice cream parlor?" Tomoyo suggested. "The park is kind of out of the way anyway."

"Sounds good to me," Sakura said. "Okay, Reed-kun?"

"Yeah," Syaoran said. He seemed almost... relieved.

They headed towards downtown with Tomoyo leading the way, walking backwards with her camcorder trained mostly in Sakura's direction. She and Syaoran walked for the most part side by side, until Syaoran began to fall behind just a little.

"You look well today, Reed-kun," Tomoyo said after a while. She focused on him.

"I do?" Syaoran said, sounding surprised.

Tomoyo managed to nod while keeping the camcorder rock steady. "Yes. There's color in your face today."

Sakura could have hugged Tomoyo. So that's why Syaoran had looked different. She chanced a glance back to him and realized that's exactly what she had been unable to put her finger on. Syaoran's usually pale skin was several shades tanner today. Tan skin like that suited him such better.

"And there wasn't color before?" Syaoran asked, rubbing his face unconsciously.

Tomoyo shook her head. "This is the first time I've seen you looking so healthy. Were you feeling ill at all before?"

"Not really," Syaoran said. He seemed to want nothing more to do with the subject.

To Syaoran's total surprise, the day passed uneventfully. After a quick lunch (which forced Syaoran to turn down all the food Tomoyo had made with an extremely awkward bit of conversation,) the group headed to the new trinket shop, Twin Bells. The owner was a very nice lady who gave Sakura and Tomoyo a small discount on whatever they bought. Syaoran couldn't believe how much time two girls could spend in a tiny little trinket shop! Over three hours and

2,000 yen between the two girls later, they finally emerged back into the sunlight.

"We'll be sure to visit again soon," Sakura said to the owner as they left.

"I'd like that very much," the woman said, smiling. "Be careful walking home, you three."

"We will," Sakura said.

"Goodbye," Tomoyo said, bowing deeply to the woman.

"She was so nice!" Sakura said, clutching her shopping bag close to her heart. "That was a great idea, Tomoyo-chan."

"I'm glad you had fun," Tomoyo said, smiling brightly. She turned to Syaoran. "I hope we didn't bore you too badly, Reed-kun."

Syaoran shook his head, his hands in his pockets. "I'm just happy to be tagging along. I didn't have anything else to do today."

"Well, what should we do next?" Sakura asked.

Syaoran resisted the urge to groan. She wanted to stay out? She should be at home where it was safe! Chaos could be anywhere...

"Well, hello everyone," a cool, cheery voice said from behind Syaoran. The words made his aura spark with annoyance. "Having a day out on the town?"

"Eriol-kun!" Sakura said cheerfully. "Hi!"

"Hello Sakura-san," Eriol said, smiling radiantly as always. The smile made Syaoran's aura flare madly.

Tomoyo ripped her camcorder away from Sakura to point it at the new arrival. "Good afternoon Hiiragizawa-san."

At the sound of his surname, Eriol's aura shifted as if it was been slapped. His outward appearance remained perfectly composed, but Tomoyo's formality seemed to have almost hurt him. What was that all about?

"Hello Reed-kun," Eriol said, turning to Syaoran, still smiling. Syaoran cringed a little. The smile cut right down to his core. "What are you all doing out today?"

"A shop called Twin Bells is having its grand opening today," Sakura said, pointing in the direction they had come from. "We wanted to see what was inside."

"And what about you, Hiiragizawa-san?" Tomoyo asked, gesturing to the folder he held in his hands. "Busy with school work?"

"Ah, yes," Eriol said, raising the folder for emphases. "I was doing more research for the family tree project. I find it all very fascinating."

"I love this project too," Sakura said. "It's a lot of fun finding out about my family history. There's so much I didn't know. My dad's been helping my out. We have a ton of family genealogy books lying around the house, so he's really happy that I'm using them."

Tomoyo nodded. "My mother too. Only, she's the genealogy book. She knows so much about our family history. She can trace herself back ten generations just off the top of her head."

"I'm glad you're enjoying the project as much as I am," Eriol said, practically beaming.

"Yes," Tomoyo said. "I'm glad you suggested it, Hiiragizawa-san."

"What?" Syaoran suddenly felt dropped into the conversation. "This project was *your* idea, Hiiragizawa?"

"Well, yes," Eriol said, looking humble. "We did something similar for school in England. However, it was Mizuki-sensei who suggested my

idea to Kasugano-sensei. So you really should thank her."

Syaoran felt like his aura was freezing over. He turned his glare on full-strength at Eriol.

"Aren't you finding the project enlightening, Reed-san?" Eriol asked, his crystal-blue eyes and calm smile easily withstanding the force of Syaoran's glare.

"Very enlightening," Syaoran had to admit. "That 'information' you gave me before turned out to be helpful after all."

"I'm glad to hear that, really I am." There was a long moment where Eriol just stood there smiling while Syaoran tried to glare him into the ground.

"Well, I had better get back home to sort through all this data," Eriol said, drawing the folder closer to him. "I suppose I'll see you all on Moday?"

"Yep!" Sakura said cheerfully.

"Of course," Tomoyo said.

Syaoran just glared and remained silent.

Tomoyo followed Eriol's retreating figure with her camera until he was out of sight. Only then did she turn the lens back onto Sakura.

"Well, what shall we do now?" Tomoyo asked, slowly revolving around Sakura and Syaoran like a model photographer.

"I dunno," Sakura said, shrugging. She turned to Syaoran. "What do you think, Reed-kun?"

Syaoran only had one thought at the moment:

What in the world is going on here?

Chill

Chapter Twelve

Chill

Tomoyo rubbed her shoulders with one hand while keeping the camcorder steady with the other. A cold front had moved in overnight, covering Tomoeda in about a foot of fresh, powdery snow and breaking the delicate distinction between the end of fall and the dead of winter. The courtyard outside the school was practically deserted; everyone wanted the warmth of heated classrooms. But Tomoyo was determined to see her weekday morning ritual through-rain, shine, or even bitter cold. Sakura's ultra-adorable blushing as she appeared over the hill (with Syaoran following several paces behind her and his stare boring into the back of her head) was much too precious to miss.

However, instead of the usual shot, Sakura and Syaoran appeared in Tomoyo's viewfinder walking side by side. Sakura was chatting animatedly and walking with a bounce in her step that had been missing since Syaoran and his staring problem had arrived. Tomoyo smiled behind the lens. She just *knew* that once Sakura got over her fear of Syaoran that they'd become fast friends. The sight made Tomoyo's heart swell. Maybe this wasn't a lost cause after all...

Tomoyo couldn't help but notice the change in Syaoran's character either. It had only been a day since she had seen him last, but he had changed notably in that short amount of time. Besides his skin having a lot more color in it, his eyes didn't seem as... dead. His face was as stony as ever, but his eyes were bright and focused, as if he was taking in the world for the first time in a very long while. And besides the physical changes, he walked without the stiffness in his arms or hesitation in his steps. It was like he had finally gotten the hang of gravity and the power it had over the human body.

Tomoyo didn't believe Syaoran when he said that he wasn't getting over an illness. When he had first arrived at the school, he had been pale, robotic, and awkward- as if he hadn't associated with human beings (or even been out in the sun, for that matter) in years. Also, he claimed to have lived in the area his whole life, and yet he had transferred to this school as if he had come from somewhere very far away. Syaoran didn't seem like the person who would blatantly lie, more like he'd bend the truth to keep from revealing too much about himself.

Tomoyo took a few more seconds of footage before quickly tucking the camera out of view. Sakura would begin to suspect something if she kept filming her and Syaoran together out in plain view; there was only so many times she could be fooled. Tomoyo was going to have to be much sneakier about her filming from now on.

"Well, that's a pleasant sight," Eriol said, appearing, as he did, next to Tomoyo. He was staring off in the direction Tomoyo had been filming.

Tomoyo had long ago gotten used to Eriol's sudden appearances. She nodded. "Seeing that has brightened my entire day."

"How did you do it?" he asked, leaning against the gate.

Tomoyo shook her head. "I didn't do anything, really. Everything just... kind of fell into place on its own."

Eriol winced. "That's not a good thing."

"Oh? And why not?"

"There's a chance that Chaos had a hand in this," Eriol said.

"We all need a little chaos in our lives," Tomoyo said. She had gotten used to Eriol's strange topics of conversation long ago. She learned to say whatever came to the top of her head. That seemed to please

Eriol the most and evolved into some of the most interesting conversations Tomoyo had ever had with another human being.

"Of course we do, but this might be more than they can handle," Eriol said seriously. Then he turned to Tomoyo and smiled radiantly. It made his eyes glow. "By the way, good morning."

Tomoyo smiled right back. Eriol's grins were disarming and contagious. "Good morning, Hiiragizawa-san."

She couldn't be sure, but she could've sworn Eriol had winced again.

"You know..." Eriol started, his perfect smile faltering *just a bit* .

Was this Eriol Hiiragizawa being awkward? Yes... it was! Tomoyo tried desperately to hide her surprise and just basked in the rare moment.

"My surname is rather long and unwieldy," Eriol said, talking faster than normal by *just a bit* .

Wait. What?

Why is my heart pounding ? Tomoyo asked herself suddenly, just then recognizing the drastic change in mood.

"Why don't you just call me Eri-"

"Good morning, Tomoyo-chan," Sakura said cheerfully. She didn't see Eriol standing just behind the wall until he poked his smiling face around the bend.

"Oh, hello Eriol-kun," Sakura said a little awkwardly. She was apparently aware that she had interrupted something important. She shot an apologetic glance at Tomoyo who flashed an "it's no big deal" smile in return, even though her chest was still aching.

Despite her own inner turmoil, Tomoyo couldn't help but notice the way Syaoran's hair stood on end as Eriol came into view. He

remained totally silent, however glared with a stare that would paralyze a rattlesnake.

"Good morning Sakura-san, Reed-kun," Eriol said. He stepped away from the wall and tipped a very gentlemanly imaginary hat to the three of them. "I had better get inside. This cold weather could make me say crazy things."

"I'll follow you in..." Tomoyo's words trailed off as she fought a battle with herself.

Dare I ? Tomoyo thought, the pessimistic part of her taking over. Is it really what he was trying to say? Maybe I've misinterpreted... Then I'd look like a fool!

Surely he meant what you think he did! Just say it!

"Eriol-san," she said steadily, flashing a confident smile. It didn't sound awkward and barely a moment had passed while she battled herself. But she could feel the heat rising into her face.

The smile on Eriol's lips never faltered. Nothing about his being changed in the slightest.

"By the way, good morning," he said, smiling radiantly as ever. "Tomoyo-san."

"Wonderful!" Mizuki-sensei said cheerfully, taking the consent form from Syaoran's hands. She gave it a quick glance, then nodded. "We can start with the extra lessons today. Unless you have any objections?"

Syaoran shook his head. "I'd like to start as soon as possible."

"Then meet us in this classroom right after school," the woman said.

Syaoran nodded.

The two stood there for a few awkward moments. Syaoran was waiting for her to make the next move.

"Dismissed," Mizuki-sensei said, smiling.

And so Syaoran left. Slowly.

He headed outside for recess. Unconsciously, he found his way to the tree Sakura sat by with all her friends. He was almost surprised when he found himself standing in front of the tree, looking down at the group of friends.

But Sakura wasn't there. Panic seeped into his being and began to multiply like a virus.

Eriol was sitting there next to Yamazaki. He smiled brilliantly, which sent ice-like thrills down Syaoran's back. Something about the guy gave Syaoran bad vibes.

"Hello Reed-kun," Tomoyo said cheerfully.

"Hello," Syaoran said, trying to hide his panic. He couldn't very well ask where Sakura was in front of Eriol. It could be dangerous.

"If you're looking for Sakura-chan," Tomoyo said suddenly, the name resounding somewhere deep inside Syaoran's soul. "She's in the gym with Rika-chan. They're holding lunchtime practice for the cheerleading squad, since Sakura-chan doesn't have any free time after school anymore."

"Ah," Eriol said pointedly. "She's been very busy these days, hasn't she?"

Tomoyo nodded. "Because of the extra lessons she's taking with Mizuki-sensei, she's been working really hard to catch up with all her after school activities. And then, because she took the extra time to catch up on those, she has to make time to do her regular class assignments. She was at the library all day yesterday trying to finish

her English worksheet. I wish she wouldn't leave homework until the last minute..."

Syaoran turned and headed in the direction of the gym. If that was where Sakura was, that's where he needed to be. He didn't need to engage in polite conversation with Eriol of all people.

As Syaoran approached the gym doors, his entire body *physically* shuddered from head to toe. It *physically* hurt and made him feel like he wanted a warm summer day more than anything else in the world. For a moment he felt like the blackness of space had seeped under his skin and into his bones.

What bones? Syaoran thought wildly as the feeling deepened, slowing down his ability to think. *I don't have bones.*

And then, as suddenly as the sensation had come on, it was gone again, leaving him wondering if he had actually felt anything at all. Already the feeling was fading away like the memory of getting a shot at the doctor's office.

Syaoran glanced warily around him, but didn't see any threat. Even Eriol was chatting animatedly and innocently with Tomoyo. The sensation had come from *inside* him, anyway. It was something restricted to him alone.

"I'm still getting used to this body," he mumbled as he stepped into the gym, shrugging off the strange event as unimportant. If it was something restricted to himself, he really shouldn't give it another thought. The only person who mattered was Sakura. Everything else - including whatever happened to him - took a distant second place.

There was a myriad of activity inside. The basketball team was running back and forth across the court, while a construction crew was doing some maintenance on the bleachers. Sakura and Rika were off to the side, practicing the new cheerleading moves. Syaoran sat down on the bleachers near the two, feeling rather relieved. Just being able to keep Sakura in sight was enough to

chase away the panic that had been welling up inside him for the past few minutes. He felt like there was nothing he couldn't handle right then- just as long as Sakura was right in front of him.

"Like this, Rika-chan?" Sakura said, turning out a complicated-looking move that involved a lot of spinning.

"Perfect!" Rika said. "You really do pick it up quick, Sakura-chan. It took us all day last week to get it down."

Sakura put her hand behind her head and laughed. "If only I could transfer some of my cheerleading talent into math talent, life would be good."

Syaoran leaned back in the bleachers, clasping his hands behind his head.

He understood math. Math made sense. One plus one equals two. This simple equation is what creates the basis for reality and, thus, makes up the laws of nature. It never changes. One plus one would *never* equal three. If for some reason it did, reality would break apart as we know it and the universe would fold in on itself and disappear. Numbers are constant, consistent, and reliable. One equation never contradicts the other. If a number came out in one equation, that same number would come out the same every single time without fail- save for human error.

Yes. Syaoran understood math perfectly.

What he *didn't* understand was what Sakura had mastered: laughing, talking, socializing, moving, breathing... Sure, Syaoran may have understood math, but Sakura was better at everything else. Syaoran was convinced that Sakura had this "living" thing down better than anyone in the universe. He thought about this as he took in her aura that was washing throughout the gym like a refreshing breeze.

Sakura's aura was like a bright white light. When she had first invaded Syaoran's old home, her light had been obnoxiously blinding and annoying to his limited perception. However, the more he got to know her, the more he began to take Sakura's light for what it really was: a warm, steady glow that brightened the lives of everyone she met.

And Syaoran would be damned before he'd let that light go out.

He was so engrossed in Sakura's aura that he almost missed what happened next.

A PE teacher was wheeling out a ribbed stand that held several rows of volleyballs out onto the court for next period's gym class. As she got close to the court, one of the kids playing basketball missed a short pass from his teammate and fell out-of-bounds. The teacher and the student, oblivious to their surroundings, crashed violently into each other. The impact sent the teacher careening into the rack of volleyballs. The volleyballs were jostled from the rack and suddenly nearly two dozen balls were rolling in all directions. Several rolled toward the maintenance crew, but they simply looked on in amusement. However, just then a student entered the gym and, unaware of the rolling hazard, stepped on one of the volleyballs. The sudden unsteady surface forced the student off-balance, leaving him to windmill wildly in the air for several seconds before falling face-first toward one of the bleachers being worked on by the crew. He hit a large piece of sheet metal at an odd angle, sending one half of the piece into the air seesaw style.

Syaoran didn't see the hammer until it had reached its zenith by being propelled into the air when it had been laying unassuming on the sheet metal. Like any good parabolic equation, the hammer was now falling to the gym floor... in perfect alignment to Sakura's head. She and Rika, startled a little by the crashing noises, had gone back to practicing, none the wiser to the other set of events the initial crash had caused.

Chain reaction, Syaoran thought dimly as he hurtled the bleachers toward Sakura's oblivious form, one eye on her and one eye on the hammer as it made its malicious descent.

"Look out!" someone had the rational to yell. Syaoran didn't have the chance to see who.

Sakura paused to look around, but it would've been too late by then. Syaoran reached out with both hands and shoved her roughly out of the way. His momentum carried him in her place.

Thunk . Cha-clang .

The sound resounded off the gym's acoustically designed walls. Syaoran felt the metal of the hammer contact his head only in the way someone feels a strong punch through a mattress. But it made the most sickening noise... Had any real person been under that blow, surely they'd be dead. Syaoran breathed a sigh of relief to see Sakura standing unharmed just a few feet away.

"Reed-kun!" Sakura gasped, seeing the hammer laying at his feet and putting two and two together. "Are you okay!"

She ran the short distance over to him, hesitated for just a second, then drew him close and put her hands in his hair, searching for injury.

"I'm fine," Syaoran said pleadingly, trying to pull away. Sakura had him held fast, though.

"There's no way that's true," a construction worker had come over. "That hammer landed square on top of your head, boy."

"No, really, I didn't feel a thing," Syaoran said, finally wiggling out from under Sakura's grasp.

He wasn't thinking clearly. Too much had happened in such a short amount of time that it left Syaoran barely clinging to sentient thought.

And the fact that Sakura was so close didn't help matters. Why did her aura make his mind numb like that?

But really, Syaoran was just focusing on the fact that he had foiled a chain reaction. Could this have been *the* Chain Reaction that Chaos had been talking about? Surely it couldn't have been just an accident. Too many seemingly improbable variables had come together to form a potentially fatal event.

Had Sakura been hit as Syaoran had, they would've called her death a "freak accident."

"Reed-kun," Rika said, an expression of horror on her face. "I saw the hammer come down. It made that horrible noise... I thought for sure you were dead."

Sakura was standing off to the side looking at Syaoran very strangely. She looked hurt, scared, worried, and there was something else there that Syaoran couldn't quite define. Whatever she was thinking made her chew her lip and stare at Syaoran's head.

"I'm *fine*," Syaoran said. He bowed his head and parted his hair to show that there was no injury. "The hammer didn't fall on me. It almost did, but it didn't. I don't know what you saw, but I think there'd be something to show if it did, right?"

That seemed to satisfy most of the onlookers. The construction worker put his hand on his chin. "You're right, of course. It must've hit the bleachers here or something. You'd be on the ground if the thing had hit you."

The crowd broke up. Even Rika looked a lot less horrified now.

"That was a close one," she said, finally taking her hand from her chest. "I thought for sure... But you're right. I must be seeing things." She turned to Sakura. "Let's take it from the top, okay?"

Sakura seemed to snap out of her trance. "Yeah, okay." she said, tearing her eyes away from Syaoran's head. She gave him one more confused look.

"I'll see you in class," Syaoran mumbled, but he felt reluctant to leave. He climbed back up the bleachers (this time much closer to the floor) and stayed there until recess came to an end.

Just in case.

An Answer Without a Question

Chapter Thirteen

An Answer Without a Question

The final bell for the day gonged, startling Sakura out of her wandering thoughts.

"Well, see you tomorrow everyone," Tomoyo said, smiling. "Don't work too hard, Sakura-chan."

"I won't," Sakura said, grinning.

"Don't you work too hard either, Reed-kun," Eriol said kindly. "Try not to let Mizuki-sensei grate on your nerves too badly."

"Hoe?" Sakura mumbled, turning around to face Syaoran. He was glaring madly in Eriol's direction as if he had just divulged a major secret.

"Ah, you didn't know, Sakura-san?" Eriol said. "Reed-kun is starting extra math lessons with Mizuki-sensei today."

"Really?" Sakura asked Syaoran. He was still shooting daggers at Eriol, but his expression suddenly softened a little.

"Yeah," he said just a bit above an audible level.

"But that's great!" Sakura said, standing up and leaning on Syaoran's desk. He stared up at her like a deer in headlights.

Maybe... Sakura thought, sitting back down and waving goodbye to Tomoyo and Eriol as they left. Now it was just her and Syaoran.
Maybe now I can get to know him better.

Syaoran's enigmatic character had become something like an obsession. Why was he so secretive? What was it about him that shunned others, even though he seemed like a perfectly nice guy? Who is the *real* Syaoran? How come he never smiled...? For some reason, the questions about Syaoran nagged at her. She couldn't explain it, but she needed to learn more about him.

Everything about him.

"Hello you two," Mizuki-sensei said dully, entering the room rather unceremoniously and carrying a small covered tray. To Sakura, she seemed a bit depressed, even though she was smiling. She entered the room reluctantly and her smile seemed to wane slightly every so often. It was as if she was trying to be cheerful, even though something was obviously weighing on her mind.

"I'm sure you've realized by now," Mizuki-sensei said, gesturing to Syaoran and smiling warmly. "But Reed-san will be joining us from this point forward."

She paused for a long moment before lifting the tray she was carrying, as if pondering something grave. "I know your lunch breaks have been getting cut short lately, Sakura-san, so I bought some snacks to help tide you over until dinner."

She brought the tray over and let Sakura pick a few pastries. They were obviously store-bought.

"Thank you sensei!" Sakura said as she took several of the biggest pieces. She was *starving*. It was just like Mizuki-sensei to know exactly what she needed.

Mizuki-sensei held out the tray to Syaoran, but he simply shook his head.

"I'm not hungry," he recited it like a broken record.

Sakura wrinkled her brow. Come to think of it, Syaoran *always* turned down food. Why?

Why, why, why?

"Let's get started, shall we?" Mizuki-sensei said, flipping open her notebook. "We'll begin with page 75 in your workbooks."

Maybe, just maybe her questions would get answers...

Someday.

Syaoran sat in the tree in the park, watching the sun near the horizon. The shadow of the moon was already hanging low in the sky amid a few lonely snowflakes. The next night the moon would be completely full and Syaoran's stay would be officially half over. Just a bit longer and Sakura would be out of danger. He had saved her several times and had now infiltrated the one place where Chaos and Sakura were alone together. He felt good about the way things were going.

The proof that he was doing his job well was on Mizuki-sensei's face when she came into the classroom. She seemed depressed, as if something was really getting her down. Syaoran reasoned that it must've been because he stopped the incident with the hammer and got inside the private tutoring session. The fact that he was indeed screwing up Chaos' grand scheme was very satisfying.

He prepared himself for the transition as the sun began to set. Balancing on something like a tree branch while in a spiritual form took special effort, but it was one of the things Syaoran was very good at. All the time he spent in trees in his old house paid off in these types of situations.

As the sun dipped behind the horizon, Syaoran felt the usual release of his spirit, followed by a strange and unexpected slipping sensation. Despite his best efforts, he was falling through the

branch. His spirit suddenly hardened again, shifting his center of gravity and causing him to go crashing toward the ground. But his right leg was still lodged *inside* the branch at his ankle, so he ended up hanging by his leg beneath the tree.

"What the...?" Syaoran mumbled, struggling to pull his leg from the tree. But it was as if his leg and the tree had merged near his ankle. "This is ridiculous..."

For some reason his soul had suddenly paused during the transition phase and then reverted half-way back to his physical form, thus causing his leg to merge with the tree. Now he was dangling upside down by his ankle. He went limp with frustration. Just when things were looking up...

Giggling erupted somewhere in front of him. He found Ruby Moon standing a few feet away. From Syaoran's view she was upside down.

"Oh you poor thing," she said, overcome with giggles. "Does it hurt?"

"No," Syaoran grumbled. Of course Ruby Moon was there to see him in such an embarrassing predicament.

It was then he noticed that Ruby Moon's figure was indistinct and transparent, as if Syaoran was seeing an apparition. Through her giggles, Syaoran could see she had a sort of I-know-something-you-don't look on her face.

"Do you know why this is happening?" Syaoran asked grudgingly. She was the last person of earth that he wanted advice from. But he needed to know, not just about why his spirit was hardening half-way through a transition, but also about the strange sensation he'd felt earlier that day. He had a sinking feeling that the two were connected somehow.

Ruby Moon nodded. "Yes, I know."

"Well, could you let me know about it?" he asked, crossing his arms. He tried to look as dignified and intimidating as he could while dangling upside-down like a rabbit in a spring trap.

"Clow didn't tell you about the moon?" Ruby Moon asked as if everyone in the world knew what she did about the moon.

Syaoran paused, finding something she said confusing. "You know Clow?"

"Of course," Ruby Moon said, shrugging. "Who doesn't?"

Syaoran shook his head. This conversation was *not* about Clow.

"What about the moon?" Syaoran continued his interrogation.

"It's getting pretty full, isn't it?" Ruby Moon said, turning around and looking at the shadow rising into the sky.

"Yes..." Syaoran said ploddingly.

"Too bad it's gotta wane someday, huh?" she said casually.

Syaoran seethed. "You're not making any sense!"

Ruby Moon whirled back around, ginning playfully. "Oh, come on. Yue told me you were good at this."

"You know Yue too?" Syaoran asked, a bit shocked.

"Of *course* I do," Ruby Moon said. "We've known each other forever. I guess you could call us something like... family. We only tolerate each other only because we're related."

"What?" Syaoran hissed. "You're *related* ?"

"Yes, that sounds about right," Ruby Moon said, putting a finger to her chin and staring into thin air thoughtfully. "You know me as Chaos, right? Well, if I'm Chaos, then he's Order."

Ruby Moon suddenly disappeared as if she'd been wiped off the landscape. At the same time, Syaoran felt his spirit loosen slightly and he fell to the ground. He lay there for a few moments on his back, completely solid and somewhat stunned.

Yue knew Ruby Moon? Why didn't he say something? If it was true, Yue could've helped him; could've told him something. But instead, he acted like Syaoran had to deal with everything completely on his own.

Grumbling, Syaoran quickly got up from the ground. Actually, who was to say Chaos told the truth? Maybe she knew Yue, but how could he be certain that they were as "close" as Ruby Moon said they were?

Syaoran nodded to himself. You can't trust Chaos.

Too bad he couldn't get any information about the what was wrong with him. Sighing through his aura, he climbed back into the tree.

He felt like Ruby Moon had told him everything...

Except what he needed to know.

The transition didn't go right during the sunrise either. His body kind of flickered between spirit and solid like an old halogen light bulb before choosing solid and sticking to it. Syaoran watched the sun rise, feeling almost defeated.

"What is *wrong* with me?" he asked, staring at his hands.

As soon as he appeared over the horizon, Sakura knew something wasn't right with Syaoran. Despite the fact that his skin had darkened to a healthy tan and his eyes seemed more lively and focused, he still looked distracted and troubled. Well, as distracted as he could possibly look while staring straight at her.

"Good morning Reed-kun," Sakura said, doing her par to be cheerful for him. "Is everything okay?"

It took him several moments to answer. "Yeah. I'm fine. How are you?"

The pleasantry took her a little by surprise. Syaoran wasn't the type to ask something as arbitrary as 'how are you?'

Truth be told she was exhausted. Extra homework from Mizuki-sensei and dinner duty kept her from getting to bed on time.

Not to mention how the nightmares of the maze woke her at least twice a night now.

But she couldn't mention something like that.

"I'm good," she said, smiling.

"Good," Syaoran said, nodding. He started toward the school.

The school day passed uneventfully. Syaoran came to her cheerleading practice again, but nothing fell out of the sky toward her this time. But still, his presence was... comforting.

There were a few times though that, as she watched him, Syaoran would shake visibly as if he had gotten a chill. Every time it happened, he would glare stonily at the ground.

Why doesn't he wear a jacket? Sakura asked herself. *He must be freezing .*

She made a mental note to pick up some yarn on the way home.

Green yarn, maybe.

Syaoran watched the sun begin to set with apprehension. He stared at his hands in the waning daylight, hoping that the light would

fragment off his body as it gave way to his spiritual form, but it never happened. He sat heavily on the bench beside the penguin slide and put his head in his hands. Without the six minute excursion to the spirit world, he felt cut off and alone. How would he contact Yue if he was trapped in this solid body all the time? How would he keep up with Chaos in this permanent form? She was probably right there... laughing at him.

The sun had completely set and Syaoran had remained solid the entire time. The stars popped into the sky one by one as if someone was poking holes into the darkening sky with a blunt needle. The light of the full moon was almost as bright as the sun itself and blocked all the light from the stars around it. The air took on a blueish hue and Syaoran could almost feel the moon's weightless light fill his being.

It was almost the same feeling as when he would step into the light of the full moon in his spiritual body. It would fill him and make him stronger.

" The full moon seems to slow the process of deconstruction..."

The random chatter of thought in Syaoran's head suddenly came to a grinding halt on the fragment of Clow's voice. Syaoran looked up at the full moon with a sense of epiphany. Somehow the full moon strengthened his bond to the physical plane. So that's what Chaos meant...

As long as this was a normal part of the process, there really wasn't anything to worry about. Besides, whatever happened to him didn't matter at all, as long as it didn't interfere with his ability to protect Sakura.

The chill that had plagued him all day came on without warning and this time it was particularly fierce. The horrible sensation forced Syaoran to wrap his arms instinctively around his body in an attempt to shield himself from the offending force. Everything suddenly became a source of prickling, stabbing, and fiery pain. His hands

that were resting on the park bench seemed to be burning away. Every snowflake that fell on his exposed skin was like a lighted cinder.

Am I... actually feeling this? Syaoran thought frantically. It was his skin that hurt- his skin. There was feeling there when he hadn't ever felt anything before.

With a sudden gasping shudder, oxygen forced its way from his lungs and the air in front of him became a cloud of vapor. Through the chill, Syaoran still had the sense of mind to be totally and completely shocked.

Breathing, Syaoran thought vaguely, watching the cloud of vapor disperse and disappear. *I'm breathing.*

He drew in a sharp breath - the very first one he had ever known - as if someone else was operating his lungs. He didn't need to think about it, it simply happened on its own. Instinct had taken over. Syaoran tried to take a breath voluntarily, but he had forgotten to exhale first and ended up choking.

He was so in shock that he had almost been able to ignore the shuddering pain that continued to rack his body. Wave after wave crashed over his body in faster and faster succession until the feeling finally rested inside his being and didn't budge.

Cold, Syaoran thought distantly, as if his body was feeding his brain information. He let out another shuddering breath, watching the cloud of vapor explode with distant fascination.

I'm cold, Syaoran thought, a bit more coherently. He hugged his body closer to himself, knowing now that he was using instinct to try desperately to stay warm.

But it was much too little. The snow that was now falling heavily forced all the warmth from his body. He began to shudder with every

breath he inhaled and his insides felt as if they had iced over like meat in a freezer.

Just like when the pressure had built up too much while Clow weaved his spell, Syaoran's world began to fade again as the cold overloaded his being. He desperately tried to hold onto consciousness, but his mind was slipping away like water in a clenched fist; giving in to the cold...

Cold.

Although he was covered in several layers of thick wool blankets, they couldn't keep the cold out. He let out a shuddering breath, and with it a whole new wave of chills exploded from his spine and seemed to ooze into his bones. He felt numb and weak.

After a few minutes, he could make out voices. He tried to focus in on them, but it was difficult since he seemed to waver in and out of consciousness.

"How is he, doctor?" a woman's tear-strained voice asked quietly.

Mom, the word popped into his head like a reflex.

"His fever seems to have receded a bit," a weary older male voice said. "That's always a good sign."

There was some bustle in the room while the doctor rummaged through his bag.

"He has the damned illness, whatever it is," the doctor said. "No doubt about it. It's been spreading rampant in this town. I get a new case every week."

"What can we do?" The woman asked. Her voice was weak and thick with sorrow, but she sounded determined.

"Not much," the doctor said sadly. "It's all up to him. All we can do is help treat his symptoms from the outside. But he needs to fight the

battle inside."

There was a few moments of grave silence.

" It's the fever that causes the most damage," the doctor said, trying to sound reassuring. "But his fever's actually receded. It's a very good sign, Li-san. Let's not give up on him yet."

" Never," the woman said instantly. "If anyone can fight it off, my son can."

A warm hand slipped under his and the soothing heat radiated through him.

" Don't ever give up Xiao Lang," the woman's voice was close to his ear. "Keep fighting for me."

The warmth from her hand spread through his body and lulled him into a dreamless, restless sleep.

Time passed in an instant. He became conscious to two people speaking softly over his bed. However, these voices were different from the woman and the doctor's. They had an ethereal and unearthly quality to them, but he had little desire to listen to what they were saying. They chattered in the background like the ambient drone of crickets.

" This is him," a small voice with an Osaka accent was saying.

" He looks relatively healthy," a different voice said. It was cool, quiet, and almost apathetic.

" Exactly. That's why it needs to be him."

" This is a routine epidemic, Keroberos. Something I created to settle the balance a bit, not to start a war."

" Spinal's got something planned. I can feel it. Let's just make some precautions, wha'daya say? Better safe than sorry."

" Spinal always has something planned. It's Ruby Moon I'm worried about. She's getting restless. She watches what I'm doing and twitches with jealousy. It's only a matter of time before she explodes and goes on a wild rampage."

" Then let's get both of them at the same time. Clow says-"

" You've been discussing these matters with a human?"

" You'd change your tune if you met him. He knows as much as we do about the way things work. He's wanted because of how much he's learned, you know. I put him in hiding."

There was a pause.

" Don't look at me like that. I know what I'm doing. Now he owes me big so he'll help with this. As long as you carry out your end, everything'll go smoothly."

" How is it that I'm not reassured?"

" Oh, come on. It's only an experiment anyway. If this doesn't work we can always try something new."

" Not if Ruby Moon is planning what I think she is."

" All the more reason to go along with me."

There was another pause.

" Do you have a better idea?"

" No."

" Then help me out. For once."

" So you want me to order the termination of this life?"

" It has to be this one. This is your epidemic, Yue. Only you can authorize the termination. Then we just need to station someone here to make sure he doesn't move on."

" He would've survived. His termination will be completely on my head. I will take the post."

" Is that your way of saying you'll do it?"

" As long as I watch over him."

" That's fine with me, but why do you like to torture yourself? Watching over the ghost of a kid is going to be no small task. He's gonna have lots of questions."

" I don't see it as torture. It's atonement."

" It sounds like the same thing to me..."

Syaoran drifted off, only to awaken later to the chills pressing on his lungs until he couldn't breathe. Every muscle screamed with pain.

I'm cold. It hurts. I wish it would all just stop.

The cool presence from before reappeared, but it was much more directed towards him. It was hard not to focus on it.

" The pain can only control you for as long as you fight it," a voice said by his ear. It was soothing. "Stop struggling against it and the pain will cease."

Won't something terrible happen to me if I do that?

" You will leave the pain behind. Isn't that what you want?"

But I'm afraid. There's a reason why I shouldn't...

" Relax. Let go of the pain. Leave it all behind..."

His mind was clouding. The urgent reason why he should keep fighting left him. Why stay in pain if he didn't need to? Why not let go?

It was like releasing the reins of a thousand stampeding horses. The pain charged away, leaving him far behind. Only he felt more like he was leaving it...

In a flash, he saw many images nearly all at once; still-shots of things he only half recognized, but couldn't name. The last image was that of a woman with long black hair and Chinese features. She looked nice. And yet, for some reason, it hurt to see her.

Goodbye. He felt compelled to say it to that image as it slid away from him like water down a drain. And... I'm sorry.

But now he couldn't remember who he was saying that to. In fact, he didn't even know what he was doing in this blank place, nor could he remember anything before it. But he felt better as the blackness closed in on him and ceased his thoughts altogether...

" You shouldn't be sorry. I should be sorry. Forgive me someday, if you can."

He came into existence to a very strange scene. He was staring downward with his back against the ceiling. The whole world seemed like it was upside down, even though he wasn't really sure that the world hadn't been this way forever. Below him, a woman was sobbing over the pale body of a young boy with shaggy brown hair wrapped in several layers of wool blankets. The boy wasn't moving.

" Who is that?" he asked himself. His voice sounded strange. It had a depthless quality to it.

" That's Xiao Lang Li," a voice answered like one of his own thoughts. "He's dead now."

He turned to look at the new presence. It was a man dressed in all white. He was floating too, kept aloft with giant wings that flexed and flared. The man's expression was hard to read and his eyes were piercing and intimidating. And yet, he gave off an air of calm and tranquility that took the edge off the intense feeling of uneasiness.

"Do I know you?" he asked the winged man. He almost felt like he did. Or at least his voice sounded familiar, even though he was pretty sure he'd never heard any sort of voice before.

The man shook his head. "Not really, but I know you. And yet, we're meeting for the first time. You can call me Yue."

"Okay," he said. "Hello Yue. Nice to meet you."

"How do you feel, Syaoran?" Yue asked.

He looked at Yue with confusion. "Is that who I am?"

Yue shrugged. "Only if it seems like it."

He nodded. It was as good as anything. Besides, the name kind of felt right.

"Good. So answer my question, Syaoran," he said. "How do you feel?"

He took stock. He felt as if he shouldn't be floating near the ceiling, but couldn't remember a time when he wasn't. "Weird. Empty."

Yue nodded. "That empty feeling is a coping mechanism to help you make a clean transition. You don't realize it, but you've just been through quite an ordeal. This is your mind's way of dealing with the situation. You'll start to feel better with time."

Syaoran stared down at the woman crying over the dead boy. An older man carrying a medical bag came and patted her shoulder sympathetically.

" I'm so sorry Li-san," the older man said softly.

*" I don't understand. He was doing so well," the woman sobbed.
"What happened?"*

" He was in pain," the man said. "Perhaps it was simply too much for him."

The woman shook her head. "That's not like my Xiao Lang. He wouldn't just give up. Something must have forced the life out of him. Something killed him."

" I know it's hard to accept, but this illness-" the older man started.

The woman shook her head again, this time more wildly. "No! It wasn't the illness. It was something else. He would never..."

" I feel bad for her," Syaoran said, watching the older man as he lead the woman out of the room. He wanted to follow her, but he wasn't sure how to move, or if he was able to move at all.

It was only in the silence of the empty room that Syaoran could hear the noise. It was a sound like a howling wind played backward. The sound stirred something in Syaoran, something dark and forbidding... Something almost like a panic.

" So you've noticed it," Yue said. He turned his gaze to a corner of the room. "It's over there."

Syaoran followed Yue's gaze. It was a massive black hole in the ground, a hole that was alive and breathing. The sight filled Syaoran with a sense of revulsion and the desperate urge to get as far away from it as possible.

" What is it?" Syaoran asked, phantom chills spreading through him. Something inside his being was quaking.

" That leads to the Void," Yue said apathetically. "The Void is total oblivion. You don't belong there, Syaoran. Don't go near it."

" No... I won't," Syaoran assured him. The very thought filled him with a terrible dread.

" It will follow you for a time," Yue said. "But it can only take you if you give in to it. After a while it will go away and take all your bad feelings with it. Then you can begin to be again."

" Begin to be...?" Syaoran asked. "I don't understand."

" You'll feel better..."

"... feeling any better? Ah. Still asleep I see..."

Syaoran struggled to open his eyes. They felt as if they were weighed down by something. He slowly realized, however, that he was just really tired.

As soon as he wasn't so tired, he would start wondering how the hell it was possible for someone like him to be tired in the first place.

Eventually he won the struggle and got the first glimpse of his surroundings. He was laying on a thin mattress in the middle of a traditional Japanese-style room, complete with the rice paper sliding door. Slowly realizing that he was in a completely unfamiliar place, Syaoran bolted upright.

"Wha...?" was all he could get out.

Panic had welled up inside him, making his heart race and heat rise to his face. The feeling in itself caused another rush of adrenaline to flood his veins. Of course, the fact that he suddenly had veins for adrenaline to rush into just scared him even more.

Okay, calm down, he said to himself.

He was halfway through taking a deep breath before he even realized it. The extra oxygen did help him steady his mind, though. Despite everything that was happening, he began to get a grip.

First, find out where you are, Syaoran nodded at his thought as if he were reassuring himself.

There was a window to his right. Steadily, Syaoran got up and walked to the window. It wasn't much different from all the times he had gotten up and walked before, only this time he could feel the blanket's fabric in his hands and the soft carpet under his bare feet. He did his best to ignore it.

The apartment room turned out to be several stories above the ground. The familiar landscape of the park stretched below with the Penguin Slide easily visible in the distance. He could even make out his tree.

Behind him, the screen slid open. Syaoran whirled around to see an old man step into the room carrying a tray of tea and steaming soup. His shiny black hair and bushy mustache seemed out of place against his wrinkled skin, but his eyes were kind. He smiled warmly in Syaoran's direction when their eyes met.

"I thought you were going to sleep forever," the old man said, setting the tray on the coffee table in front of the TV. "You began to worry me a bit."

Syaoran watched as the old man lifted the bowls from the tray and set them on the coffee table.

"I'm sure you're hungry," he said. "Have a seat."

"No thanks," Syaoran said, starting on the usual excuse he used whenever he was offered food. "I'm not hun-"

Guuuuu...

An audible sound came from his abdomen. It felt like his insides had shifted and a great empty hole now stood gaping.

The old man didn't laugh, but his mustached smile grew a bit wider. "Your stomach seems to be protesting. Please eat something. It's not good to go without food."

"My stomach...?" Syaoran said softly, putting a hand on his abdomen. It rumbled again, sending uncomfortable vibrations through his body.

Not knowing what else to do, he sat down at the table and the old man set a bowl of soup in front of him.

Syaoran stared at it for a moment, not exactly sure what to do. He knew how to eat, of course (he'd been witness to hundreds of Kinomoto family meals), but he was hesitant. It seemed... unhealthy to him.

The man watched Syaoran expectantly. He felt like he had little choice. Besides, it definitely couldn't *kill* him... Right?

As hesitantly as possible without looking *too* strange, Syaoran lifted the spoon to his mouth and tipped the liquid inside. As soon as it hit the back of his throat, a reflex forced his throat to contract and he swallowed with no effort on his part. Everything was taken care of by instinct.

A warm sensation dispersed inside of him as he downed the soup. It was comforting, pleasant, and seemed to fill the hole in his stomach nicely.

Syaoran waited a few moments for something to go horribly wrong. When nothing did, he had another spoonful.

"Feel better?" the old man asked.

Syaoran opened his mouth to talk, but found it impossible while there was food inside. Instead, he simply nodded.

"I knew you would," the old man said, grabbing a bowl of soup for himself. "After what happened last night."

Syaoran raised an eyebrow. "What happened last night?"

The old man chuckled. "I found you laying unconscious on a snow-covered bench, of course."

"Oh, right," Syaoran said.

"When I couldn't wake you, I brought you here. I didn't want you to freeze to death," he said.

"Thank you," Syaoran said.

"Why were you out in the cold like that?" the old man said, a concerned look on his face. "Isn't your family going to be worried about you?"

Syaoran shook his head and looked down at the table. Why did he almost feel ashamed?

"Ah," the old man said, leaning back a bit. "I see."

A short silence stole the mood from the room.

"You obviously go to school, though," the man said, eyeing his uniform.

Syaoran's eyes widened. "School!" He searched desperately for a clock and found one on top of the TV.

"Is this right!" Syaoran practically yelled.

The old man nodded. "Are you late?"

"I have to go!" Syaoran said, almost knocking the coffee table over as he jumped to his feet. "School starts in less than ten minutes! I'll never make it..."

He slid the screen open frantically. He turned around and bowed briefly to the old man. "Thank you for everything."

"Of course," the old man said. "I couldn't just leave you out there. Be careful going to school. Don't rush."

"Yeah," Syaoran said, frantically opening the door.

"The weather report says it will be just as cold tonight," the old man said, calling after Syaoran down the hall. "Make sure to have somewhere warm to stay."

"Right," Syaoran said, feeling a little panicked, but he squelched the feeling quickly.

I'll worry about that when the time comes .

Uncertain to be Sure

Chapter Fourteen

Uncertain to Be Sure

Syaoran had to slow down after about five minutes of running flat out toward the school. His insides were burning and there was an uncomfortable knot in his side. Breathing in the freezing winter air wasn't helping, either. The back of his throat was raw.

This body is a curse! Syaoran thought to himself. He would've yelled it out loud, but he was too occupied with panting for breath with his hands on his knees.

He'd been in the body for less than twelve hours and already he hated everything about it. He had suddenly become so frail and weak that a few minutes of running had nearly worn him out. Besides that, now he needed sleep and food, not to mention shelter. Where was a homeless, familyless, penniless, former ethereal spirit supposed to find these things?

With a low grumble in the back of his throat, he knew he'd have to go back to Clow. He was the only person on Earth who knew about his predicament. No one else could help him, especially now that he was cut off from any advice from Yue-

The thought of Yue stopped Syaoran dead in his tracks. It was only then, after the panic and confusion had loosened its grip, that he remembered his dream from the night before. The dream where Yue's soothing, apathetic voice lulled Xiao Lang Li out of existence.

But was it really just a dream? No, it couldn't be; it didn't feel like one- it felt more like the description of *deja vu*. Besides, Xiao Lang Li had definitely existed once, in Syaoran's house no less. How and why would he have the memories of a person who was unrelated to

him, especially memories of that person's death? It only made sense that...

Syaoran was Xiao Lang Li. Or at least he used to be. A strange sensation rippled over his body, a sensation that could only be described as an epiphany.

And if he had been Xiao Lang, that meant that...

"Yue killed me," Syaoran said softly to the snowflakes. He needed to say it aloud; he needed to feel the weight of the words and let the meaning pass through the synapses in his brain.

Xiao Lan- No, I would've lived through that illness, Syaoran thought, starting to walk forward again. He needed to move. They said I'd live! Why did he... why did he...

I had a mother... he thought, trudging forward. I had a life!

He stopped and clenched his fists. He wanted to hit something. He wanted to punch someone. But instead of doing anything of the sort, he sank into a bench and sat there.

"Why did he take it all away from me?" Syaoran asked no one.

Anger pent up inside him until it pushed against his jaw and jammed his fingers into his palms.

"Why am I here?" Syaoran asked through gritted teeth.

"Reed-kun?"

Syaoran opened his eyes to see Sakura standing a few feet off, her emerald eyes crinkled with concern. The early morning sunlight danced off her hair and Syaoran suddenly noticed how bright and sunny that day was shaping up to be.

He instantly got up from the bench, feeling almost cornered. "What are you doing here? You'll be late."

She made a face. "You didn't meet me in front of my house. I guess I got a little worried..."

Syaoran rolled his eyes. "Don't worry about me. Worry about yourself." He wanted to knock some sense into her. *He'd* come to help *her* . The last thing he needed was for her to focus her energy on him. It was counterproductive.

Sakura shrugged. "But I'm kind of glad I did come looking for you. Something *is* bothering you, isn't it?"

"It's nothing, really," And he meant it. When she was around, his own problems just didn't seem so bad anymore. She really was the only thing that mattered.

' *Why am I here?*' He'd just kind of answered his own question. Or rather, Sakura had answered it with her presence. He was here for her, regardless of whatever happened before.

"Well, you know," she said, flashing a smile that seemed to light up the sky. "If you need me, I'll be around."

And that's all I ask of you, Syaoran thought, too embarrassed to say it out loud. *Just stay around.*

Sakura glanced at her watch and gasped a little. "We're going to be so late!" She raced forward and grabbed Syaoran's hand. "But we can make it if we run!"

She pulled on his hand and urged him into a run. She was saying something, but all Syaoran could focus on was the feeling of Sakura's hand on his and the heat that was rising into his face.

... So maybe some things about this body weren't all *that* bad.

"Where is she this time?" Syaoran asked Tomoyo. Sakura was missing from the lunch group again. He hoped she was somewhere

inside where it was warm, since he was practically frozen stiff.

"You mean Sakura-chan?" Tomoyo asked, the shadow of a grin on her face. She put her hand to her chin and thought for a moment. "Oh, right. She went to meet Mizuki-sensei in the teacher's lounge."

"She's *where*?" Syaoran said, feeling the heat drain from his face. Sakura was putting herself into grave danger every time she merely approached that woman. He headed for the teacher lounge, even though he wasn't exactly sure where it was. Had he not been in this spiritually stunted body, he could've followed Mizuki-sensei's presence, but his current state made that impossible.

After several panicked minutes of running around the school, Syaoran found the teacher's lounge on the first floor, across the hall from his classroom. Without a moment's hesitation, he threw open the door and stomped inside. Sakura and Mizuki-sensei were on a couch against the wall, hunched over something in Sakura's hands.

"And then you take the second needle and thread that loop on-" Mizuki-sensei was saying.

"Reed-kun!" Sakura yelled in surprise. Syaoran saw a flash of green before Sakura quickly tucked something behind her back. "What are you doing here?"

He glared at Mizuki-sensei as she straightened up and smiled at Syaoran warmly. "Hello Reed-san. What can I do for you?"

"I..." Syaoran stammered, trying to think fast. "I just wanted to make sure that there would be tutoring after school today."

He resisted the urge to grimace. He sounded stupid even to himself.

"Of course, Reed-san," Mizuki-sensei said, responding as if it was the most brilliant thing she'd ever heard. "We have it every day after school."

There was a moment of awkward silence as Syaoran glared at Mizuki-sensei, Mizuki-sensei smiled warmly, and Sakura fiddled with her hands behind her back.

"Well, thank you for everything Mizuki-sensei!" Sakura said, stuffing whatever was in her hands into a small Twin Bells shopping bag.

"You were a huge help. I think I can do the rest on my own."

"You're welcome, Sakura-san," Mizuki-sensei said. "Anytime."

Sakura bowed deeply, then turned to leave the room. She gave Syaoran a wavering smile as she passed.

"See you in class," she said quietly, holding the bag close to her.

"Yeah," Syaoran said. The door shut as she left.

Suddenly he was alone with Chaos.

"I'm warning you-" Syaoran began, but Mizuki-sensei held up a hand to cut him off.

"I don't want to hurt her, Reed-san," She said. Her eyes were sad and grief-stricken. "In fact, I hope you can keep her safe. Don't let anything happen to her."

He stared at her with his mouth slightly open, expecting some kind of dirty trick. This was the last thing he ever expected to come out of this woman's mouth.

"Sakura-san is... much too precious to be lost to the world," Mizuki-sensei said, getting up and gracefully moving toward the window. It overlooked the tree where Sakura's group ate lunch. "Don't you feel the same way?"

Syaoran hesitated for just a moment before answering. "Of course I do. That's why I'm here. She means... everything."

He paused for a moment on the thought before shaking it out of his head. "But why do you care? It's your job to settle the balance."

The woman shook her head. "I don't know why I care. I'm certainly not *supposed* to care. But just the mere thought of something happening to her is... very painful."

Syaoran shook his head angrily. "That doesn't make sense. Ruby Moon can't wait to-"

"I'm not Ruby Moon," Mizuki-sensei said. She put a hand to her temple. "I'm only a branch of her consciousness. She's in my head giving me orders and telling me what to say, but I only follow through because I have no choice. If it were up to me, I'd leave Sakura-san alone. But I can't. That's why you can't let anything happen to her."

"That still makes you my enemy," Syaoran said.

Mizuki-sensei nodded. "But I had to tell you... Please don't let her die."

"It won't happen," Syaoran said, feeling the pit of his stomach drop out. "Whatever it takes, I won't let it happen. I swear it."

"Do you really understand what 'whatever it takes' means, Syaoran?" the woman asked. Her eyes were so sad.

"I don't care," Syaoran said firmly, emphasizing every word. "If it saves her, that's all that matters."

The woman smiled sadly. "I can see that you really are willing. But it won't be easy."

"I never expected it to be easy," Syaoran said.

"But did you expect it to be the hardest thing you've ever done in your entire existence?" Mizuki-sensei said. It was much of a question, more like a statement.

Before Syaoran could answer, the woman's expression changed abruptly and she plastered the same warm smile back on her lips. Her eyes remained incredibly sad, though.

"Well, Reed-san. Recess is almost over," she said, now all business. The pleading tone was gone from her voice. "You should head back to class."

Without another word, Syaoran left the room and closed the door tightly behind him, as if locking up some dangerous creature.

Syaoran headed right for Sakura's lunch spot, his resolve to keep Sakura safe never stronger. He watched her and Mizuki-sensei extra close, looking for anything, *anything* out of the ordinary.

The day, however, passed normally. When school was let out for the day, Mizuki-sensei swept into the room as usual, carrying another platter of treats for Sakura. Almost as a sign of defiance, Syaoran took a few pastries for himself and ate one right there in front of the teacher. He couldn't help but notice her eyes widen slightly as he swallowed his food. Even Sakura seemed a bit shocked.

Syaoran made his way back to his seat and sat heavily. He glared at Mizuki-sensei the entire time she stood up there.

"Well, that's about it for today," Mizuki-sensei said some time later. "You are free to go. See you tomorrow."

She quickly left the room, leaving Sakura and Syaoran alone together.

"I'll... walk you home, okay?" Syaoran said, helping to gather some of her books. He didn't want her to leave his sight, even for a second.

"Yeah, okay," Sakura said, smiling and taking Syaoran's hand in hers.

Touya glared out the window as Sakura waved goodbye to a scrawny little brown-haired brat. Everything about the kid rubbed Touya the wrong way, from his slightly untidy school uniform to the way he stared at Sakura as if his gaze was glued there. Touya grumbled audibly as his sister and the brat had a short conversation which delayed Sakura's return into the house.

"What is it, Toya?" Yukito asked, coming over and following Touya's glare out the window. "Ah, I should've known. Sakura-chan has been seeing a lot of that boy lately, hasn't she?"

"I don't like him," Touya said, steam practically rising from his words.

"Of course you don't," Yukito said, a playful smirk breaking on his face. "It's part of your sister-complex."

Touya shook his head and got away from the window. He couldn't stand to look at the kid anymore. "He's going to hurt her, Yuki. I just know it."

No matter what he does, Touya thought darkly. He's going to just end up hurting her.

After Syaoran had dropped Sakura safely off at her own house, he headed - slowly - toward Clow Reed's mansion, still clinging to the last bit of hope that the effects of the full moon would wear off with the sun set. But as the sun set and absolutely nothing happened to him, he knew he'd have no choice but to ask for Clow's help... again. All too soon, Syaoran found himself standing in front of the seemingly abandoned property that Clow called home.

Something about being in debt to a magician made Syaoran uneasy. But he drew a deep breath (thinking distantly how much deep breaths really did help clear his mind), and headed for the front door.

As he reached to ring the doorbell, it glowed briefly before melting into the wall like a boat capsizing into a calm ocean. Glaring angrily,

Syaoran reached for the giant door-knocker, but it too sank into the wood before he time to touch it.

Syaoran sighed exasperatedly, thinking how Clow definitely wasn't one for subtlety. "Come on. I have nowhere else to go and it's going to be cold again tonight. I could freeze to death."

The door emitted a golden glow. Clow's sprawling, calligraphic handwriting spelled itself out on the door a character at a time.

You can't die, only suffer. You can only leave this world once your energy is fully depleted. Not by any other means.

It really was a relief to know he couldn't die while in this body, but Clow's stubbornness still grated on Syaoran's nerves.

He felt so stupid talking to a door. Why couldn't Clow just come out and talk to him face-to-face?

"So you want me to suffer?" Syaoran said, the temper in his voice flaring.

Not particularly.

"Then will you just let me stay here for a few days?" Syaoran asked through clenched teeth. "I'll do chores or something. There must be something I can do to earn a room."

No, Syaoran, there is nothing you can do. I told you to stay away from this place. It is no safe haven.

"But-" Syaoran started.

The door itself suddenly melted into the house and Syaoran found himself talking to a brick wall.

His frustration reaching a breaking point, he punched the wall with every ounce of strength he had in him. But that only made things worse as his hand erupted in throbbing pain.

"Ow!" he cried, trying to shake the pain out of his fist. He wanted to kick the wall too, but fought himself to refrain.

After pacing angrily on the porch for a few moments, Syaoran stomped away from the mansion cradling a throbbing hand, an empty stomach, and a severely injured sense of pride.

"Why did you do that?" Madoushi asked, watching Syaoran stomp away. "He needs your help."

Clow shook his head, a knowing smile playing on his lips. "No he doesn't."

Madoushi sighed, drawing her arms over her chest. "In a few days, that boy will know only suffering. Why not let him stay here in relative comfort until then?"

"It's not safe here. They're looking for me and drawing closer all the time," Clow said solemnly. "Besides, he's not completely out of options. It just seems that way."

Now what? Syaoran asked himself, slumped on the bench beside the penguin slide.

Now that the sun had gone down, the air had turned bitterly cold. Already, his lungs were on fire from breathing in the frigid air and he was losing feeling in the tips of his fingers. He rubbed his shoulders, hoping the friction would help a little. It didn't, really.

He wasn't so much afraid of suffering in the cold as he was of going unconscious again. The last thing he wanted to do was relive his final hours as Xiao Lang Li a second time. The very thought sent chills down his spine that had nothing to do with the weather.

Now what? Syaoran asked himself again, pushing the nagging memory of Yue's apathetic voice from his mind.

Keep moving, he thought. He got up and began to wander the park. Walking helped warm him a little, but the cold was still pressing in. An icy gust picked up suddenly, cutting through the fabric of his school uniform like light through a glass window.

Snowflakes began to fall softly to the ground, glowing blue in the light of the moon. Syaoran looked up into the sky to see the just-full moon hanging there in plain sight, almost as if it were mocking him.

"I hate you," Syaoran said bitterly, glaring at the ball of light. He hugged himself against the cold. His stomach grumbled loudly.

Unconsciously, his steps began to slow as inevitable exhaustion crept over him like a dark cloud. He'd have to give into sleep soon.

He stopped in front of the apartment complex he'd been at earlier that morning. Only a few windows were still lit up from the inside. One several stories up would provide a perfect view of the penguin slide...

Without really knowing what he was thinking, he headed into the complex and up several flights of stairs. Way too soon he was standing in front of a door on the fifth floor, his hand poised to knock, but frozen there.

Before he could gather the courage to knock, the door opened on its own and the old man from earlier that morning stood in the doorway.

"Ah," he said, smiling knowingly. "I thought you might come back."

"Sorry about the intrusion," Syaoran said awkwardly, putting a hand behind his head. "But I was hoping you had a spare room that I could borrow for a few nights."

"I don't see why not," the old man said, ushering Syaoran inside with a friendly sweep of his arm.

"I really don't have anything to offer you in return..." Syaoran said, looking around the apartment. It was a small, plain place with minimal accents and decorations.

The old man held up his hands. "You will make your payment in a few days. Until then, feel free to call this place home."

Syaoran shook his head frantically. "No, really. I don't have anything to pay with."

The old man smiled disarmingly. "Relax. *I'm* not asking for anything in return. Make yourself at home. Would you like something to eat? I always end up making too much."

Syaoran's rumbling stomach answered for him.

The old man's smile widened and he went to the stove. "You could put some bowls out for me, if you'd like. They're in that cabinet there."

"Sure," Syaoran said, getting a couple of bowls out and setting them on the small table next to the kitchen. He found cups and silverware as well. He busied himself with arranging them nicely, savoring the warmth radiating from the kitchen.

The old man brought the pot to the table and set it down on the potholder Syaoran had placed there. "That was good thinking. I'll think we'll get along just fine." He sat down and gestured for Syaoran to take a seat across from him.

"It's stew," he said, ladling some of the stuff into his bowl. "Perfect for a cold night like this."

Syaoran readily agreed as he wolfed down his food. He felt a million times better in a warm house with warm food in his stomach. It was as if his misery was now a million miles away.

"As long as you're staying here, I suppose I should get to know you," the old man said. "And you should know me. Names seem like a good place to start."

"It's Syaoran," Syaoran said, swallowing.

The old man looked expectant, as if waiting for more.

"That's it," Syaoran said shortly. "It's just Syaoran."

"I see," the old man said. "Well, then you can call me Wei."

Syaoran waited patiently to hear the rest of his name.

Wei smiled. "That's it. Just Wei. Fair enough, right?"

Syaoran nodded. "Nice to meet you, Wei-san."

"Nice to meet you, Syaoran," Wei said.

For the rest of the meal the two talked casually, sharing interests and divulging as much of their pasts as was necessary. It turned out that Wei had worked most of his life as a servant of several prominent families in Japan, including the Emperor's family at one point. He was retired now, but admitted to receiving a penchant from a few old clients who thought of him as family. His wife had died some years ago and now he lived alone in the apartment.

"It will be nice to have life in the house again," Wei said, smiling at Syaoran. "Even if only for a time."

Their conversation was not nearly as awkward as Syaoran thought it would be. The banter felt a lot like the conversations Syaoran used to have with Yue: insightful and serious, but an air of companionship in every word.

"Are you finished?" Wei asked a few hours later.

Syaoran nodded. "I'll help you clean up."

Wei stood and help up a hand. "That's not necessary. You have to be up early for school tomorrow and you're exhausted. I can see it in your eyes. I bet you haven't had a good night's sleep in a long time."

Syaoran had to nod. He was right, after all. It had been over half a century now...

"There's a spare bedroom down the hall on your right. You should find everything you need is there," Wei said. "If not, don't hesitate to ask me about it."

Syaoran nodded. "Thank you very much."

Wei waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Think nothing of it."

Syaoran awkwardly headed towards the hallway, feeling strange about leaving a mess behind for Wei to clean up by himself. Before he reached the hallway, however, he paused, suddenly remembering something that Wei had said earlier.

"Wei-san," Syaoran said over the sound of Wei washing dishes.

"It's just Wei, Syaoran," Wei said, smiling over his shoulder. "Nothing more than that."

"Wei..." Syaoran said, testing the name out. Yes. That sounded better. "How did you know I would come back here?"

"Ah..." Wei said, wiping his hands with a dish towel. His back was to Syaoran. "Truth be told, I didn't know for sure, but I thought maybe you might come back."

"You weren't surprised to see me at all though," Syaoran said. "That's a pretty big maybe."

"It's the 'maybes' and the 'mights' that make up our lives," Wei answered, his back to Syaoran. "I find it very hard to believe that there's any such thing as 'certainty', even when concerning our own actions. While people may make their own fate, no one can be

absolutely sure which path leads toward the right direction all the time. If 'certainty' really existed, life wouldn't be worth living because everyone would already have all the answers.

"That's why no one should ever say 'That will never happen to me' or 'I will definitely won't let that happen.'"

"Then what should I say?" Syaoran asked quietly.

"I'll do the best I can," Wei said, smiling. "That's all we need to take from this life: the belief that 'I've done my best.' If you believe that with everything in you, then there's no reason to regret those countless moments of uncertainty."

Syaoran felt like his entire existence had been one giant moment of uncertainty, but the prospect that he could *never* be certain of anything made him uneasy...

Because he was absolutely, completely, one hundred percent *positive* that Sakura wouldn't die in a few days.

"But right now I am *almost* certain that..." Wei said, his smile reaching his eyes. "you need some rest. Goodnight, Syaoran. Sleep well."

"Yeah, I will. Thanks," Syaoran said, heading down the hallway. The sounds from the kitchen faded away as he opened the door to the first room on the right.

It wasn't a very large room. There was a bed against the right wall and a dresser catty-corner to the bed. A small wooden desk and chair sat on the right wall across from the dresser. A set of sliding glass doors on the far wall opened up to a bare balcony that overlooked the park. Simple, unappealing green curtains framed the doors and a large area rug covered most of the floor between the bed and the glass doors. Moonlight flooded the room, making everything look blue.

The room was plain, stark, and just barely habitable.

Syaoran couldn't have asked for anything more.

He approached the bed and found a stripped yellow and green night shirt and pants laying there unassumingly. Syaoran eyed them suspiciously.

"The old man went to a lot of trouble for a 'maybe,'" Syaoran mumbled. But he couldn't really sleep in his school uniform, could he? It would get wrinkled. He reluctantly took off his uniform as if he were peeling off an layer of his own skin. He couldn't believe how cold it was without clothing on and quickly changed into the night shirt and pants; which was only the second outfit he'd ever worn in his entire remembered existence. The sleeves were a bit too short, but he wasn't complaining.

As soon as he was changed, the warmth from the wool against his skin made him feel drowsy. He drew the blankets back and crawled into the bed. It squeaked under his weight, but it was a comforting sort of noise that made him feel almost at home. After a few minutes of staring at the moonlight-stained ceiling and wondering how in the world he had ended up in this place, his eyelids got heavy and fell closed on their own.

Syaoran had expected sleep to be something that would be difficult to get used to, but he found himself drifting off before he even fully registered that it was happening.

His last thought was of Sakura's warm smile and the feeling of her hand in his, which only lulled him deeper into sleep.

Everything will definitely be alright.

Completely Incomplete

Chapter Fifteen

Completely Incomplete

Sakura sat up suddenly in her bed, breathing heavily. Her bedroom was dark and the street outside was a sleepy kind of quiet. It seemed like the crickets were the only ones awake.

As her pulse returned to normal and her mind began to clear, she turned to glance at the clock on her headboard.

4:37am.

Sakura flopped back onto her pillow. The maze just kept waking her earlier and earlier... She hadn't had a good night's sleep in weeks. And she'd been up late putting the finishing touches on her newest project. It was too bad should couldn't sleep some more, but once she woke up from the maze nightmare, she got too restless to go back to bed. Something about the maze made her want to get up and get moving, almost as if she needed proof that the waking world was indeed reality. It was very hard to shake the sense of impending dread.

After futilely lying in bed for a few minutes, she reluctantly slid out from under the insulation of her blankets and shuffled into the bathroom for a warm shower. Even inside the house, the air was freezing. It looked like it was going to another of those days: horribly cold, but still bright and sunny.

At the very least, the day would be sunny.

Syaoran was surprised to open his eyes to find morning light flooding into his room from the sliding glass windows. He hadn't even remembered falling asleep. Is that was it was supposed to feel like?

He pushed his blankets back and sat up, feeling unfocused and groggy. It was a very unsettling feeling to someone who hadn't ever felt less than ready for anything.

After a few moments, the grogginess began to fade and feeling returned to his limbs. The downy blankets were very soft and comfortable, almost as if he were wrapped up in a springtime cloud. Beyond the blankets he could sense the air snapped with cold and he suddenly felt very reluctant to leave the confines of the bed. Everything was just so warm and quiet...

Seconds after the thought, a piercingly loud beeping filled the room, violently shattering the peace. The synapses in Syaoran's head sparked violently with the noise and threatened to fry his brain.

"Wha... !" Syaoran yelled indignantly, throwing the blankets to the floor. He searched wildly for the noise and, after a few frantic seconds, found the source was the bedside clock. He grabbed the thing from the nightstand and turned it over in his hands, searching desperately for the "off" switch and trying to resist the urge to throw it across the room. His hand brushed the "snooze" button and the noise stopped abruptly.

He breathed a heavy sigh of relief and was able to find the "off" switch easily in the silence. Only then did he have the sense to check the time.

6:42am. He had a good hour and a half before he had to leave for Sakura's house. What to do? He was too pent up with adrenaline from the alarm to go back to bed now.

Syaoran slowly got out of bed and wandered into the main part of the apartment. Far from being quiet like he expected, Wei was already up and at the stove cooking breakfast. The sultry smell of bacon, eggs, and flour frying in a pan wafted through the air and made Syaoran realize how hungry he was. Apparently sleep made the human body *really* hungry.

"Ah, Syaoran, good morning," Wei said, turning around. "Did you sleep well?"

"I guess so," Syaoran said awkwardly. "Until that alarm woke me."

"Well, I wasn't exactly sure when school started for you," Wei said, going from pan to pan and moving the contents around with his spatula. "But I wanted to make sure you didn't oversleep."

"You set it?" Syaoran asked, getting the urge to rub his eye. The gesture helped wipe the grogginess away somehow. "But you weren't even sure that I was coming back."

"I thought maybe you would," Wei said, grinning under his mustache. He quickly shifted gears. "You do have enough time for breakfast, I hope."

Syaoran nodded. "I don't have to leave until around 8."

"Go ahead and take a shower then," Wei said. "This won't be ready for a few more minutes."

"O-okay," Syaoran said. He watched Wei move back and forth in front of the stove. "Are you sure I couldn't help you here?"

Wei shook his head. "Oh no. I have this covered. You go ahead."

"Alright..." Syaoran said, backing out of the room and down the hallway. He was pretty sure he'd seen a bathroom somewhere on the left.

Pushing the door open, he found his school uniform freshly laundered and folded neatly by the sink. Syaoran narrowed his eyes at the sight.

"Just who does Wei think he is?" Syaoran whispered to himself. "My butler?"

Finally he shrugged, thinking that Wei's instincts from his old job must have awakened with the arrival of a new guest.

And if that's what made the old man happy, Syaoran felt obliged to play along.

Sakura waited outside her house down by the sidewalk. Her project was in the shopping bag she'd been carrying with her for the past several days. It was the reason she'd stayed up late the night before and the reason she was looking toward the park with an anxious feeling in her stomach.

She hadn't been waiting long when a tuft of dark brown hair appeared over the horizon. Syaoran quickly made his way up the sidewalk, his hands in his pockets and a stony look on his face, as always. And, as always, he wasn't wearing anything besides his school uniform. Not even jacket, even though the air was bitterly cold. But despite the expression and his huddled appearance, Sakura couldn't help but think he looked... good. As if everything in his life was going really well.

"Good morning, Reed-kun!" Sakura said cheerfully as he approached.

"Morning," Syaoran said, short as always with conversation. "Ready?"

Sakura nodded. "Yeah. But first, here."

She reached inside the shopping bag and pulled out a long, handmade scarf. The crocheting was messy and obviously rushed in places, but it was still readily recognizable as a scarf. It was a deep shade of green with two stripes of carnation pink near the ends.

"I've never actually crocheted anything, so it's kind sloppy," Sakura said, holding it out. "I hope you like the green, though. I thought it matched your personality somehow..."

Syaoran stared at it for a long time, as if recovering from a very big shock.

"Is... it for me?" he asked finally.

Sakura nodded vigorously, cracking a smile. "You always look so cold. I thought maybe it would warm you up a little..."

Syaoran reached out and gently took the scarf from Sakura's outstretched hand. For a moment, Syaoran's fingers brushed against hers and a thrill slid down her spine.

He continued to stare at it laying in his open palm. Then he wrapped his fingers around it and squeezed, as if to make sure it was real.

"You don't like it?" Sakura asked, getting a little worried.

Syaoran shook his head. "No, not at all. It's just..." He quickly and eagerly wrapped the material around his neck. "I've... never gotten a gift before."

"Hoe?" Sakura said, cocking her head in confusion.

"No, forget I said that," Syaoran said, shaking his head. He lifted one of the arms of the scarf and slid the material between his fingers. He looked up at Sakura. "Thank you."

"No..." Sakura said, pointing at the scarf. "This is my thanks to you. For the car and kite and the hammer... I don't know what I'd've done without you."

Syaoran shrugged. "I'm just glad you're alright."

Sakura giggled and flailed her arms. "I'm great!"

They started walking toward the school, side by side.

"Do you like the green?" Sakura asked after a few minutes. "You know, in the scarf?"

Syaoran turned and started into Sakura's emerald eyes.

"I love green," he said softly.

" I've never gotten a gift before ."

No... that's not exactly true, Syaoran thought to himself as Sakura chatted animatedly by his side. He was very aware of the fabric around his neck as it radiated warmth throughout his body. The winter cold suddenly couldn't touch him. My first gift was getting the chance to be at her side like this. Everything else is just a bonus.

"... And then I tried to stomp on onii-chan's foot, but he was able to dodge me. I think it's because I do it too much," Sakura said, clenching her fist and fuming dramatically. "Someday I'll take him totally by surprise and crush him!"

Something bubbled inside him then, rising up to his face and coming out his mouth. It was kind of like a cough, only... happier.

Sakura turned to him with shock in her eyes.

"Reed-kun..." she said, a grin breaking on her face. "Did you just laugh?"

Syaoran could only stare blankly. Is that was just happened? "Uh..."

"You did! You *laughed* !" Sakura said, grabbing Syaoran's arm and shaking it. Her grin grew wider.

"I guess I did," Syaoran said, feeling the muscles in his face tighten involuntarily. Her smile was contagious, especially with how good he was feeling at the moment. His reflexes just took over.

"And a smile too!" Sakura said, looking at Syaoran's face in awe. "I'm so lucky to see Reed-kun laugh and smile in the same day!"

The school appeared in the distance and Sakura ran to the gates where Tomoyo and Eriol were waiting. Tomoyo had her video camera out, as always.

"Tomoyo-chan, Tomoyo-chan!" Sakura yelled, running up to the two. "You should've seen it! Reed-kun laughed *and* smiled!"

He couldn't help it, he smiled again. It was a shy grin and rather sheepish, but it was there.

"See!" Sakura said, guiding Tomoyo's hands to train her camcorder on Syaoran. She looked so happy. "He's doing it again!"

No, this time isn't really a bonus... Syaoran thought as Sakura laughed with Tomoyo. Even Eriol's presence couldn't get him down.

"Come on, Reed-kun," Sakura said, grabbing Syaoran's hand and tugging on it. "We're going to be late."

Her hand sent a pleasant ripple up his arm and down his spine. How could he have ever thought that this body was a curse?

... Every moment is a miracle.

"What about this one?" Sakura asked, pointing to a math problem in her workbook.

It was their extra study time with Mizuki-sensei. The teacher had assigned the two some problems and said they could work them out together, so they pulled their desks next to each other and were bent over the workbook.

"Yeah, same thing with this one," Syaoran said. "Just apply the formula and it'll work out. See?"

"Right," Sakura said. "And with these too. But these have to be broken down first, right?"

"Yeah," he said. He looked up and smiled at her. "You've got this."

Sakura smiled radiantly back. "I guess I do."

Mizuki-sensei came by and peered over their shoulders. Syaoran could feel her shadow fall over them.

"Excellent, you two," she said, analyzing the sheet. "I don't think there's much more to do. Why don't we cut this short for today?"

"Okay," Sakura said, gathering her books. "We'll see you tomorrow, right?"

"I surely hope so," Mizuki-sensei said, smiling. She turned to Syaoran. "Be careful going home." She said a last goodbye and swept out of the room.

Syaoran turned to help Sakura pack her things.

"Um, Reed-kun," Sakura said quietly. "Do you have anything planned tonight?"

Syaoran shook his head. "Not really."

"Well... would you like to come have dinner at my house?" she asked casually. "We're having spaghetti."

Syaoran's heart skipped a beat. A chance to be back inside his old house... And with Sakura, no less.

"Shouldn't you ask your dad first?" Syaoran asked. His thoughts darkened. "Or... your brother."

Sakura shook her head. " *I'm* the one making dinner tonight, so I'll just buy extra. I'm sure they won't mind."

"Okay, sure," Syaoran said, trying to keep the excitement from leaking into his voice.

"Alright!" Sakura said, grabbing his hand again. No matter how many times she did that, the ripple never failed to fall down his spine.
"Meet me at my house at 7, okay?"

"Could I..." Syaoran said. The thought of Sakura being off on her own filled him with dread. "Why don't I just come with you?"

"Really? You wouldn't mind?" Sakura said. "I've still got to buy the ingredients and make it..."

Syaoran shook his head. "I don't mind. I told you that I have nothing better to do."

"Okay," Sakura said. "There's a little market right down the street from here. That's where I usually go."

It turned out that Sakura was a very picky shopper. She had many different methods that she used to make sure everything she bought was of the highest quality. And she knew how to haggle. She could knock at least 20 off of everything she bought, more like 50 when she was at her best. Syaoran marveled at how the price came down the more she talked. And despite being extremely picky, she found what she needed quickly and didn't need to stop very often.

"You're really good at that," Syaoran said as Sakura waved goodbye to the man at the meat counter.

"Good at what?" Sakura said, blinking.

"... Buying things," Syaoran said.

Sakura grinned. "I've been doing this since I was eight years old. You get good at what you do over and over. That's why my family sends me to get the groceries most of the time. Otou-san's too nice, so he never gets a good price and onii-chan only intimidates people."

They passed through the park on the way to Sakura's house.

"Oh, Reed-kun," Sakura said, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk next to the penguin slide. "Shouldn't you let your parents know you're staying at my house for dinner?"

Syaoran shrugged. "It's okay. I told Wei that I'd probably be back late anyway."

"Wei?" Sakura asked.

"Wei is..." Syaoran struggled for a word to describe him without telling an outright lie. "... my butler."

"Your... butler?" Sakura said, question marks practically coming out of her ears.

"Uh, yeah," Syaoran said, putting a hand behind his head.

Sakura giggled.

"What's so funny?" Syaoran said, a smile threatening to break on his face again. Sakura just had that effect on him.

"I don't know," Sakura said, stifling her laughter the best she could. "It's just the way you said it."

They continued toward Sakura's house. The air was getting colder, but the sun still had a few hours left. The sky was blue and fresh-looking.

"So you live with Wei-san?" Sakura asked.

"Yeah," Syaoran said, shifting the grocery bags over his shoulder.

"Alone?" she asked.

Syaoran nodded.

"What about your parents?"

Syaoran struggled to hold back a sigh. What about his parents? "I don't really remember my father... And my mother..."

He paused, trying to reconcile with the reality that he'd just come to think of.

"... My mother is probably dead by now," Syaoran said. The thought hurt him much more than he thought it would, but he knew it was the truth. His mother had died a long time ago.

Sakura's face fell a bit, but she recovered quickly. "Probably? You mean you don't know for sure?"

Syaoran shook his head. "We got... separated. But I don't think it's possible that she's still alive."

"I'm sorry," Sakura said, looking at the ground.

"Don't be," Syaoran said, looking at the same spot on the ground. "I'm just happy to be here. Besides, Wei took me in. Everything has worked out for the best, I think."

Sakura smiled and began to talk about happier things. Eventually they reached Sakura's house and she let Syaoran in.

"No one's home yet," Sakura explained as she turned on the lights in the living room. "Otou-san and Onii-chan are working late. That's why I had to make dinner."

Nothing had changed since Syaoran left. Even the remote control to the television was in the same place. Syaoran was a little shocked. For some reason, he had expected it to be drastically different.

Or maybe he had just hoped it would be. If it had been different, he might have been able to convince himself that this place really wasn't the same place he'd left. Seeing the house like this only reminded him of everything he'd given up. The thought made him a little bitter.

"I'll make some tea," Sakura said, leading Syaoran into the living room by the kitchen. "And you can watch TV or something while I get dinner ready."

"Can I help?" Syaoran asked. Even when she was inside her own house, he worried about her safety. Until he left for good, he wanted to be at her side during every waking moment.

"Guests aren't supposed to help make their own dinner," Sakura said, a playful tone in her voice. "It's bad manners for the hostess."

"But really..." Syaoran said. "I want to help."

Sakura stood there for a moment, then seemed to make a snap decision. "Okay. If you really don't mind..."

"I don't," Syaoran said firmly.

Sakura lead him into the kitchen. "Alright. Well, I guess you could get the water boiling and put the noodles in when it's done. While you do that, I'll cut the sausage for the sauce."

Sakura reached for a huge carving knife and panic washed over Syaoran. Flashes of all the horrible ways Sakura could get hurt with a knife ran through his mind almost simultaneously.

He dove in front the knife holder, blocking Sakura's way.

"Reed-kun..." she said, laughing. "I need to get a knife."

"Let me use the knife," Syaoran said insistently, his arms spread wide as if trying to keep a suicidal person from the roof's edge of a skyscraper. "You boil the water."

Sakura laughed nervously. "Um... Alright."

She moved to pull a pot out of the drawer under the stove. Syaoran breathed a sigh of relief and took the smallest knife from the holder. He got the sausage out from the grocery bag and walked to the far

side of the kitchen- to get Sakura as far away from danger as possible.

Sakura chatted as they worked, telling Syaoran things about her family that he already knew. She told him stuff like what her father did for a living and where she moved from. Syaoran may have already known these things, but it just seemed more interesting when she talked about it.

He was so wrapped up in Sakura's one-sided conversation that he wasn't paying very much attention to where he was cutting. The knife slipped and caught Syaoran's index finger near the cuticle. He didn't feel much in the first few seconds, but then a stinging pain quickly wrapped around his finger and invaded the cut.

"Ow..." Syaoran said quietly.

"Something wrong?" Sakura asked suddenly. Obviously he hadn't been quiet enough. He could feel her coming over even though his back was to her.

"I'm fine," Syaoran said, going back to his business.

"No you're not!" Sakura exclaimed, grabbing Syaoran's hand. "You're bleeding."

"Huh?" Syaoran muttered, looking down. The cut on his finger was leaking a few drops of red that left a trail from the open cut in his finger to the tiny dots on the white counter.

Syaoran could only stare. Of all the things he never thought possible, the fact that he could bleed was a very high number on the list.

"Here, run it under the tap," Sakura said, guiding Syaoran to the sink.

The cold water helped to wash the sting away, as well as the unsettling trail of red. But as soon as the water stopped, more blood

began to welt up under the wound.

Sakura got a rag out and gently dried his finger off.

"Hold this," Sakura said, gesturing to the rag. Syaoran obeyed. "I'll go get a bandage."

She ran out of the room and Syaoran lifted up the rag to watch the blood trickle from the cut and slide slowly to the pad of his finger.

He knew it was fake. All of it: the breathing, the exhaustion, even the bleeding. It was only a side effect that the full moon had on the elements that manifested his spirit on the physical plane. He wasn't human anymore than a scuba diver is a fish. A diver could breathe underwater and resist the ill effects of the pressure while submerged, but it was only temporary and fake. It was the same thing with his spirit, pretending it was human. Some time in the future, the effect would fade because the moon would fade... He knew it. In fact, he was counting on it. Only when he finally left this plane for good would Sakura be safe. That was the whole nature of the paradox that brought him here.

But as he watched the blood trickle down his finger, some selfish part of him hoped all this would be permanent. He could protect Sakura for the rest of her life... couldn't he? Was it too much to want to stay?

Hadn't he sacrificed enough already?

Sakura returned quickly with an open bandaid in her hand.

"Here," Sakura said, gently taking Syaoran's hand. She wrapped the bandage expertly around the cut. "Tell me if it gets too tight."

"It's fine," Syaoran said. He looked back at the work he'd abandoned. "I'm sorry I bled all over the food..."

Sakura giggled a little. "No it's okay," She paused for just a second, as if thinking seriously about her next sentence. "The blood proves you're alive."

Syaoran's head snapped up. She was wrong; it wasn't true, not for him. It just wasn't true. I couldn't be true. And yet...

And yet...

They both became aware of how close together they were standing, their stomachs almost touching. They were so close that they were breathing the same air. Sakura tilted her head upwards and Syaoran leaned forward, his body moving on its own...

"I'm home!" Touya's voice echoed like a gunshot from the hallway.

Suddenly Sakura and Syaoran were at opposite ends of the kitchen.

"Welcome back!" Sakura said, peeking around the corner. "How was work?"

"Fine. We were able to wrap up early," Touya said, still in the foyer. "What's for dinner?"

"Spaghetti," Sakura said. "And I invited someone over tonight. You don't mind, right?"

"Daidouji again, huh?" Touya said, his voice getting closer.

"No, it's-" Sakura began.

"You!" Touya exclaimed, staring at Syaoran with wide eyes from the kitchen's entrance. His expression was one of confusion, suspicion, and contempt all at the same time. "I thought you left."

Syaoran resisted the urge to pull his arms across his chest. He had been interested to see what the brother's reaction to him would be, but he wasn't expecting something quite like this.

Sakura looked back and forth between the two, sensing the sudden hostility in the air. "Do you two... know each other?"

"Not really," Touya said.

"Not really," Syaoran said at the same instant.

They glared for a few tense moments before Touya seemed to let up and mentally back off.

"I thought for a second..." Touya said, glancing at the bandaid on Syaoran's finger. Then he shook his head briefly as if to clear it. "Sorry. I must've been mistaken."

A few more uncomfortable seconds passed before the mood finally lifted off the air. Well, more like it soaked into the air like a red stain into white carpet. The feeling was still there, only slightly diluted.

"I'm going to get some homework done before dinner," Touya said, turning toward the staircase. "Call me when it's ready."

"Sure," Sakura said, smiling as if she could wipe away the hostility in the air with cheerfulness.

Touya paused before climbing up the stairs. He turned to Syaoran. "Nice to meet you," he mumbled, almost as if he regretted his words before he said them.

"Nice to meet you too," Syaoran said in the same tone.

But by then Touya was halfway up the staircase.

Sakura turned around with an embarrassed smile on her face.

"Sorry," she said, her tone reassuring. "He's like that with just about everyone. Don't take it personally."

"I won't," Syaoran said, wiping up the mess on the counter and throwing the contaminated meat away.

The actual dinner, unlike Touya's introduction, was very pleasant. Fujitaka arrived right before dinner was served and more than made up for Touya's bad mood, greeting Syaoran warmly and making sure he stayed involved in the conversation. To his surprise, Syaoran wasn't asked too many hard questions beyond where he lived and who he lived with. Other than that, the inquiries from an eager father were mostly surface-level things that were easy for Syaoran to answer or, in a few cases, fabricate.

One question, however, took Syaoran by surprise.

"What are your plans for the future?" Fujitaka asked, smiling. "Have any ideas?"

Syaoran was speechless and a little shocked by the question. He only had one real plan for the future: to have no future. And he couldn't possibly tell Fujitaka that. For some strange reason he desperately wanted Sakura's father to like him.

"No, I'm not really sure," Syaoran said, unconsciously playing with his food in a nervous way.

"Well, not many people your age are," Fujitaka said reassuringly. "Myself included. It wasn't until half-way through my junior year of college that I decided..."

Fujitaka talked on, but the innocent and mundane question continued to weigh heavily in the back of Syaoran's mind.

He did the best he could to ignore it, though. He reasoned that it was natural to have these kinds of disparaging thoughts when the day of his complete oblivion loomed ever closer. He wasn't so much afraid as he was... sad.

But what did he possibly have to be sad about? Sakura would finally be *safe*. That's all that mattered.

Yes. That's really all that mattered.

Really.

The meal ended with a round of chocolate cake. Syaoran could hardly taste his piece, though.

It must be nerves, Syaoran thought as he shoved another flavorless bite into his mouth. *Stupid human body...*

"My turn for dishes," Touya said unceremoniously, standing. He began to pick up the empty plates and walked briskly into the kitchen. He seemed eager to leave Syaoran's vicinity.

Syaoran stood too, looking at the time for effect. "I better get back. Thank you for the meal," he said to Fujitaka.

"Of course, Reed-san," Fujitaka said, smiling warmly. "You're welcome any time."

Syaoran thought he heard a deep groan from the kitchen.

Sakura stood up quickly as Syaoran headed for the door. "I'll walk you out."

A second groan, even more frustrated, drifted from the kitchen.

Syaoran headed outside with Sakura trailing close behind. The sun had set about an hour before, turning the brisk winter chill into a freezing mist. The distinct feeling of snow was dispersed almost threateningly in the crisp air. The two stopped on the stairs that lead off the porch.

"I hope you had a good time," Sakura said, vapor pouring from her mouth with every word. She had her arms wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

"I did. Your dad's a nice guy," Syaoran said, not nearly as much vapor coming from him. "And the food was really good. You're a great cook."

Sakura flashed a flattered grin under the porch light. "Hey, you helped make it."

Syaoran couldn't help but smile. "But it wouldn't have been as good if you weren't there."

Sakura grinned wider. "Maybe you should come over more often."

"Yeah..." Syaoran said, looking at the window where the blinds were parted ever so slightly. "But I think some other people would probably rather I not."

Sakura followed his gaze to the window and the gap in the blinds quickly disappeared.

"Onii-chan!" Sakura yelled, her voice echoing down the quiet street. She turned back to Syaoran, a sour look still on her face. "Sorry about that. He always does that. He even listens to my phone calls!"

Syaoran laughed a little at Sakura's over-dramatization. She seemed to relax at the sound.

"I really better go," Syaoran said, walking down a couple steps. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight Reed-kun," Sakura said cheerfully, waving.

The name resounded unpleasantly in Syaoran, as if he'd just gotten a bad taste in his mouth. The syllables reminded him of the Reed who had practically abandoned him not once, but twice. Besides, Syaoran wasn't a Reed. He was Syaoran. Period.

Sakura deserved to know that.

"Hey..." Syaoran said, turning back around. He was a few feet below Sakura on the steps so he had to look up at her. "I've never really liked the name Reed... Just call me Syaoran from now on, okay?"

Sakura looked a little shocked at the sudden request, but quickly recovered with a shy grin growing on her face.

"Okay. I'll call you Syaoran," Sakura said. The name sent a wonderful chill down Syaoran's spine and into his stomach. He wished she'd say it a thousand times over. "... But only if you call me Sakura."

Syaoran froze and gulped. At the same time, he wondered why the hell he was feeling this way. It was just a name, after all.

"It's only fair that you should call me by my first name if I can call you by yours," Sakura said, smiling playfully. "It's a really easy name and I kind of like it. Sa-ku-ra."

There was a moment as Sakura looked on expectantly while Syaoran gathered the courage.

"S-sakura," Syaoran said hesitantly, hoping that he said it right. It felt like he was saying the words to some magic spell.

Sakura beamed. "There. That wasn't so hard, was it?"

The pleasant little ripple washed over him again. He smiled shyly and walked reluctantly down the porch steps.

"Goodnight Syaoran-kun," Sakura said in a sing-song tone.

"Goodnight..." he paused again, as if delaying a wonderful thing. "Sakura."

He walked backward down the steps as Sakura waved goodbye to him from the porch. Rubbing her shoulders against the cold, she finally went back inside.

Only then did Syaoran feel like he could turn back around.

He formed the word "sakura" under his breath several more times for no reason.

He just liked the way it felt.

"Suppi-chan, you're just in time! I've finished it, finally. It's done!"

"Ruby Moon, this is..."

"It's *perfect*, isn't it? A masterpiece, if I do say so myself, which I most certainly do!"

"This can't be what it appears to be."

"Oh yes it is. Come on, say it's great. You know you wanna."

"Ruby Moon... This will destroy the world. It will kill *everyone* ."

"Oh, don't exaggerate. We're talking about three-fourths of the population, tops."

"Th-three fourths!"

"Tops. I have faith in human ingenuity. They'll be able to stop it kills off too many to repopulate."

"No, Ruby Moon. This is massive overkill. I asked you to take care of a *single* human girl, not the entire planet!"

"You're exaggerating again, Suppi-chan. Besides, it's not overkill. You have *no idea* what I had to go through to take care of that one little human girl. Her will is like plated armor against my power as sticks and stones. Besides, Yue told me to go all out, so I'm going all out. I can't resist a challenge."

"Destroy that thing, Ruby Moon. There must be another way."

"No! I waited too long for this! Do you *know* how long it's been since I've had a chance like this? It's been nearly 700 years. 700 years ! I'm seeing this through."

"It will all be on your head. They won't tolerate it."

"Yes they will. I'm only doing my job, trying to set the balance straight..."

"Setting the balance! You're *destroying* it-"

"... and I left a loophole. There's *always* a loophole. Yue saw to that. So just calm down."

"And just what are the odds that the loophole will be found and executed in time?"

"Just enough so that there's the glimmer of a hope. That's all that the regulations demand. See? I'm totally playing by the rules."

"You're not playing *by* the rules, Ruby Moon. You're playing *with* the rules."

"Same difference."

Unbecoming

Chapter 16

Unbecoming

Syaoran became conscious to his body flickering between solid and soul like a dying candle in the wind. He was surprised to see his hands pass right through the blankets as he lifted them to get a better look. After a few moments of teetering awkwardly between physical and spiritual, his body finally flickered solid and stayed that way. Rosy sunlight slowly spilled into the room through the sliding glass doors.

Syaoran gripped the blankets and slid the material over his fingers. With a sort of grim satisfaction, he found he could barely feel what he knew should be fluffy-soft fabric. He felt it only as if he were wearing rubber gloves. The sensation was still there, but it was muffled and dull.

Syaoran slowly got out of bed and headed for the balcony, feeling like he could use fresh air. He felt a little groggy, but it was nothing like what he'd felt the morning before. There was no instinctive urge to yawn or rub his eyes. In fact, he didn't feel tired or even particularly awake. He was stuck in that strange place between physical and spiritual that he'd been in before the full moon.

With a heave, Syaoran opened the sliding glass doors and stepped onto the balcony. It hadn't snowed the night before like he thought it would, but a thin layer of frost coated every surface, turning the morning dew into glass. Absentmindedly, Syaoran gripped onto the railing and looked over the park bathed in morning sunshine. It was a few moments before he realized that, despite the heavy frost that coated the balcony and strung icicles from the roof, he didn't really feel cold standing there in his light striped pajamas. Something was tugging at him as if he *should* be cold, but his skin wasn't

responding. Only when the bitter wind picked up did he finally shiver a bit involuntarily, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle.

The shadow of a nearly-half moon could still be made out near the horizon, rapidly being eaten by the sunrise. The full moon was now officially over and its influence had finally loosened its grip over Syaoran's soul. That was why his senses were slowly going numb again. He had been expecting this to happen eventually.

It was actually kind of a relief. Now he wouldn't have to waste eight hours on sleep or resources on food. And he could sense his aura again, finally. He'd felt naked without it.

And yet, he had kind of liked being able to feel things. He'd miss that. Even putting up with the cold seemed like a small sacrifice to being able to feel Sakura's hand in his...

But now it was only a matter of time before he went away forever. A strong feeling tugged at his stomach with the thought. But, like all the new emotions he'd experienced lately, it was a difficult sensation to identify.

He felt empty. Hollow. Dead... It was funny how it didn't bother him in the way he thought it would. Sure, the thought of total oblivion made him a bit nervous, but it was something else that was making him sad. It was something that made his hand tingle, even though he couldn't really physically feel anything anymore.

This sadness was not something he had expected. Nervousness, anxiousness, even relief, sure, but not sadness.

When he first heard about Sakura's fate from the plushie, his first thought was that, no matter what the cost, Sakura couldn't end up as a ghost like he was. She didn't deserve that kind of fate. At the time, he had convinced himself that he just didn't want to have to share his house with another ghost, but that excuse didn't hold up when he sacrificed everything to save Sakura's life. After all, wasn't it better to share something than to have nothing to share at all?

But now, looking back, he realized that he did it because he wanted to protect Sakura. Since he was the only earthbound soul that knew of Sakura's untimely fate, he felt obligated to do everything he could to change it.

And if he had to give up what time he had left on this planet to give Sakura her own time back, he considered it a fair trade.

He didn't regret his sacrifice. Really, he didn't.

"Really..." Syaoran said aloud, gripping the ice-laced railing hard until he finally felt *something* . "I don't."

His secret promise to Sakura was all that mattered...

No matter what happened to him.

Eriol had taken his usual post with Tomoyo by the gates to the school, waiting for Sakura and Syaoran to appear over the hill. The weather was warm enough to allow wearing a light jacket instead of a heavy coat. The sun was shining down from the clear blue sky, making the ice everywhere gleam like polished marble.

It seemed like a beautiful day, but Eriol could sense the echo of something sinister just beyond the bright sky. It was as if the air was straining with the tension of a thousand rabid dogs about to snap their bonds.

It was the unmistakable feeling of Chaos on the move.

Eriol glanced at Tomoyo. They stood silently beside each other, perfectly content to not say a word. That was one of the best things about Tomoyo: Eriol never felt like he had to make frivolous conversation with her. In fact, their relationship seemed to deepen the longer they stood together in silence. She was unlike anyone he had ever met.

He wondered, briefly, if Tomoyo could sense the same imbalance that he could. Tomoyo was extremely witty, sharp, and observant, but it was doubtful that she was open to this kind of disturbance. Chaos was an omnipresent force, so most people easily tuned the presence out. Eriol was almost certain that even Syaoran, who had the most intimate contact with the forces of Order and Chaos, wasn't quite expecting the disaster that was about to unfold.

And, even then, no one on this plane could possibly fathom the intricate design Chaos was weaving. Eriol may have been able to sense the impending disaster, but he was at a loss to predict its form. He could only hope that Order had done enough to prevent it. This was something that was going to effect the entire world if it couldn't be stopped.

Finally, at five minutes to the bell, Sakura came racing over the hill. Eriol shuddered just a bit to see the pressure of fate bulging in on her like a dam about to break. Syaoran was walking swiftly behind her, looking vigilant and rather... pale.

The second Eriol laid eyes on him, he knew it had begun: Syaoran's final descent toward the total oblivion his mind, soul, and spirit. He had perhaps a little more than a week left. But this wasn't anything unexpected. It was all part of Order's intricate plan to counteract and balance out the designs of Chaos.

Order's plans must go through if there's any hope of keeping Sakura alive, Eriol thought darkly.

Sakura was the catalyst. She was the one soul in the entire world that Order and Chaos had singled out to be their battleground. But why her? Eriol really couldn't put his finger on it.

There was no question that Sakura was special. The energy surrounding her was like an instant pick-me-up and there wasn't a soul on earth who considered her an enemy. She made everyone around her feel as if they could suddenly pluck the moon from the

sky. Of course she was *special*, but Eriol couldn't understand why she was *important* .

Eriol assumed that Syaoran had something to do with Sakura's sudden popularity with fate. When these two souls met, it seemed like they created the perfect conditions for a war between Order and Chaos.

A war that had been a long time coming.

The two forces are *always* struggling for dominance. There is a balance to life, but neither Chaos or Order really want to strike that balance. Each one tries to project the image that they're working to maintain the balance, but both of them wholeheartedly believe that life on this plane would be better if their respective forces were totally in charge. Ironically, the constant battle between Order and Chaos is what actually creates the balance.

But, every few hundred years, the tension between the two forces reaches an intolerable point and it must be relieved somehow. And when two souls such as Syaoran and Sakura's seem to be pulling uncomfortably on the web of fate, it creates a perfect battleground for Order and Chaos. One of the forces will invariably emerge victorious from this battle and then the world will enter a new age.

When Chaos wins, it's not really a bad thing. Although the results cause horrible strife for everyone living in the world, it's only the balance attempting to right itself. It's no more malicious than someone shaking out a towel and dislodging all the extra debris attracted to it. The debris may not be happy to be falling to the ground, but the towel is fresher for it.

However, if there is a way to gently remove the debris without a violent uproar, that's even better. And that's why Eriol could only hope that Order won out.

Because everyone would rather not fall to the ground.

"Another perfect paper, Sakura-san," Mizuki-sensei said, marking down the score in her grade book with a flourish.

"Yay!" Sakura yelled, looking back at Syaoran and grinning madly. "I did it!"

Syaoran's rare, slow smile appeared gradually on his face.

"Good job," he said.

"This is your fifth perfect paper this week," Mizuki-sensei commented.

"I know," Sakura said, beaming. "I finally feel like I've got the hang of this stuff now."

"Which brings me to only one conclusion," Mizuki-sensei said, folding her hands under her chin. She smiled serenely. "You don't need extra lessons like this anymore, Sakura-san. I think you can easily do the assigned schoolwork on your own, don't you agree?"

Syaoran picked up his ears. Chaos was just letting Sakura go?

Sakura nodded slowly. "I guess so..." she paused. "But I'll miss you Mizuki-sensei."

The woman chuckled, a sound that to Syaoran was like the tinkling of a delicate china dish shattering into a million pieces.

"Well, we all must part eventually," she said.

It was uttered so casually, but her glance slipped to Syaoran for an instant. The supremely sad gaze sent a very real shiver down Syaoran's numb spine. He glared back.

"And besides," Mizuki-sensei said, cheerfulness flooding back into her features so fast it was like it had never left. "It's not as if I'm abandoning your regular math classes. And I'm always available if you need me for a refresher course."

Sakura grinned, looking rather relieved. "You're right. I'm just being silly."

Mizuki-sensei smiled. "So tomorrow shall be our last lesson together." She looked around Sakura to Syaoran. "For you as well Reed-san. Unless you have objections?"

Syaoran shook his head. He would go wherever Sakura went and not a step further.

"Alright," Mizuki-sensei said. "And that's all for today. I'll see you two tomorrow."

Sakura went back to gather her things, but Syaoran already had everything in his hands.

"Ready?" Syaoran asked, Sakura's pink backpack over his shoulder.

Sakura smiled, forcing back a laugh. "Yeah. But let me carry something. It's my stuff after all."

Syaoran shook his head frantically. He shrugged Sakura off as she reached for her books. "I got it."

"Alright," Sakura said, giving up and heading for the door. "If you're sure."

As they were walking out, Mizuki-sensei headed off Syaoran. Sakura kept walking, unaware that Syaoran wasn't following anymore.

Syaoran glared at the teacher as Sakura rounded the corner and out of sight. Panic welled up inside him. He prepared to barrel through woman by force, but she held up her hands.

"I just wanted to give you some advice," she said. Her expression had lost all hint of happiness. All that was left was anxiety and defeat.

"Get out of my way," Syaoran said through gritted teeth. Every moment Sakura was alone was the moment she could lose her life.

"What happens when you piece together all the little pieces of a puzzle?" the woman asked, the words tumbling out of her mouth as if she had a limited amount of time to say them.

She didn't seem to want an answer, and Syaoran wasn't about to supply one. He just stood there, glaring. He hoped he looked intimidating enough even while carrying a pink backpack and a load of textbooks.

"Remember that a piece doesn't equal a puzzle," Mizuki-sensei said. "If you can comprehend that before time is up, everything will definitely be alright."

Then, suddenly, she moved aside as if granting Syaoran passage. Syaoran slunk past her, glaring as he went.

To his utter relief, he found Sakura waiting for him by the stairs.

"A last-minute chat?" she asked.

"Something like that," Syaoran said darkly.

They headed down the stairs side-by-side. Their footsteps echoed noisily in the stairwell. As they got near the bottom, Syaoran ran ahead to open the door. He needed to make sure there were no unpleasant surprises waiting on the other side.

Sakura passed through the door. She smiled. "Thanks."

Syaoran's shadow smile appeared on his face in return.

They headed for the school gates. A figure was leaning against one of the columns. Syaoran could sense an air of hostility wafting from it, but it was directed at him, not Sakura. Nevertheless, he moved in front of Sakura as if to shield her.

"Onii-chan!" Sakura yelled suddenly, running up to the figure.

The brother waved casually. "Yo."

"You got out early today?" Sakura asked. Syaoran slunk up behind her.

Touya nodded. "I was passing by so I thought I'd walk you home."

Without a word, Touya lifted the books out of Syaoran's hands as if he were some kind of walking table. Syaoran glared, but the gesture had no effect on someone who wouldn't even look at him.

Sakura looked back and forth between the two with anxiety laced in her cheerful expression. "Onii-chan..."

"Get your backpack and let's go," Touya said, putting the books in the basket attached to his bike. "Dad'll be home early tonight too. I need to get dinner started." He started walking his bike down the sidewalk, his back to them.

Syaoran handed over Sakura's backpack.

"Sorry," Sakura said quietly. "I don't know what his problem is."

Syaoran shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me. I'll see you tomorrow, right?"

"Yep!" she said. She backed away, waving.

Syaoran was waving back before he realized it.

Touya rode away, forcing Sakura to run beside him.

"Why are you such a jerk?" Sakura asked in a playful tone as their voices began to fade away.

Syaoran could see Touya shrug. "Some people just want to be left alone..."

" *Leave me alone.* "

It was the first thing Syaoran had ever said to a Living.

But that's not true, he thought, unconsciously fingering the green scarf around his neck.

Not anymore.

It was sunset by the time Syaoran reached the park. Even as the sun headed toward the horizon, he could feel the familiar tugging on his spirit that signaled his transition into the spiritual plane.

It was too soon. Wasn't it just yesterday that he was wishing he could stay pseudo-human forever? And now, already, he was starting to slip from the world. All this wasn't unexpected, it just seemed so... sudden.

He was still holding onto the hope that he would stay physical through the sunset until the very last few seconds before the fading light stole his wish away. With a breathless sigh, Syaoran was dumped back onto the spiritual plane like the words to a forgotten song.

"Welcome back!" a voice like an atom bomb exclaimed from behind him. "I was worried that we wouldn't get another chance to chat."

Syaoran snuffed the urge to groan. Dealing with Chaos' mind games was the last thing he wanted to do right then.

But she'd be ecstatic if she knew that. He didn't want to seem weak, so he had to play along.

"What do you mean?" Syaoran said, his voice itself somehow emitting a fierce glare. "I still have six days at least. That's six more sunsets and six more 'chances to chat.'"

"True, but not really," Ruby Moon said, leaning casually against a tree. "After tonight, everyone moves into position and all the traps are sprung."

Her expression changed suddenly from smugly casual to devilishly elated. Her scarlet eyes burned with the thrill of the hunt. She'd never looked more in her element.

"After tonight, kiddo," she said, her aura throbbing like an excited heartbeat. "The war finally begins. I'll be a very busy entity."

"I didn't know that things between us had escalated to an all-out war," Syaoran said, determined to stay casual despite the unpleasant vibes Chaos was emitting.

But Ruby Moon suddenly threw her head back and began shrieking with laughter. It wasn't an insane kind of laugh, it was just as if Syaoran had said something extremely amusing.

Syaoran drew his aura tight around him in indignation. "What's so funny?"

It was a few moments before she could answer. "No... I'm sorry. You're just so *cute* that I couldn't help it." She composed herself quickly, but her eyes still twinkled with amusement. "There's no war between *us*, kiddo. I meant the war between Yue and I. The war between Order and Chaos."

Syaoran felt a pang at the mention of Yue's name, but ignored it the best he could.

"I'm sorry I laughed like that. It was rude of me," Ruby Moon said. "It just struck me as extremely amusing to think there's a war between human beings and Chaos."

She pushed off the tree she was leaning on and took a few sauntering steps forward, her arms crossed loosely over her chest. "There's no more a war between humans and Chaos than there is

between you and an opponent's chess pieces. To me and Yue, you people are nothing more than plastic game pieces. And now all the pieces have moved into position and a checkmate is only a matter of time." She smiled savagely. "Isn't it funny how you can make a metaphor out of just about anything? A chess game though... that's almost hitting the nail on the head. Except Yue and I each play with the same set of pieces."

Syaoran felt a sweep of anger fall over him and darken his aura. "So this is all just a game to you? Sakura's life is like some kind of sick prize to be given to the winner?"

Ruby Moon stifled another fit of laughter. "Yes, it's all a game, but it's one we take pretty seriously. However, you're wrong in thinking that the girl's insignificant life is the prize. The 'prize' is actually something *much* bigger. It's so big that it's hard to describe to you, even in a metaphor. The girl and her life are simply another part of the game, albeit an important one. She's the one we'll call checkmate over."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Syaoran grumbled. "You seem to be giving out way more information than I need to know, especially to an insignificant plastic game piece."

Ruby Moon sighed. "Unfortunately, there are so many *rules* to this game. You're quite the anomaly, kiddo. We had to make up a whole new set of regulations just to deal with you. And besides..." she glided up to Syaoran and put her face very close to his. He recoiled, but she only pressed closer. "I kind of like ya. You've really grown on me, you know. It's a shame that next time we have a talk, I can't be so nice- no matter what the outcome. In fact, next time we meet, win or lose..."

She began to fade and the waning sunlight shone through her, making her seem more like a ghost than he was.

"I'll shatter your soul."

Chaos disappeared from view, but Syaoran's transition back to the physical plane was like trying to crawl out of a vat of molasses. It was several intense minutes before the spirit world finally released him. By then it was well past sunset and the half-new moon was hanging ominously in the sky like a broken symbol of hope.

Syaoran sat heavily on the bench and brought his hands close to his face. For some reason, he expected to see right through them. With a deep sigh of relief, he found them completely solid. He wiggled his fingers just to be sure.

Chaos' threats meant little to him. In fact, the part of their conversation that bothered him the most wasn't even supposed to be so troublesome.

Yue. Had he really been toying with Syaoran all this time? Was he really Chaos' counterpart and just another enemy...?

Syaoran shook his head. He didn't need to be thinking about that sort of stuff. In a little more than six days his relationship with Yue wouldn't matter one bit, so why give it another thought?

In six days, nothing about Syaoran would matter at all.

"It's been a long time," Wei said to the iridescent figure floating in his kitchen. It had human form, but it was insubstantial and burning with a white light that drowned out the figure's features. All Wei could make out with his limited perception was long, floor-length hair and huge, flared angel wings.

But it was enough to recognize the figure as the same force who stole his client's son's life away 50 years ago.

"It takes a lot to summon me away from my work human," the figure said. The voice was vaguely male with a definite air of indifference. "But you have made mention of something I can't ignore."

"So my bargain is enough?" Wei said, his tone deadly serious. "Take what's left of my life and give it to him. I know it isn't much but-"

"What you are suggesting is impossible," the figure said, its energy flaring as if frustrated. "Your intended sacrifice is admirable and I can see you are truly prepared to make good on your word. However, human lives are not something that can be bargained with, replaced, or even exchanged- at least not in the way you're intending it. Your life belongs to you alone and no one else can ever claim it."

"So you brought him back only to destroy him again," Wei said, leaning heavily on the kitchen counter. He felt as if he'd aged 100 years during Order's speech.

The figure's energy suddenly dwindled. "I'm not proud of what I've had to do. Syaoran's death was a preventative measure. Now he has come back to take on a burden that I hoped he would never have to bear. But now, unfortunately, the sacrifice is necessary."

"That's exactly what you told me 50 years ago," Wei said. "It never changes, does it? Each sacrifice just brings on more sacrifices. Where does it end?"

"It ends only when you people realize that all these sacrifices..." the figure said, practically spitting the words. "Are just part of a grand illusion."

There was a knock at the door at the same time the figure disappeared. Whether the conversation was over or the knock had simply ruined Wei's concentration was hard to determine.

But regardless, Wei had nothing more to say.

He moved to the door and opened it, wiping away all the gloom from his face. He knew a sad disposition was the last thing the person on the other side of the door needed to see.

"Syaoran," Wei said kindly even before he had opened the door entirely. "You really don't need to keep knocking on the door. Feel free to come and go as you please."

The boy in front of him was only a shadow of the one Wei had come across two nights ago. His skin was several shades paler and his face was mostly expressionless. The only thing that gave his appearance any color at all was the messily crocheted emerald green scarf wrapped snugly around his neck.

"I just came to say thanks for everything," Syaoran said, looking mostly at the floor. "I don't need a place to stay anymore, so..."

"Nonsense Syaoran," Wei said, opening the door wide and stepping aside. "There's not a soul in the world that doesn't need a place to call home."

Syaoran shook his head. "Really. I don't want to bother you any longer."

"Bother me?" Wei said, grinning. "Whatever gave you the impression that you were a bother? Please come in."

Without waiting for a response, Wei swept Syaoran inside.

This is the least I can do for you, Wei thought to himself, determined not to let any of the hopelessness he felt leak into his expression.

"Hey," Sakura said, looking up. Syaoran was sitting in one of the big oak trees that overlooked the school's courtyard.

He hid it well, but Sakura could tell something was really bothering Syaoran. The very fact that he was up in a tree proved it. He never sat in a tree unless he had something really important to think about. She had known him just long enough to know that.

"Hey," Syaoran said back. He was always watching her. Sakura couldn't believe it used to bother her. Now it would be weird if she *didn't* feel Syaoran watchful gaze on her.

"Let's do something really fun this weekend!" Sakura said, bouncing a little to emphasize the fun part. "There's a carnival coming to town on Saturday. We should go!"

A hint of a smile crossed Syaoran's face. It was as if he wanted to smile, but was having trouble remembering how.

"Okay," he said. "As long as it'll be fun."

Sakura grinned. "Of course it'll be fun. We'll be there together."

Syaoran's shadow smile got a little brighter.

"Oh, and I'll invite Tomoyo-chan and Eriol-kun too!" Sakura said. "We can all go!"

A brisk wind picked up then, carrying Syaoran's groan of protest at the mention of Eriol far away.

The rest of the day passed normally. Mizuki-sensei threw a little informal party for Sakura and Syaoran's last tutoring session. She wrote silly, sappy messages on the board and strung a few streamers from the ceiling. It seemed more like a farewell party than anything else. The oppressive feeling of finality wafted off the woman, especially as she brought some store-bought pastries into the room. Sakura had several since she was so late that morning that she had to leave without breakfast.

Mizuki-sensei offered Syaoran a pastry, but he had to refuse, citing that he wasn't hungry. He could feel Sakura's eyes on him as he did.

The next day came way too fast. Syaoran left Wei's apartment several hours before he was supposed to meet up with Sakura,

mostly because he was restless, but also because he didn't want Wei to offer him breakfast only so he could refuse. He wandered the town aimlessly, trying to busy his thoughts with the effort it took to walk.

Sakura had told Syaoran to meet her in the park by the penguin slide, but he ended up at her house anyway. He was a little early, but Sakura didn't come bounding out the door until five minutes before they were supposed to meet up in the park. Syaoran smiled to himself. She would never change, would she?

The weather must have been unusually warm because Sakura was only wearing a light sweater. At least Syaoran didn't feel so under-dressed anymore in only his school uniform and a light scarf.

"Morning Syaoran-kun!" Sakura exclaimed cheerfully, the mention of his name resonating pleasantly deep inside him. She seemed less than surprised to find him waiting for her. "Ready?"

"Yeah," Syaoran said. "Daidouji will be at the park, right?"

"Yep," Sakura confirmed. "Eriol-kun said he'd meet us there too."

Syaoran suppressed an intense wave of disgust. If Eriol's presence made Sakura happy, that's all that mattered, just as long as Eriol didn't try anything. Syaoran couldn't bring himself to trust him, no matter how much Sakura liked him. In fact, just thinking about Sakura liking Eriol sent hot waves of hatred down his aura for no apparent reason.

The walk to the park was brief (because Sakura insisted on running to make up for lost time) and uneventful, but Syaoran's senses were still on high alert. Chaos' threat from the day before was still fresh in his mind and he was determined to stay more vigilant than usual- if that was even possible.

The penguin slide and the surrounding play area slowly came into view. Since it was a Saturday morning and the weather was

wonderful, there were little kids crawling all over the park, but two figures sitting on the bench near the slide stood out from the crowd.

"Sorry I'm late!" Sakura said, stopping short in front of Tomoyo and Eriol. She put her hands on her knees to try and catch her breath. Syaoran came trailing up behind her, looking more like a bodyguard than a kid spending a day out with friends.

"It's alright Sakura-chan," Tomoyo said, her video camera at the ready. "We came a bit late ourselves to compensate."

Sakura laughed. "You know me too well, Tomoyo-chan." she turned to Eriol who was standing beside Tomoyo with his hands behind his back. "Hello Eriol-kun. I'm so glad you could come with us."

Behind her, Syaoran rolled his eyes. Tomoyo chuckled discreetly.

"And I'm glad you invited me, Sakura-san," Eriol said, bowing gentlemanly.

"Ready to go?" Syaoran said, pushing his way between Sakura and Eriol.

"Yes!" Sakura exclaimed, beaming madly. "Let's go."

It was a short walk to the carnival, just beyond the park and a bit outside town. It wasn't very big or modern, but it had a ferris wheel, bumper cars, and a ton of game booths that kept the four of them very busy. Syaoran didn't have any money, but somehow his tickets always got paid for. He was almost sure that Eriol was behind it all, but he never actually saw Eriol pay for anything. Syaoran would've just told Eriol to knock it off, but Sakura seemed so happy when everyone played together.

"Reed-kun," Tomoyo said quietly as Sakura and Eriol played the last round of a water-gun game (Tomoyo and Syaoran had already lost).

"What were you planning to do for Christmas in a few weeks? I was thinking we could all get together and..."

But as soon as she let the words slip, she knew she had said something careless. Syaoran's expression had been cheerful all day (well, cheerful for Syaoran anyway), but it suddenly collapsed and darkness seemed to sweep over him like thunderclouds swallowing a sunny sky.

"I..." he said, tearing his eyes from Sakura to glare at the ground. "I won't be around for Christmas. I'll be gone by then."

"You're leaving?" Tomoyo asked.

Syaoran nodded slowly, but firmly.

"When?" she said.

"I'm not exactly sure," Syaoran said. He gripped the tails of the scarf around his neck. "But really soon."

"For how long?"

He paused for just a moment as if thinking about it for the first time.

"Forever."

Syaoran turned his gaze back to Sakura. She was still in the lead, but Eriol was gaining on her fast.

"Please don't tell her, Daidouji," Syaoran said quietly, his gaze locked on Sakura again. "It'll just make her sad."

Tomoyo wrapped her arms tightly around herself, feeling a little shocked at the sudden revelation. She didn't say anything for a moment, but simply mulled the short conversation over and over in her mind.

Syaoran turned to her, seemingly wary of her silence.

"Swear you won't tell her," he said. It was like he was trying to be intimidating, but the tone in his voice just came off as pleading.

Tomoyo was quiet for a few more minutes before she finally assimilated the information and came to terms with what it really meant.

"Did you ever stop to think that perhaps your sudden disappearance might upset her more than the shock of letting her know right now?" Tomoyo said rationally. "Then she could at least prepare herself and not leave a regret behind. That is what will make her sad, Reed-kun. I'm sure there's so many things she wants to say-"

"It's not like I won't say goodbye," Syaoran said, his quiet voice filling with indignation. "Just... let me have these last few days. Then I'll tell her."

Tomoyo eyed Syaoran with her best disciplinarian glare. But she quickly folded under his pleading expression.

"Alright..." she said as if dropping her side of a tug-of-war. "I promise I won't say anything to her- but only as long as you eventually do."

"I plan on it," Syaoran said seriously. "Even if it's the last thing I ever do, I'll at least tell her..."

The supreme sadness on his face was heartbreaking. Tomoyo wished she'd never brought up the subject, unintentional though it was.

"I won!" Sakura yelled suddenly, breaking the heavy silence. She turned around to where Tomoyo and Syaoran were standing a few feet away. "What should we do next?"

Syaoran's expression instantly lightened. He shrugged. "Whatever's fun, right?"

"Right!" Sakura exclaimed.

"I think I saw some fun over this way," Eriol said, pointing in a random direction.

"Me too!" Sakura said, bounding ahead. "Come on you guys! You're too slow!"

"You just have too much energy," Syaoran said, a smile creeping over his face. He shoved his hands into his pockets and started walking toward Sakura. But then he paused and turned back around to face Tomoyo.

"Thanks, Daidouji," he said it so quickly that he left Tomoyo wondering if he'd said anything at all. And then he was next to Sakura, an air of protectiveness all over him again.

Tomoyo watched him and Sakura together, feeling uneasy. She knew she was betraying Sakura's trust by keeping such a hefty secret from her. There wasn't a doubt in Tomoyo's mind that Sakura would definitely want to know what Syaoran had just told her.

And yet, she trusted Syaoran. Even though she hadn't even known him for an entire month yet, he came off as someone who kept his promises.

And, even more importantly, Syaoran would do whatever it took to keep from hurting Sakura. That was probably the trait that Tomoyo found most meaningful.

Besides, maybe in the end Syaoran wouldn't have to go anywhere. It was obvious that he didn't want to leave.

And, Tomoyo thought firmly, if he really didn't want to leave...

He would find a way to stay.

"Wow!" Sakura gasped as the small group cleared the hill. "Ice skating! Let's go, we have to go!"

There was indeed a little frozen lake at the bottom of the valley that the carnival had set up for ice skating. There was a tent beside the lake where attendants were handing out skates and a small heater that was running on a generator for people to warm up to after being out on the ice.

"Do you know how to ice skate, Sakura-san?" Eriol asked as their group made their way down into the valley.

Sakura grinned sheepishly and put a hand behind her head. "Well, it's been a few years. But I bet I can pick it up again fast enough."

"Can you ice skate, Eriol-kun?" Tomoyo asked, her camcorder out again.

"Yes," Eriol said, smiling humbly. "It gets very cold in England, so most children grow up around frozen lakes."

"Syaoran-kun, what about you?" Sakura said, turning around and walking backward, her hands behind her back.

Syaoran just shook his head, having nothing to contribute to the conversation.

Sakura grinned and hooked his arm in hers. "Then we'll just have to teach you."

Ice skating turned out to be rather difficult for Syaoran. He tended to lose his balance and fall a lot because he couldn't feel the force of gravity pulling on his body. The only good thing about falling was that he couldn't feel pain or cold anymore, so falling on the ice was more annoying than anything else. To Sakura and Tomoyo, he seemed very resilient and determined to learn to skate, but the truth was that he was just numb and had nothing better to do.

It took him the better part of an hour, but eventually he found his center of gravity and was only falling every few minutes, rather than every time he put his foot down. Sakura began to skate further and

further away from him, which only motivated him to improve his own skill faster. He got nervous every time she disappeared into the crowd, even if it was only for a few seconds. He became determined to keep up with her.

It was a while before Syaoran realized that he was actually having a good time. The sensation of movement was thrilling and he found himself trying to pick up as much speed as he could without leaving Sakura behind.

"It's fun once you get the hang of it, isn't it?" Sakura said, skating a cool little loop around him.

"Yeah," Syaoran said, flashing a shy smile. "It really is."

Sakura finished circling Syaoran and skated ahead a bit. Syaoran followed.

Suddenly, he felt a yank on his aura. At first he thought he was falling again, but the familiar release of his soul made him think otherwise. He found himself abruptly back on the spiritual plane as the sun melted into the horizon. How did the day pass so quickly? He had completely lost track of time.

"Syaoran-kun?" Sakura said, skidding to a halt just a few feet away from where Syaoran was standing, invisible. She began to scan the crowd. "That's weird. He was just right here..."

Syaoran sighed through his aura, trying to think of excuses to tell her once the sun finally set. He'd also have to be careful to stay out of her line of sight when he suddenly reappeared...

He heard the noise only seconds before Sakura did: a sound like two sheets of glass being slowly crushed into each other, or an ice cube suddenly meeting lukewarm water- only on a much bigger scale.

"What...?" Sakura said, locating the sound as coming from under her feet.

A wave of dread washed over Syaoran at the same time that Sakura went pale.

Tiny cracks had appeared in the ice beneath Sakura. Even as she stood there motionless, the cracks got bigger, erupting like tiny, permanent lightning streaks on the ice. Each new crack made a horrible snapping noise as if the entire lake was going the collapse in on itself in a matter of seconds.

"Everyone! The ice is cracking!" Syaoran jumped when Sakura suddenly started yelling. "Get off the lake now! Hurry!"

There was a sudden eerie quiet, then a surge of panic as everyone made their way to the outer banks of the lake. Sakura tried moving herself, but the ice snapped threateningly with each mere twitch. And, as far as Sakura could see, the ice was only cracking under her. If she tried to make a run for it, she could end up endangering the people who would otherwise make it to safety.

The lake emptied in a matter of minutes. Only Sakura was left, standing motionless near the center of the lake as water began to welt up menacingly between the cracks.

"Sakura-chan!" Tomoyo's voice sounding strange when it was so panicked and upset. She was making her way through the crowd with Eriol following close behind.

Syaoran could only stand by helplessly as more cracks appeared in the ice like they were painted there by an invisible brush. Sakura was looking around alertly, trying to think of a way to get off the lake, but every move just made the ice break faster.

"Rescue is on their way!" Syaoran heard an attendant call from the banks. "They said the best thing is just to stay still! If you move, the ice will collapse! Hang in there!"

Sakura nodded frantically. It was obvious that she was frightened, but she was trying her best to stay calm. A few brave people tried to

come over to her, but they couldn't get very close because the cracks were spreading all the time like ivy over a picket fence.

Syaoran paced, frustrated and panicked, in front of Sakura, glancing back at the sunset every few seconds.

"Come on sun," he said to it. "Go *down* !"

It didn't matter that the stink of Chaos was everywhere. It didn't matter that Syaoran had been completely blindsided by her once again. It didn't matter that a dark, panther-like figure was sitting on its haunches in the crowd on the bank, ignored by everyone.

All that mattered was that Sakura was in mortal danger...

And he was powerless to help her.

A few quiet, tense minutes passed as Sakura stood motionless and Syaoran floated next to her, trying to think of ways to help her once he became solid again. He decided he was going to use the push strategy again. If he pushed her hard enough, he could send her gliding past the cracks and onto solid ice. Then he'd take her place and if the ice gave way under him, it was no big deal...

But then, suddenly, the ice gave a final threatening groan and snapped, revealing the freezing liquid water under it. Sakura screamed, then she was swallowed by the lake and disappeared beneath the surface.

"Sakura!" Syaoran yelled, his desperation reaching its peak.

Some people in the crowd on the bank began to rush forward, but the ice cracked and gave way all around them. Getting to Sakura now would be nearly impossible.

Just when Syaoran was about to get desperate, he suddenly realized he was in the water too. He looked frantically at the sun, seeing that it had finally totally set.

Even though he couldn't feel the temperature, he could sense the debilitating cold just beyond the numbness of his skin. If Syaoran had been human, the cold would've struck him breathless.

Just then, Sakura popped up beside him, her hair plastered to her face and her skin a sickly shade of pale blue. She'd been in the water for no more than ten seconds, but already she was feeling the cold's effect.

"Sy-sy-aoran," she gasped, relief flooding her shivering voice.

"Here, get on my shoulders," Syaoran said, grabbing Sakura's weak arms and pulling her over to him. He dived under the water and came up beneath her, hoisting her onto his shoulders like he would a hyper five-year-old. This way, only Sakura's legs were still in the water as he began to ferry her toward solid ice.

"Get those towels!" people were yelling. "Find anything you can to cover them."

Once Syaoran hit solid ice, he lifted Sakura onto it, then hoisted himself up. Then he was able to carry Sakura, cradle-style, safely to shore.

As soon as he and Sakura came onto the bank, they were instantly covered with towels, jackets, and sweaters from the people in the crowd.

"Let's get you two over by the heaters," someone told them.

"Are you okay?" Syaoran said, instantly turning to Sakura even as the crowd surged them forward.

"Just cold," Sakura said, shivering from head to toe. "What about you?"

Syaoran shook his head, dislodging tiny droplets of water from his hair as he did.

"Never mind me."

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Days Away from Eternity

Chapter 17

Days Away from Eternity

"Where did that kid come from?"

"Yeah, I thought only that girl was out on the lake."

"He must've swam out there to get her after she fell in."

"But I didn't see anyone go out there, did you...?"

Syaoran did his best to tune out the whispers of the crowd and hoped that Sakura wasn't listening. But the paramedics were swarming all over her like bees around a disturbed hive and they were just as noisy. Still, with Sakura obscured from view, the crowd only had Syaoran to look at. He wished everyone would just stop staring at him like he was some kind of alien specimen.

"Kid, are you *sure* you don't want to be looked over?" one of the paramedics asked him for the billionth time. "Just let me take your blood pressure-"

"No," Syaoran said firmly. He flung his arms wide and waved them around, showing that he was in perfect health. "There's nothing wrong with me, see? Just make sure Sakura's okay."

"Fine," the paramedic said irritably. "But we need to get some information from you before you leave. Don't go anywhere without letting us know."

"I'll try," Syaoran replied grimly.

Tomoyo and Eriol burst through the crowd just then. Tomoyo was white as a sheet, her lavender eyes carrying a sort of after-panic

desperation. Eriol just looked concerned, as if he hadn't been surprised at this turn of events at all, but still cared about the result.

"They just let us through," Tomoyo said. Her voice was steady and calm, despite the fact that she was shaking all over. "Where's Sakura-chan?"

Syaoran pointed to the dozen or so paramedics who each had a different medical device in their hands and applying them in turn to the unfortunate person who sat in the middle of the group.

Tomoyo made her way over to them, hoping to get a glance at Sakura. She wasn't tall enough to see over the group, so she held her camcorder up above her head and used it somewhat like a periscope. As soon as the camera popped up, a muffled but cheerful voice exclaimed "Tomoyo-chan!" from within the center.

Eriol stood off a little bit from all the commotion like an oasis of tranquility. He looked relieved, but his warm smile was as smug as ever. It had never been more obvious to Syaoran that Eriol knew way more than he let on.

Syaoran knew he probably wouldn't get a chance to talk to Eriol alone like this ever again. But still, the thought of asking Eriol to share his knowledge was irritating and embarrassing.

However, Syaoran desperately needed the information. After all, it was for Sakura.

"Hiiragizawa," he said quietly, almost hoping Eriol wouldn't hear him.

"Yes, Reed-kun?" Eriol said, feigning surprise.

"Is it over?" Syaoran asked, looking at the sky next to Eriol's head.

Eriol slowly shook his head, his smile melting away into stern seriousness. His aura flushed with an air of doom.

"It's only just begun," he said. He turned to Syaoran and looked deep into Syaoran's eyes, his own eyes like ice. "And it won't end until one of you leaves this place. That is the only thing that will make everything all right."

Syaoran nodded. He'd never felt more numb. "That's what I thought."

"I'm sorry I can't help more," Eriol said, his voice carrying a hint of genuine sadness. "But I'm just an observer. I have no more of an idea as to what Chaos is planning than you do."

"I'm sure you have more of an idea than I do," Syaoran said bitterly.

"True," Eriol replied, his warm smile coming back to the surface. "But it's all theory and nothing that will really help you. Besides, you seem to be doing just fine on your own."

Syaoran retreated into stony silence. Eriol quickly took the hint and moved away, his face twisted with concern once again and any hint of smugness long gone.

A paramedic broke away from the crowd and trotted back over to Syaoran. "Your friend seems fine."

Syaoran sagged with relief, even though his body was incapable of holding tension. He looked over to where Sakura was visible again, wrapped in an insulated blanket and her matted hair getting blown all over the place by the heaters she was up against. She gave Syaoran a sheepish smile from her spot which forced him to smile in return.

"But we can't release either of you until we speak with an adult," the paramedic added. "Especially if you're refusing treatment. We tried contacting Kinomoto-san's family, but no one was-"

"Excuse me, I need to get through. I'm her brother," a voice said gruffly from within the crowd. Everyone parted, revealing a surprisingly calm Touya. He hurried over to Sakura, casting a look at Syaoran that could cut diamonds as he passed.

"Onii-chan..." Sakura said as Touya approached. "Why are you here? I thought you were working."

"Are you alright?" Touya said, kneeling down to Sakura's level and gripping her shoulders. "What happened?"

A shy, embarrassed smile crossed her face. "I fell in the lake."

"You what! How?" Touya exclaimed.

"Are you a relative, sir?" the paramedic who'd been harassing Syaoran came up behind Touya. He must've the one in charge.

Touya got up and turned around, his demeanor changing instantly from frightened brother to authoritative guardian. "Yes. I'm her brother."

"Your sister had a very serious accident this evening, sir," the chief paramedic said, looking profoundly official. "She was skating out out on the lake when the ice gave way. All this warm weather lately must've weakened it."

"Is she going to be alright?" Touya asked, turning back around to look at Sakura. She *looked* fine.

"According to eyewitness accounts, the girl and her friend," the chief paramedic gestured to Syaoran. "were in the water for approximately 30 seconds before they were able to make it to the shore. However, despite the risk of hypothermia and other complications, your sister seems to be fine. She has a slightly raised blood pressure reading, but that's not surprising and quite normal under the circumstances."

"I see," Touya said. "So can I take her home?"

"I don't really see any reason for her to be hospitalized," the chief paramedic said. "But the final decision is really up to her parents. Do you have a number where we could reach one of them?"

"Yeah, sure," Touya said. He and the chief paramedic walked off a ways to begin tackling all the tedious paperwork. Sakura gave Syaoran a glance like "sorry" and joined the conversation over the paperwork.

The other paramedics began packing up all their equipment. Syaoran thought for a moment he was off the hook until one of them broke off from the group and headed straight for him, carrying a clipboard. Syaoran sighed through his aura. This was going to be tough with all the questions.

"Before you can officially refuse treatment," the paramedic guy said, waving his clipboard around. "We're going to need to talk to your parents."

"My parents are dead," Syaoran said emotionlessly.

"Oh," the paramedic said, a bit taken aback. "Well... then we need to speak with your guardian."

"He's not alive either," Syaoran said, thinking of Yue and fuming.

"Uh, okay," the paramedic said, flipping through the papers on the clipboard nervously. "Then we need to speak with the person you're living with."

"I don't *live* with anyone," Syaoran replied airily.

"Listen kid," the paramedic was obviously just annoyed now. "There has to be *someone* who's taking care of you. If not, we can hospitalize you tonight, then have a representative from the foster home come down in the morning and talk with you about your family-"

"Please excuse my cousin sir," Eriol spoke up suddenly, getting between Syaoran and the paramedic in a very disarming fashion. "He's been through a rough time lately."

The paramedic seemed to relax. "You're a relative, then?"

"Yes, sir," Eriol said as if he were proud the fact. He extended his hand. "Reed-san is my father's wife's brother's son, you see."

"I... see," the paramedic said, clearly not seeing anything at all.

"He's currently staying with a friend of the family and I'm afraid he's not quite adjusted yet," Eriol said, speaking distinctly, but very quickly. He took the clipboard from the paramedic's hand and produced a pen seemingly out of thin air. "But I'd be happy to give you all the information you need. Where should I begin?"

"Well, I suppose..." the paramedic trailed off, unsure of how to proceed.

"You know, I can't hear you very well over this heater," Eriol said, guiding the paramedic away from Syaoran. "How about we move someplace a bit quieter?"

"Right..." the paramedic said, awkwardly following Eriol out of earshot. Syaoran glared after Eriol, his aura going black. The thought of actually being related to Eriol was downright indignant. And yet, it was nice to have the officials off his back. If Eriol hadn't stepped in, the conversation could've gone off in a dangerous direction. Syaoran shuddered at the thought of being locked away while Sakura needed his help.

Fujitaka arrived a few minutes later, concerned but calm. He talked with the chief paramedic for a bit and, per his recommendation, decided to take Sakura home. Syaoran was surprised with how easily things went in favor of Sakura's ultimate safety. The fact made him more than a little wary.

Once again, he felt as if he was missing something. Something very small, but extremely important.

And just out of reach.

After what seemed like an eternity, Sakura was saying goodnight to Tomoyo and Eriol.

"Well, I had a great time up until now," Sakura said, making a face. "Sorry about ruining all the fun."

"Don't be silly, Sakura-chan," Tomoyo cut in quickly. "Falling into the ice wasn't your idea."

Eriol chuckled softly. "Certainly you don't think this fiasco erased all the fun we had before. At least we have the memories."

Syaoran scowled at the words. Something about the phrase struck a cord with him.

As if memories are enough, Syaoran thought unconsciously. The words in his head were extremely bitter.

Fujitaka came up to the group then, a folder of paperwork in his hands and a weary smile on his face. "Well, that's it. We can leave. Daidouji-san, can I give you a ride home?"

Tomoyo shook her head. "No thank you, sir. I've called for a driver to come for me and Eriol-san. We live kind of out of the way and I want Sakura-chan to get home as soon as possible."

Fujitaka nodded, looking grateful. He turned to Syaoran. "What about you, Reed-san?"

"I'll just walk," Syaoran said without hesitation.

"No way!" Sakura said, drawing her towel tightly around herself. The paramedics had given her a dry set of clothing, but her hair was still damp and she shivered a bit in the cold. "It's freezing!"

"You live near the park, correct?" Fujitaka asked. "We'll pass by there as we head home. It wouldn't be a problem to drop you off on the way."

Syaoran was prepared to put up more of a fight, but the pleading look on Sakura's face instantly brought down his defenses.

"Okay," Syaoran said slowly, as if giving in to some horrible temptation. "If it really wouldn't be a bother."

Fujitaka shook his head. "Of course not."

Touya came up behind Fujitaka then. "Are we ready to go?"

Fujitaka nodded. "We can leave."

Sakura turned around and said a final goodnight to Tomoyo and Eriol, promising them that she'd see them at school in the morning. Then she followed Fujitaka and Touya to the car that was parked at a panicked angle near the tent.

Syaoran followed a few paces behind Sakura, quickly leaving Eriol behind.

Touya scowled at Syaoran as he slid into the backseat next to Sakura. It was the first time that Touya had really acknowledged Syaoran's existence since they formally met at dinner. But the acknowledgment faded fast, replaced by an air of detachment as his eyes slid off Syaoran and into the air beyond the windshield.

Syaoran could tell the heater was on full-blast in the car by the way the windows fogged up quickly. The ride to the apartment complex by the park didn't take very long. Syaoran found himself sitting in the car by Wei's building in no time at all.

"Thanks for the ride," Syaoran said, moving to get out.

"You're welcome Reed-san," Fujitaka said pleasantly. "It's the least I can do after how they said you helped Sakura-san tonight."

"Yeah..." Syaoran said, feeling awkward. "Well, goodnight."

He opened the car door and climbed out.

"Goodnight," Fujitaka said from inside.

"I'll walk you up!" Sakura said, bolting out of the car before anyone could stop her.

"Hey!" Touya said, leaning out the window.

"I'll be right back," Sakura said, taking Syaoran's hand and steering him toward the building. "It'll only take a second."

"Just let her go," Fujitaka chided Touya gently.

Syaoran quickly led Sakura into the apartment building's lobby. "You really should just get home and rest," he said. "Especially after tonight."

Sakura shook her head. "I can't rest until I know you're okay."

Syaoran's eyes widened a bit and then the corners of his mouth sloped upwards. "Then we have the same problem."

Syaoran led Sakura up to Wei's apartment on the third floor after she refused to send him off in the lobby. They stopped outside the door, feeling as if they were making a huge racket in the quiet hallway.

"Goodnight," Syaoran said quietly, letting go of Sakura's hand with a yank as if releasing a magnet from metal. "I'm sorry about tonight."

Sakura's expression furrowed. "What do you mean 'I'm sorry'? I should be saying that, not you. You're not the one who made the suggestion to go ice skating, remember?"

"But I couldn't help you until the last second," Syaoran said, putting his forehead on top of Sakura's head. He wanted to be as close to her as possible right then; He never wanted to leave her alone again. "I was stupid to leave you."

Sakura pulled away from Syaoran so she could stare him straight in the face. Her emerald eyes were soft and reassuring as she

searched his face.

"I'm not asking you to become a psychic for me. How were you supposed to know what was going to happen tonight?" Sakura's gaze softened and welled up with the same kind of feeling that weighed heavily in Syaoran's soul right then. "All that matters is that you were there when I needed you the most. The very second I thought that I might be in really big trouble, you suddenly appeared. And that's the best thing about you."

Her words were supposed to make him feel better, but right then, she was hitting him in every vulnerable spot he had.

In a few days... Syaoran thought sadly as he looked into Sakura's grateful eyes. I'm going to completely abandon her. Then she'll look back on this conversation and hate me.

It was then that he realized how important the deal he made with Tomoyo was. Sakura really did have to know about the fact that Syaoran was leaving. He didn't want Sakura to think that he abandoned her because he wanted to.

"Sakura..." Syaoran said slowly, the sound of her name filling up his aura. "I need to tell you something."

"Sure," Sakura said, taking Syaoran's hand. "Anything."

She was so sincere about it, as if she really was prepared to accept *anything* Syaoran had to tell her. But she obviously had no idea what he was going to say...

Because she didn't look as sad as Syaoran felt.

Dozens of lies passed through his head. Which one would hurt her the least? It was impossible to tell her the truth because that would only make her think he was crazy. Not only would he need to tell her that he was the ghost who once haunted the house she lived in, but also that she was the object of a war between Order and Chaos

where her fate determined the winner. And even if, by some great leap of faith, she believed him, how would that knowledge make his disappearance any less painful for either of them? It could even make things worse.

And secretly, Syaoran didn't want to give the truth words... because words would make it real.

But reality was the one thing Sakura couldn't afford to lose.

"I..." Syaoran said, Sakura's hand weighing heavily in his own. "I have to go."

"Oh, right," Sakura said, squeezing Syaoran's hand, then dropping it. She gave him a sheepish smile. "I guess I should get going too. Otou-san and onii-chan are waiting."

Syaoran shook his head slowly, simultaneously relieved and frustrated that Sakura got the wrong message. Despite his conflicting feelings, he began to forge on with the conversation anyway, almost as if he couldn't help it. "That's not it. I mean-"

Just then, the door in front of them opened and light flooded into the dim hallway.

"I thought I heard voices," Wei said, smiling warmly under his mustache. He paused and turned to Sakura as if just catching sight of her. "Good evening. Are you a friend of Syaoran's?"

Sakura nodded and bowed lightly. "Sakura Kinomoto. And you must be Wei-san, right?"

Wei's warm smile spread into his eyes. "That's right. Would you like to come in? I just put some tea on."

"Oh, I really can't..." Sakura said, looking genuinely pained. "My family is waiting for me downstairs."

"Besides, you really should go home and get some rest," Syaoran said firmly.

Sakura grinned and put a hand behind her head. "Yeah, well, same to you," she turned to Wei. "Nice to meet you. Sorry I can't stay."

"Of course your health some first, Sakura-san," Wei said, eying her damp hair and unseasonal clothes. "I can see it has been quite a day."

"That's one way of putting it," Sakura said, beaming a smile. She turned back to Syaoran, her smile threatening to melt him. "Well... goodnight, Syaoran-kun."

No matter how many times she said his name, the effect it had on him never lessened. The air itself seemed to reverberate with the sound and it panged deep inside his hallow chest. He wished the feeling would stay forever...

"Goodnight," Syaoran said, the word catching in his throat as if he were choking on it.

... But forever was one too many goodbyes away.

Sakura turned and walked a few paces down the hall. Right before she got to the stairwell, she paused and turned around. Her expression was thoughtful and a bit confused.

"Weren't you going to tell me something?" Sakura said as if remembering something she was about to leave behind.

Syaoran shook his head, refusing to let any of the longing he felt leak into his expression. "It's not as important as you getting a good night's sleep. I'll tell you later."

Sakura smiled, but the confusion remained. "Okay. I'll see you tomorrow, right?"

Syaoran slowly nodded. "I promise I'll see you tomorrow."

"Good," she said, her smile reaching her eyes again and her features sagging with relief.

"Night..." Syaoran said, watching Sakura disappear down the stairwell.

"See you tomorrow!" Sakura's voice drifted up from the hallway and then faded away, the echoes ringing hollowly in Syaoran's ears.

"Definitely tomorrow," Syaoran said, clutching his numb fists until he should have started bleeding.

But there was nothing there.

"Here," a shadowy figure said, holding out an object to Sakura. The shadow had long, calf-length hair and a distinctly female figure. The only other feature that Sakura could make out was the shadow's ruby eyes.

Sakura reached for the object. Her mind was cloudy and numb. She knew she should be more questioning, but she didn't know what questions to ask. So she took what was handed to her.

It was a knife. A kitchen knife with a sleek black handle and a dangerously sharp blade.

"That's for you," the shadow said, her voice like velvet. "So you can end it now."

"End it?" Sakura said, unsure and uncomfortable. She held the knife in the exact same position as when it was handed to her.

"It's going to get painful," the shadow said sweetly. "And when it does, you're going to wish you had it."

"I don't understand," Sakura said, feeling like darkness was approaching. She didn't know this person, but she suddenly wanted

to be far away.

"Look where you are, you silly girl," the shadow said, gesturing widely around her.

It was the center of the maze. The green walls where tallest here between all the openings where the paths spilled out into this one and only exit. The shadowed woman and Sakura were standing beside a swirling mass of darkness on the ground that was like a black hole. The sight filled Sakura's being with an overwhelming sense of dread. She stumbled away from it, almost tripping over herself to get away. But she could only go so far.

"It's waiting for you," the shadow said, crossing her arms nonchalantly. "The Void only takes those who give up, but... everyone eventually gives in. In the meantime, it hurts," She nodded to the knife that Sakura as still holding. "That's why I suggest you use that. That way it will be over in an instant. For you and for them."

"Them?" Sakura asked.

"The people who love you," the shadow said. "The people who don't want to see you suffer. They want to see it end quickly. Then they can begin to heal. And when its their time to meet the Void, they can hopefully enter it with as much dignity as you did."

"The people who love me..." Sakura said.

Something snapped inside her then. The fog around her mind cleared and without a moment's hesitation, she threw the knife directly into the Void. She watched as it was dissected and swallowed by the Void molecule by molecule. The gruesome process continued even as Sakura turned to face the shadow.

"The people who love me," Sakura said. Her body was trembling, but her voice was rock steady. "Would never want me to just give up and take the easy way out. They would want me to fight, even if it's

painful... Because there's always a chance that things will work out. And if there's even a glimmer of hope, I will cling to it forever."

A smile spread on the shadow's face. She chuckled a bit, but there was irritation evident in her gestures. "Well, that last part certainly backfired," She said it as if she was talking to someone else. Then the shadow shrugged and addressed Sakura directly again. "Do what you like. I tried to persuade you to end it early and make it easier on everyone . But you obviously want to make this as difficult as possible. That's fine by me.

"Because, the harder things are, the better it is for me," the shadow said, getting so close to Sakura that she could smell the shadow's sweet perfume. "After all, I am the grand master of all things difficult."

Sakura's eyes snapped open and she sat up quickly.

She was in her room. With the pink curtains on the wall and the shelf above her bed displaying all her stuffed animals. Her desk was across the room with a few crumpled math worksheets and chewed pencils littering the desktop.

She was surprised to be here. Surprised as if she had woken up in some strange place that was not her bedroom.

It had been so real, that dream. Sakura was positive that, somehow, the conversation she just had actually happened. But the words and images in the dream were already fading quickly like water down a drain. Soon there was nothing left except an overwhelming feeling of ominous dread.

And the horrible urge to vomit.

Sakura slowly lowed herself back to her pillows and waited for the whirlpool in her stomach to subside. Her head felt like it was going to float away.

She glanced at her bedside clock. 8:30am, it read. At least she had slept through the night this time, the maze only waking her at the very end. But this time the dream had been different. Although she couldn't remember what she had seen there, she knew that she was in the middle of it - the center of the maze. And something was there... something she hoped she would never see again.

She racked her brain trying to remember, but it only made her dizzy.

Really dizzy, actually. She kept completely still for several minutes until the spinning finally stopped. Then she lay still for several minutes more, just to be safe.

Eventually there was a knock on the door and it opened wide with a creak.

"It's been a while since I had to come in here and wake you up," Touya's voice sounded from the doorway. "You haven't been late for school in a while."

"Is it time already?" Sakura said, unwilling to turn her head to check the clock for herself.

"Yep," Touya said. "And that kid is waiting outside in the cold for you. He really isn't that bright, is he?"

"Syaoran-kun?" Sakura said, sitting up. She tried her best to ignore the wave of dizziness that seemed to spin the universe around her. Despite the unpleasantness, she smiled. "He's here."

"What else is new?" Touya said, glaring toward the window. Then he turned and eyed Sakura as she began to climb clumsily out of bed. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Sakura said, making her way to the closet to get her uniform out. "Just a little dizzy."

Suddenly, Touya grabbed Sakura's shoulder and spun her around to face him. He knelt and looked directly into her eyes, his own searching her face knowingly.

"You look flushed," Touya said, smacking a hand to her forehead. "And you feel warm."

"I just got out of bed," Sakura said, on the defensive. "My covers were warm."

Touya glared. "Do you feel sick?"

"I feel *fine*," Sakura said, assuring herself as much as she was Touya. "And besides, I promised Syaoran-kun I'd be at school today. If I don't go, he'll worry. Tomoyo-chan too."

"Should they be worried?" Touya asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Nope" Sakura said, resuming the retrieval of her uniform from the closet. Then she looked up at Touya meaningfully. "I'll be fine. Really."

There was a long, frozen pause between the two as Touya glared and Sakura tried to look as healthy as possible without starting to bounce around the room. Finally Touya relented and started toward the door.

"If you say so," he said, grabbing the handle. "Just don't forget what happened last night. You shouldn't expect yourself to be in top form after something like that. Take it easy today and come right home after school."

"Right!" Sakura said, sagging with relief. Then she sagged a little too much, lost her balance, and stumbled a bit.

Touya sighed from the door. "I should tell otou-san."

"No, no," Sakura said, waving her arms around. "I'm okay. I just-"

Touya sighed again and yanked the door open. "Yeah, yeah. Okay. Get dressed. You shouldn't keep that little brat waiting outside."

Sakura smiled at Touya's back as he left. "Thanks, onii-chan."

"I just know I'm going to regret this," Touya said, his voice weighed down. The somber tone surprised Sakura and pitched her stomach oddly.

Or maybe that was just the dizziness.

The sky threatened bad weather with dark gray clouds that hung low over the town. A fine mist of freezing rain saturated the air, turning the few inches of old snow on the ground into a muddy, disgusting slush.

Syaoran poked some of it with his foot and watched as it sloshed onto the sidewalk like some kind of horrible ooze. He also observed with interest how the wetness seeped into his shoe and up his pant leg.

It must be freezing, Syaoran thought to himself, sadness clinging to him like a fly to flypaper.

He turned to face the Kinomono house. It was getting late. He would've been more worried, only he could see the brother and father bustling around in the kitchen. If something was wrong, they wouldn't be going through the same-old routine.

Would they?

Just as Syaoran was about to get really worried, Sakura finally opened the door, quietly shut it behind her, and took the steps one at a time as she headed for the sidewalk.

Syaoran lowered his gaze as she approached and glared.

"Morning Syaoran-kun," Sakura said, smiling weakly. "Sorry to make you wait. Onii-chan was being his usual nosy self. I had to practically shove him-"

"You *walked* down the steps," Syaoran said, his dark brown eyes searching her face. "You never just walk out the door and down the steps. You always burst out the house and bounce down the steps and take off down the sidewalk."

"Hoe..." Sakura muttered as Syaoran stared at her.

"It's not like you," he said firmly. "Is something wrong?"

Sakura always knew Syaoran was observant, but she never knew that he was so observant of *her*. She struggled to come up with a good defense while attempting to process the revelation.

"Did you get hurt last night?" Syaoran asked, his eyes getting big. "Did you twist your ankle or something like that? Should I carry you? I could carry you."

But he's always focused on the outside of people, Sakura thought. He forgets that people can hurt inside too. No matter how much observant he is, he only looks for what he can see with his naked eye.

Sakura smiled wide. She was learning so much about him.

When she smiled, Syaoran seemed to relax; not in his posture or the tension in his body, but his eyes softened and his lips curled upward ever so slightly. It was an awesome thing to watch.

"We better get going," Sakura said, taking Syaoran's hand and urging him forward. "We'll be late."

Syaoran eyed her seriously for a few moments. Sakura felt like the sick feeling in her stomach was visible to Syaoran's super glare.

"Alright," Syaoran said, finally relenting and starting toward the school. "But you better be okay."

"Good morning Sakura-chan," Tomoyo said cheerfully as Sakura approached her desk. Syaoran followed close behind, looking vigilantly concerned and watching her every subtle move.

"Morning," Sakura replied, flashing a faint smile and sitting down.

Tomoyo and Eriol exchanged glances. They turned to Syaoran as if he had Sakura's current mood and body temperature written on his face. But all he gave them was a dark look as he sat down in his desk and then glued his eyes in their normal position on the back of Sakura's head.

"You don't look as energetic as usual, Sakura-chan," Tomoyo said when Syaoran didn't provide any useful information. "Is something wrong?"

Sakura tried to pass off her surprise with a nervous laugh. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"Because it seems like something is wrong, Sakura-san," Eriol chimed in.

"Nope, you guys are wrong," Sakura said, beaming a smile that lit up her cheeks. "I'm fine."

Tomoyo and Eriol did the eye thing again - where they seemed to communicate only with their eyes.

Tomoyo opened her mouth, but the bell rang just then and cut her off. Sakura couldn't help but be relieved.

Before the bell was even finished ringing, the door to the classroom opened and, much to everyone's surprise, Mizuki-sensei stepped inside.

"Good morning everyone," the woman said. Even though she spoke the words with plenty of cheer, her smile didn't even reach her eyes.

The class began to mummer softly.

"Terada-sensei had a bit of bad luck this morning and I'm afraid he won't be able to join us until later in the day," Mizuki-sensei said. "So I will be taking over his homeroom class. He should get here before lunchtime."

Hands shot up in the air, but Mizuki-sensei only shook her head.

"It's nothing to be concerned about. Terada-sensei is not hurt, just having a bad start on the day," she said, smiling lightly.

The class relaxed and started on their usual homeroom study hour, taking out books and writing down notes.

Mizuki-sensei wandered to the window and stared outside. "It seems it's turning out to be quite a chaotic day for everyone."

Sakura could feel Syaoran shift in his seat behind her.

The class lapsed into silence as Mizuki-sensei moved to the desk and sat down.

Sakura pulled out her math workbook, determined to finish the lesson she left undone over the weekend. But as she stared at it, the lines in the figures on the page made her eyes blur until it made her dizzy. She hastily shut the notebook and held her head in her hands, willing the spinning to stop. But it only seemed to worsen as the dizziness leaked out of her head and into her face where it grew hot around her cheeks. Then it finally slipped into her stomach and stayed there, writhing and thrashing like a snake with its head in a vice.

Sakura wasn't even aware of anyone standing over her until a soft hand lifted her chin up. Mizuki-sensei stood there, looking seriously

at Sakura's face.

"You don't look well, Sakura-san," she said softly, lifting her other hand to put it lightly on Sakura's forehead. "And you have a fever."

Before Sakura could protest, Mizuki-sensei turned to Tomoyo. "Diadouji-san, please take Sakura-san to the nurse's office so she can call home and get some rest."

"Yes ma'am," Tomoyo said, getting up and looking extremely relieved. She walked to Sakura's desk and took her by the elbow, gently but unyieldingly guiding her out of her seat and toward the door. "Shall we, Sakura-chan?"

"Hoeeeee..." Sakura murmured, surprised at how fast things were happening.

As Tomoyo and Sakura left the classroom, Syaoran quietly rose from his own seat and followed them out without a word or even a glance toward to the teacher.

"Li-san!"

Syaoran stopped. No matter how panicked he was about Sakura, the sound of his true name turned his movements to stone and his thoughts into frost. It was as if he had a curse put on his and that name was the incantation that bound him.

He turned slowly to find Mizuki-sensei standing in the hallway. It was only now, in the sunlight that cascaded into the hallway from the windows, that Syaoran really noticed her transformation. Her skin and lips were ashen and her eyes were rimmed with red as if she wanted to cry, but no tears would come. She walked over to Syaoran, her arms crossed tightly over her chest and her head bent. It was the posture of a mourner; someone who was approaching a grieving family member about their loss.

"I'm so sorry," she said, whispering in the silent hall. "I wish I could have stopped it. But everything fell so neatly into place. I didn't even realize it all until it was done."

"I don't have time for this," Syaoran said tersely, turning to go.
"Sakura's-"

"It started with the nightmares," Mizuki-sensei said, cutting him off.
"Didn't you notice? She hasn't been able to sleep. The dreams keep her awake."

"What?" Syaoran said, something dark growing in the pit of his being. "Are you talking about Sakura? She's been having nightmares?"

Mizuki-sensei nodded gravely. "It's the maze. It won't let her rest."

"Nightmares of a maze..." Syaoran said softly, dumbstruck.

We first met in a maze. Syaoran thought. But that was so long ago. She's still having nightmares about it?

"Then it was all the extra homework. It kept her up late," the woman said, putting a hand on her chest. "That was my fault."

Syaoran lowered his gaze. "You..."

"I didn't know," Mizuki-sensei said. "I swear I didn't. But the more work she got from me, the more she fell behind in other classes and the more she had to catch up. Then the chores began to pile up at home... She hasn't had a chance to rest."

The woman leaned in closer, a few strands of red hair falling into her face. "She's so *tired*, Li-san. Her body started shutting down. And when she was vulnerable... when, even for a moment, her system froze... Chaos took the opportunity to invade her."

The world fell out from beneath Syaoran's feet.

"Chaos got inside, Li-san," Mizuki-sensei said, bringing a finger up to Syaoran's chest. "It is inside her now."

"Inside? How? When?" Syaoran said, wanting to grab the woman and shake her. "What do you mean?"

"You said you'd protect her," Mizuki-sensei said, as if she hadn't heard Syaoran speak. "But protection is limited to keeping what's outside from getting in."

She took a step back.

"Now that what should be outside is inside, what can you do? It's not protection any longer, so what is it?" she asked, looking at Syaoran meaningfully.

Syaoran glared at the floor.

"It's a battle. I have to fight it."

Mizuki-sensei smiled, relief flooding her features. "You're still a threat to Chaos, Li-san. If the situation was set in stone, she wouldn't be watching you anymore, but she is. Your actions can still make a difference."

The woman leaned in close to whisper. "But you're not the only one Chaos still sees as a threat. Remember that."

Suddenly, without warning, Mizuki-sensei reached out and grabbed Syaoran. He struggled violently, but only until he realized that he wasn't being attacked. He was being hugged- hugged as if he were leaving to go somewhere from which he probably wouldn't return.

And it was over as soon as he realized. Then Mizuki-sensei was kneeling in front of him and gripping his shoulders hard.

"Good luck," she said, looking him right in the eye. "And please keep your promise."

"Whatever it takes," he said without hesitation.

Then he turned and ran from the woman toward the nurse's office, his mood somewhere between annoyed, confused, and panicked.

By the time he arrived, Sakura had been moved into one of the school's small infirmary rooms. Tomoyo was sitting in the chair next to the little cot, watching Sakura as she breathed heavily with an audible rasp in her voice.

Tomoyo looked up as Syaoran came into the room, putting a finger to her lips.

"She fell asleep as soon as she lay down," Tomoyo said softly. The corners of her eyes crinkled.

Syaoran came closer to the bed to see Sakura laying there with a pained expression, even in sleep. Her cheeks were bright red and stood out vividly against her sickly pale skin. Her breathing was shallow and labored.

I wonder if she's having that nightmare right now, Syaoran thought. A surge of frustration cut through him.

All his vows of protection were completely worthless now. He had kept an unblinking eye on Sakura, ready and tensed for whatever might come to harm her. If a meteor had fallen from the sky, Syaoran was sure he could have protected her somehow. At least then he could have seen it coming.

But what had come hadn't been a meteor. It wasn't even something he could see.

He hadn't considered that chaos would come in the form of something small. Small, in his mind, meant insignificant. That's what he had been missing all this time. He kept waiting and waiting for "the big one"; the single event that would decide everything. But

chaos doesn't work that way. It keeps pushing and pushing until, eventually, something finally gives.

Until the scale finally balances out.

But, of course, Syaoran had no intention of letting Sakura be the one to make that balance.

In the vigilant silence between Syaoran and Tomoyo, voices came drifting in from the hallway outside the room.

"I didn't know someone was able to get in touch with her family so quickly," the school nurse's voice came first. "She just came in not ten minutes ago."

"She was acting odd this morning," a cool male voice said. Syaoran scowled at it even before the person it belonged to came into view. "I was sure that by now she'd be ready to go home."

The school nurse came in first, followed by Touya. His first glance was to Sakura on the bed, but then his eyes drifted to Syaoran as if to say, "not you again."

"Well, whether or not she wants to go, I think it would be best if she went home and got some rest in her own bed," the nurse said, looking at Sakura with a cocked head. "Pushing herself will only make her more ill."

Touya nodded, then strode up beside Syaoran to get a better look at Sakura. He put a hand on her head.

"Her fever's gotten worse," he said.

With the hand on her head, Sakura's eyes fluttered open.

"Onii-chan?" she said groggily. "Why are you here?"

The nurse gestured to Syaoran and Tomoyo. "You two can head back to class now. Your friend is going to go home and get some

rest. You can talk to her after school if you must."

"Yes ma'am," Tomoyo said, reluctantly getting out of her chair. She touched Sakura's hand lightly as she headed for the door. "Feel better, Sakura-chan. I'll come by after school to see how you're doing."

"Thanks Tomoyo-chan," Sakura said, smiling weakly. "But I'm really fine."

Tomoyo chuckled. "I'm sure you are."

Then she walked out the door and down the hallway. Syaoran followed her after the nurse made it apparent that he wasn't welcome to stay.

Syaoran walked only as far as the doorway at the end of the hall where he stopped and waited. Tomoyo turned back around as if she had expected him to stop.

"Are you going home with her?" she asked, her lavender eyes somewhere between intrigued and knowing.

Syaoran nodded. "If the brother won't let me in the house, then I'll sit outside her window."

Tomoyo chuckled. "I see."

She paused for awhile and looked at Syaoran as if daring herself to ask him something.

"Reed-kun, did you tell her yet?" she finally asked.

It took Syaoran a moment to remember the promise he had made to Tomoyo the day before. Then he shook his head. "No."

Tomoyo seemed to sag gracefully with relief. "Ah," she said. There was another brief pause. "It's just... I was afraid that..."

She chuckled as Syaoran raised an eyebrow. "It's silly. I thought maybe, by telling her your secret, she got so upset that it made her ill. I thought for a moment that... you were the one who made her sick. Isn't that silly?"

Somewhere, Syaoran's spirit panged heavily with guilt.

"Well," Tomoyo said, smiling and backing away. "I suppose I will see you at Sakura-chan's house after school. Watch her for both of us, okay?"

Syaoran nodded firmly, still struck speechless by Tomoyo's accidental accusation. He watched her back as she walked back to class, each step away from Sakura seeming painful for her. Then she disappeared around the corner.

After a few minutes, rustling in the hallway behind Syaoran summoned all his attention back on Sakura.

"I suggest a cool compress and a few non-aspirin tablets like Tylenol to keep the fever down," the nurse's voice was saying. "And make an appointment with a doctor as soon as possible."

"Thank you," Touya's voice sounded. "I'll get right on it."

"Take care," the nurse said, her voice drifting away.

Touya emerged from the hallway, Sakura hitched piggy-back style on his back. She smiled faintly and waved at Syaoran weakly from under Touya's heavy coat. After looking at him for a few moments, she rested her head against Touya's shoulder and closed her eyes. The gesture was so unlike her usual cheerful self that it turned Syaoran's core to ice.

Something is really wrong with her . Syaoran thought, fighting panic.

Touya started for the exit from the school and Syaoran followed close behind, his eyes locked on the back of Sakura's head.

"Li-san!"

Syaoran growled when his movements stopped. That name again...

He turned as fast as the sound of his true name would let him. Eriol was sauntering up to him, the smug smile on his face as always. But there was something in his eyes... Syaoran squinted hard. Was he frightened for Sakura too?

"I'm sorry to stop you," Eriol said.

"Just tell me what you want," Syaoran snapped. "I have to go."

"Whatever happens," Eriol said, his smug smile wiped away with one blink of his eyes. "Don't let them take Sakura-san from the house."

"What? Why?" Syaoran said. "She needs to get to a hospital-"

Eriol cut him off with a shake of his head. "Order's presence is strongest in that house. It is the one place in the entire world where the powers of Chaos are weakened. And the last place you would ever want to take her is a hospital," a hint of a smile came back to his face. "Have you ever been to a hospital, Li-kun? Chaos *rules* there."

Syaoran shook his head as if to clear it. "I don't understand. Why is *that* house a safe haven for her?"

"Because Order spent the better part of the last fifty years watching over the ghost of a young boy who died there," Eriol said.

Syaoran's head snapped up, but he had nothing to say. Nothing to Eriol, anyway.

"You see, when a place is inhabited by a being like Order for so long, it tends to absorb its influence. You could say that, inside, Sakura is shielded from any further harm Chaos might cause her," Eriol said. He sighed. "Of course, the shield can't *negate* any of the effects she gained while outside Order's influence, but at least..."

It was strange to see an expression close to sadness on Eriol's usually smug face.

"At least there she will have a fighting chance..." Eriol said, his entire being emanating doom. "However small it may be."

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Ephemeral Promise

Chapter Eighteen

Ephemeral Promise

"Are you coming in or what?"

Touya was standing in the doorway to the house, Sakura still hitched up on his back in a feverish sleep. Touya held the door open for Syaoran, seemingly in a gesture of invitation, but the stiffness in his movements and the contempt on his face contradicted his gesture.

But it was good enough for Syaoran. He was only relieved that he didn't have to crawl through Sakura's window or do something else equally illegal to get inside the house. After recovering from the initial shock of Touya's strained hospitality, Syaoran slinked past Touya who swiftly shut the door behind him.

Syaoran followed Touya upstairs to Sakura's bedroom. Her bed was unmade and her room was a mess. Touya gently pulled Sakura off his back and laid her down in the bed. He gave her an extra pillow and pulled the blankets high around her chin.

Sakura's eyes opened for just a moment. They were unfocused and the usual sharp emerald color had faded to a mossy grayish-green.

"I'm sorry onii-san," she said before closing her eyes again.

"There's nothing to be sorry about," Touya said. "Just get some rest."

Sakura nodded weakly before she slipped back into a fitful sleep. Her breathing was long and deep, but it was also labored and rasped. The red in her cheeks had spread back to her ears and her skin was slick with perspiration. Syaoran stood over the bed, fighting the panic that was slowly flaring up inside him.

I remember this, Syaoran thought, his thoughts whirling. It's a little different, but I've seen this before.

He could almost feel Sakura's fever in his own cheeks. With every breath she took, Syaoran felt the grinding wheeze in his own chest. The weakness in his joints... The way even the ends of his hair hurt... He put a hand to his chest, positive that he would feel the vibration in his labored breathing, but there was nothing there. It was only phantoms of pain that seemed to haunt his physically unfeeling body as he started at Sakura.

She's really in pain, Syaoran thought, lowering his hand after several seconds of waiting for a breath he knew would never come. Somehow I know exactly how it feels.

Touya had been standing there in silence, watching Syaoran closely with a suspicious glare. Eventually, he turned and moved toward the door.

"I'm going to call my father," Touya said from the doorway, his words clipped and sharp. "If anything changes, call me. I'll be right downstairs."

Syaoran turned around just in time to see a spark of real fear drop off Touya's face, replaced by the "in-control older brother" look. Syaoran's soul ripped.

He can sense it too, Syaoran thought, turning back to Sakura and listening to Touya's footsteps as he walked down the stairs just a bit faster than normal. He knows that something dangerous is at work here.

After a few moments of silence through Sakura's rasping breaths, Touya's phone conversation drifted up the stairwell.

"Otou-san, it's me. Sorry to bother you at work but-" he paused. "So you noticed this morning too, huh? Yeah, she has a really bad fever now. You should probably... Okay. Bye."

Syaoran could hear Touya moving around downstairs. It seemed he wasn't too keen on coming back up.

Syaoran moved to the side of the bed and knelt down so he could get a good view of Sakura's face. If anything were to change for the worse, even a bit, he was sure that he could see it from this angle.

"You'll be okay," Syaoran whispered, the words tumbling out of his mouth before he even formed the thoughts. "I'll find a way to make it stop."

When he spoke, she opened her eyes a little.

"Syaoran-kun," Sakura said, a wavering smile appearing on her face like a light bulb that didn't have enough power. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Why?" Syaoran asked, a wave of guilt washing over him. Sakura was sick *because* he was here.

"I just like knowing that you're here," Her eyes closed again, but the faint smile stayed. She lifted her arm and held it up to Syaoran, her wrist dangling limply. "Hold my hand, okay?"

"Okay," Syaoran said quietly. He took her hand gently and laid it on the bed. Even though his own skin was nearly colorless, Sakura's was much darker. He could see her veins.

"And stay here until I fall asleep," she said, a rasp lacing every syllable.

Syaoran shook his head. "I won't leave until I know you're okay."

"Promise?" Sakura asked faintly.

"I swear it," Syaoran said with all the conviction he could put into his voice, even though Sakura had already drifted back to sleep. Her hand went limp in his and the expression of pain came back to crease her eyelids and pull down the corners of her mouth.

He'd give anything to take that expression away.

Anything.

The first thing Fujitaka did after he got home was call the family physician.

"I think he's the last doctor in the world who still does house calls," he remarked as the phone rang on the other end.

Syaoran was very impressed with how well the family dealt with a crisis like Sakura's. They stayed calm and collected, even though both of them were obviously aware that Sakura's illness was something much more serious than the flu. The father spent most of the time downstairs preparing hot tea and making sure that Sakura always had a pot of ice water for her compress. The brother was busy most of the afternoon canceling all his after-school activities and calling into work. After every phone call, he came into Sakura's room to change her compress. Syaoran felt Touya's eyes on him whenever he did.

But no one ever told Syaoran to leave. He kept expecting either Touya or Fujitaka to tell him to go home, but they never seemed to mind him. In some ways, it felt like old times when he was a ghost in their house. Whether he stayed or went- it was all the same to them.

Sakura spent the afternoon slipping in and out of consciousness, waking up whenever anyone would touch her or call her name. She never became unresponsive, but the pain that lined her face when she was asleep began to stay even when she was awake.

The doctor showed up about an hour after Fujitaka called him, carrying a black medical bag and a deathly serious expression. He hurried up the stairs to Sakura's room.

"Sakura-san," Fujitaka said gently. "The doctor's here. Wake up, sweetheart."

She didn't move. It was the first time that she didn't wake up right away when someone called her name.

Touya nudged Syaoran's shoulder roughly. "You call her."

"S-sakura," Syaoran said, feeling embarrassed. "Please wake up."

Sakura's eyes fluttered open and she squeezed Syaoran's hand. "Un?"

"Hello Sakura-san," the doctor said, forcing a smile and a morbidly cheerful tone. "I heard you aren't feeling too well."

Sakura shook her head, smiling a little. "I think I'm feeling better than I should."

"Well, let's have a look at you," the doctor said.

For the next fifteen minutes, the doctor used every instrument he had in his little black bag on Sakura. He took her temperature, blood pressure, and pulse. With every reading, his expression became more and more serious.

"Alright Sakura-san," he said finally. "Go back to sleep. I'm going to have a talk with your dad."

Sakura nodded and fell back asleep almost instantly.

Syaoran followed the doctor, Fujitaka, and Touya out into the hallway, but he didn't leave the doorway. He wanted to hear what they were saying, but he would be damned if he would let Sakura out of his sight even for a moment.

"I'm going to be very blunt, Kinomoto-san," the doctor said. "This doesn't seem like any illness I have ever dealt with. If she was fine this morning, that means that in just four hours, her temperature has skyrocketed from normal to 102.4. Her blood pressure and pulse are also elevated to dangerous levels."

"What should we do?" Fujitaka asked.

"I don't have the proper equipment to help her here," the doctor said.
"We need to get her to a hospital as soon as-"

"NO!"

"NO!"

Syaoran and Touya stared at each other, both of them surprised at the other's outburst.

"Look, kids, you don't understand," the doctor said. He turned back to Fujitaka. "Her lungs are filling with fluid and her body temperature is rising by two degrees every hour. If that trend stays constant, she won't even live through the night. She needs to get to a hospital."

There was a beat of stagnant silence. Fujitaka looked extremely torn.

"Otouto-san," Touya said, taking Fujitaka by the shoulders. "You can't take her to the hospital. She won't get better there. The only chance she has is right here."

Another beat of silence passed. Touya's grip on Fujitaka's shoulder tightened.

"Please trust me," Touya said, his eyes rock steady. "A hospital stay didn't help mom, remember?"

Finally, Fujitaka nodded. He turned to the doctor. "I think we should keep her here. Traveling could be bad for her."

The doctor stepped forward. "This is madness, Kinomoto-san. I know the doctors couldn't help Nadeshiko, but her case was terminal. There was nothing they could do for her. Sakura-san has a virus, not cancer. Swearing off hospitals just because your wife died in one-"

Fujitaka held up a hand. "That's absurd, Doctor. I don't blame the hospital for my wife's death. Nadeshiko left us when it was her time. I

made peace with that long ago."

He stepped forward a bit. "However, now is *not* Sakura-san's time. I know it's true. And my son is only confirming my convictions. If he says Sakura-san's cure is right here in this house, I believe him."

The doctor shook his head and headed for the stair. "Then I suppose there's nothing I can do to change your mind. Just let me say my peace: if it was indeed Nadeshiko's time, then no power on Earth could keep her here. But... even if it's *not* Sakura-san's time, that doesn't mean she is immune to dying."

"She won't die."

Syaoran's voice was quiet, but echoed in the hallway.

"I'll go first," he said, slipping back into Sakura's room. "I promised I'd be the one to go first."

The doctor went down the steps, still shaking his head while Fujitaka and Touya exchanged glances.

"I didn't even know he was here," Fujitaka said with an embarrassed half-smile.

"Sakura knows," Touya said, crossing his arms in a gesture of indignation. "And I guess that's all that matters."

Sakura's temperature didn't rise by two degrees every hour, but it certainly didn't go down. As the afternoon wore on, Sakura's breathing went from long and strained to shallow and swollen. She woke less often and when she was awake, she seemed distracted and confused.

Tomoyo and Eriol came by after school, Tomoyo with a basket full of paper cranes strung on a long fishing wire.

"Mizuki-sensei had us make them during her class," Tomoyo said solemnly, carefully stringing up the cranes over Sakura's bed. "She said it was a good way to practice geometry by measuring the angles of the folds, but I know better. She's just really worried about Sakura-chan..."

Tomoyo looked down and watched Sakura's labored breathing for a few quiet moments.

"And she has every reason to be worried," Tomoyo said. She touched Sakura's arm lightly. "Doesn't she?"

No one said anything, but Tomoyo seemed to take the silence as answer enough.

Tomoyo and Eriol were almost as determined as Syaoran to stay near Sakura until she was better. Fujitaka seemed relieved with all the company and even insisted that everyone stay for dinner. He made sandwiches and soup, but no one was really hungry. For the first time, Syaoran didn't feel awkward about not touching his meal.

Sakura woke up a few times between three and five o'clock, but each time she fell back asleep almost instantly. She acknowledged Tomoyo and Eriol's presence, however, and commented on the cranes above her bed. But as she was talking to Tomoyo, she fell asleep in mid-sentence.

The day seemed to be on fast-forward. From Sakura's window, Syaoran watched the sun slowly sink into the horizon and felt the tugging on his soul as it prepared for release. Tomoyo, Eriol, and Touya were all in the room, but Syaoran was determined to stay by Sakura's side even if he had to reveal his secret and disappear right before their eyes.

Thirty seconds before sunset, however, the doorbell rang downstairs.

"That's probably Yukito," Touya said. He headed downstairs.

"I'll take these plates downstairs and help Kinomoto-san clean up dinner," Tomoyo said, picking up a few plates.

"Good idea," Eriol said, lifting a few plates of his own. "I'll help you."

The last person left the room just as Syaoran's soul released. It was kind of like a sigh of relief. Keeping his secret was just one less thing to worry about.

Sakura's hand slipped through Syaoran's soul and fell limply on the bed. Sakura's eyes fluttered open for just a moment before closing again. The creases of pain on her face seemed to deepen.

Syaoran looked out the window to see a sliver of moon hanging in the sky above the setting sun. It looked like maybe two days before the new moon.

"The new moon is almost here, Sakura," Syaoran said softly, phantom pain lacing every syllable. "Just fight it until then."

"She won't make to the new moon, Syaoran," a voice sounded behind him. "At this rate, she won't even live past sunrise."

Syaoran whirled around. He hadn't noticed any presence besides Sakura's.

Yue stood there, his arms folded over his chest and his expression icy. He was looking past Syaoran to Sakura.

"You! What do you know?" Syaoran said, taking a few threatening paces forward. "You stole my life and now you're going to let Chaos take hers!"

"You were always quick to jump to conclusions," Yue said serenely. His eyes shifted to Syaoran. "Of course, you're right about the first part. And there's no reason that you shouldn't hate me for it."

And there it was. The only person in the world who Syaoran had considered a true friend was actually his worst enemy. Right then

Syaoran hated him more than Chaos.

"Why?" Syaoran said, unable to gather the strength even to lift his weightless head. "Why me? I was just a kid. I don't understand it."

Yue stood there for a long time without saying a word. He was so silent and his aura so subdued that for a moment Syaoran thought he had run away. But he was there, looking as if he only wished he could run.

"Human beings," he said finally. "If they think about things like Order and Chaos at all, believe the two of us are complete opposites. One is good, the other is bad; one is right and the other is wrong.

"But, in reality, we exist on a whole other level from all that. Right, wrong; good, bad- that's for humans. All that exists for us is *necessity* .

"And we are not opposites, either. Two opposing elements have nothing in common whatsoever, like fire and ice; one can't possibly exist within the other. But Chaos and I... we have the same goal: the balance. And so we are connected. The actions of one of us directly affects the results of the other, while the counter-actions of the other sets off a whole new chain of actions... so on and so forth.

"This has been going on since the Big Bang. However, it's only been in the past few million years that things began to... 'get interesting,' as Chaos put it. That's when you people began to populate the planet. Humans have one very special capacity that no other creature on Earth has: the ability to make your own fate. And this ability has added a whole new facet to the duty that Chaos and I have to protect the balance. That's not to say that we're powerless now; on the contrary, it has granted us a new extraordinary power- the power to indirectly affect the balance through human beings. It turns out that this kind of approach is *vastly* more potent than directly affecting the balance, since every action a human takes has the tendency to reverberate through time and cause a chain reaction of

new events, often weighed in the favor of the force from which the first action came."

"Humans make their own fate, huh?" Syaoran said, his words biting. "Then why did I die when I was only 16? And why is Sakura sick? We didn't want this."

"Just because humans have the ability to change their lives doesn't mean that we can't intervene," Yue said. "Fifty years ago there was an explosion in population growth. To balance the sudden increase in human lives, thanks indirectly to an event Chaos caused, I created a mild epidemic in a small city on the island of Japan. Here I could keep the outbreak isolated and still be sure that as many died as were needed."

"Like me," Syaoran said slowly. "I was one of those people you needed to die."

But Yue shook his head. "No. You were going to live, Syaoran. And I knew that when you caught the illness. There was something inside you that kept the virus from shutting down your system like it did to others. You didn't succumb to the fever it induced.

"And, at first, that was all part of the scenario. When you lived, the virus would have had time to mutate and go on to affect others. That was the beauty of my design: the way the virus mutated every seventy-two hours. That made it impossible to stop until I stopped it-

"By killing the last victim before the virus could mutate," Syaoran finished.

Yue's wings flared. "Correct."

"But I wasn't *supposed* to be the last victim, was I?" Syaoran said.

"No," Yue replied, almost whispering the word. "I terminated your life prematurely. That is, you died before you were ready to die. It doesn't happen very often, but it's not completely unheard of."

"But *why* ?" Syaoran said, taking a few threatening steps forward. "Why kill me if I was supposed to live, especially when my living or dying wouldn't affect the epidemic at all? It doesn't make sense!"

"That's because you're thinking too narrowly," Yue said. "I didn't create that epidemic for my own gain; I created it to counter Chaos. And when I realized that you were able to fight off the virus I created, an opportunity presented itself. This opportunity had the potential to not only counter Chaos, but get the upper hand.

"But it also carried some very real risks, and it required tremendous sacrifice. Basically, because to explain it in any more detail would be impossible for the human mind to comprehend, by killing you before your time, I created a hole in the balance. Ironically, this means that Order created chaos. And thus, Chaos was forced to create order in retaliation. This began a series of chain events that leads up to this day- when decades of counter-retaliation finally come to a climax."

Yue nodded to Sakura, who lay in her bed, wheezing with every breath. "It all comes down to her. I told you before, Syaoran: she is your opposite. You two are so completely different that what one of you lacks, the other possesses something that fills that void. Your souls fit together seamlessly like two puzzle pieces that form a whole. Your existences, right down to the actions you make, balance each other. And so if you died where you should have lived..."

"Then Sakura needs to live where she should have died," Syaoran said quietly to the floor.

Yue nodded firmly. "When that happens, the balance will shift in my favor. But if she dies, the balance will shift in Chaos' favor. And Chaos has something *big* planned if things turn out for her."

"What do you mean?" Syaoran said, his aura flaring. "It's bad enough that Sakura's sick and dying! What else is she planning?"

"The virus that's killing Sakura is indeed a creation of Chaos, but it's not an original design," Yue said. "It is based on the virus I created

fifty years ago in this very town. However, Chaos made one crucial change to the original. My virus was slow and methodical because it had to keep the victim's body alive in order to successfully mutate. However, Chaos' modification is swift and erratic, seeking to kill its victim as fast as possible because, unlike my virus that mutated at exactly seventy-two hours into the illness, her virus mutates at the exact moment of the victim's death.

"Right now, this illness is limited to Sakura alone. But if she dies - and I would say she has less than twelve hours - this virus will mutate and become airborne. By drawing on the echoes of Sakura's tremendous strength of soul, it will become unstoppable. As each strain enters a new victim and kills him, it will mutate again. Suddenly, there will be hundreds of different viruses mutating out of control until there is no more life to feed from."

Syaoran stood dumbstruck, staring at Sakura who was fighting to stay alive. She didn't know it, but she was fighting for the whole world. "How can I stop this? What can I do?"

"Unfortunately, I can't tell you," Yue said stonily and drawing his arms tighter around himself. "But I can say this: you are the key to Sakura's life. If your existence here didn't matter, you would have disappeared fifty years ago. I've created a much more intricate picture than it looks from a distance and I would never make such a drastic sacrifice without having good reason."

Yue kneeled down to Syaoran and took his shoulders. The darkening rays of the sunset began to wipe his appearance from the air. "I hate myself for it, but you are my secret weapon, Syaoran. I know you will do what's best for her."

Yue's torn expression faded with the last rays of the sun, leaving Syaoran whirling. Of course he would do what's best for Sakura. Her wellbeing was all that mattered to him.

But Syaoran also knew what Yue meant by 'secret weapon.'

He was like an impending explosion. Once triggered, he would detonate and be no more.

In tune with Yue's prediction, Sakura's fever began to skyrocket again after midnight, and she became completely unresponsive. Her only signs of life were her wheezing breaths and the way she mumbled every so often as if talking to someone in her dreams.

Syaoran sat like a stone by her bed, holding her hand and churning the conversation with Yue over and over in his mind. But no matter how many ways he viewed the situation, he didn't see how anything he did could possibly make a difference. If he truly was the only one in the world who could save Sakura, then why did he feel so utterly helpless?

"If it's any consolation," Eriol said, coming up behind Syaoran around 4am. "She's still watching you."

Syaoran didn't even turn around. "Whatever the hell that means."

"Chaos," Eriol expounded. "She's still watching you very closely."

"And that's supposed to console me?" Syaoran asked bitterly.

He could feel Eriol shrug. "I would be relieved to know that my enemy still thought of me as a threat."

"Yeah, well I don't feel very threatening right now," Syaoran said as Sakura took a particularly labored breath. He squeezed her hand and brought it to his forehead. He wished that the heat from Sakura's fevered body would sink into him somehow. He wanted to be able to feel it because maybe then he would know what to do. "I don't think I can save her. Not from this."

"She should be dead now," Eriol said. The seriousness in his voice seemed to leak out into the room. "You have no idea how hard it has been for Chaos to touch her. Sakura-san is strong, which is why

Chaos had to resort to such an extreme tactic like this, but Sakura-san would never have made it this far without you."

"Even if I saved her one thousand times before tonight," Syaoran said quietly, "If she dies here, then it's all for nothing."

"Nothing is ever nothing," Eriol said. "Even nothing is something."

Syaoran shook his head. "I don't think that's right."

"Well, at the very least remember that you're not alone," Eriol said. "Chaos has her eye trained on you... and one more. There is another that has the ability to alter Sakura's fate."

Syaoran finally turned around to face Eriol, but he wouldn't let Sakura's hand go. "Is it you?"

Eriol shook his head. "No. Like I said before, I'm just an observer. But I'm flattered that you would think otherwise."

Syaoran glared. "Then who? The brother?"

"No, not him. Chaos stopped watching him some time ago," Eriol said. "The person you're looking for has already altered your fate once. Without him, you wouldn't be what you are today."

"Clow?" Syaoran asked, his voice rising.

Eriol nodded firmly.

Syaoran stood up, a wave of hope surging through him. "That makes sense. He's a magician! He brought me back to life-"

"Well, he gave you a fake one," Eriol interrupted.

"-and if anyone could do anything for Sakura, it's him," Syaoran said, ignoring Eriol's comments. For the first time in hours, Syaoran voluntarily released Sakura's hand. He stood over her bed for a moment as if contemplating something grave.

"She'll be okay if I leave, won't she?" Syaoran asked.

Eriol shrugged. "Her chances all rely on your discovery of why you're important to her survival. Whether you're sitting here like a stone or actively pursuing her cure doesn't affect her chances of living or dying. Until you change her fate, she'll die all the same."

"How long do I have?" Syaoran asked heading for the door.

"Not long," Eriol said gravely. "A little less than two hours."

Syaoran nodded firmly. He reached down and brushed a few auburn hairs out Sakura's fever-slick face. "I have to do something. I can't just sit here and hope for the best."

He headed for the door. Before he left, he took one last look at Sakura lying on the bed, fighting for every breath. Then he turned toward Eriol, looking him in the eyes for the first time since the day they met.

"Thanks Hiiragizawa," Syaoran said slowly. He never thought he'd actually say those words.

Eriol's expression darkened further.

"Don't thank me just yet."

It took Syaoran a lot longer to get to Clow's mansion from Sakura's house than the first time he had made the trek. Back then, he'd been able to float through walls. It surprised him how many barriers there were between Clow's place and Sakura's now that he had to physically pass them all. He pushed his unfeeling body as far as it could go, but it still seemed like he was moving in slow motion. He warily watched the moon sink in the sky with every step he took.

At last he arrived at Clow's, running up the short path that led to the front porch. The windows were dark and the house itself seemed

dead, but it didn't deter Syaoran in the slightest. He simply kept on running until he reached the porch.

As he approached the heavy oak door with the giant bronze knocker, it began to sink into the wall just as it had last time he visited. He increased his speed, but by the time he reached it, the door had vanished.

"No!" Syaoran said, banging his fists violently on the blank brick wall. "Why are you doing this? Sakura needs help!"

Beyond frustrated, he turned and leaned his back against the wall.

"I need help," he said to the night sky.

Suddenly, the support behind Syaoran gave way, making him tumble backward into the house. He landed flat on his back, stunned and staring at a gap in the wall in front of him. The door that just a moment ago hadn't even been there swung silently shut.

Syaoran got up and looked around. It was eerily dark and quiet, just as it had been a little less than a month ago when Syaoran dared to enter this house to ask for Clow's help.

An odd sensation weighed heavily in Syaoran's soul as he made the long trek down the hallway. It was a feeling of foreboding and... regret. He did the best he could to shrug the feeling off.

He came to the door at the end of the hallway. This one, thankfully, did not attempt to disappear on him. He pushed it open and stepped into the same spacious room that he had been in before. The sliver of the moon was perfectly framed in the center of the huge window that took up most of the north wall. A dying fire lay sputtering in the fireplace that sat against the north wall. About the only other thing in the room was that huge red armchair. Syaoran marched up to it.

"I apologize for the less-than-warm welcome, Syaoran," Clow said as Syaoran rounded on the chair. The older man sat there with his head

resting on one fist. His eyes were mirthful as always. "The house shuts down to anyone who comes near. I am a hunted man and it never hurts to be too careful."

"Sakura's sick," Syaoran said unceremoniously. He knew that Clow would know who Sakura was. She seemed very important to a lot of people.

The spark of playfulness dimmed from Clow's expression, but did not disappear entirely. "I am painfully aware of that."

Syaoran was shocked. Clow knew all this time and just let her get worse?

"So *do something* !" Syaoran yelled. "She's dying!"

Clow's serene expression never wavered. "And what exactly do you propose I do?"

Frustration surged through Syaoran. "You're the magician! Can't you give me something to cure her? Like a potion or a magic spell or something? You have to help her! I don't know what to do."

"The chaos that is inside Sakura-san," Clow said calmly as Syaoran began to pace back and forth in front of him. "is slowly eating away at the energy that makes up her soul. That energy is unique to her and impossible to duplicate. It would be like trying to replace a part of Sakura-san's brain. The human brain is so infinitely complex that people don't even know how it works, so an attempt to recreate it would be a total waste of time. And if something as physical as the *brain* is that elaborate, try to imagine the inner workings of the soul. There is no magic spell or potion that can recreate the energy Sakura-san has lost."

"So what are you saying?" Syaoran asked. "There's nothing you can do?"

"No, Syaoran, there is nothing *I* can do," Clow said. "You are the only one who can help her."

"How?" Syaoran said through clenched teeth. He leaned close. "What can I *possibly* do about her soul?"

"The fire is dying, Syaoran," Clow said, gesturing to the hearth in front of him. His robes flowed gracefully as he motioned. "Would you please put another log in before it completely goes out?"

" *What?*" Syaoran hissed. "Sakura's dying and you want me to save your *fire* ?"

"Please do as I ask," Clow said, a warm smile playing on his lips. "Use the white birch log from the basket beside the hearth."

Glaring maliciously and feeling used, Syaoran did as he was told. There was only one white log in the entire pile of wood, so Syaoran picked it up and lugged it the few feet to the fireplace.

When he dumped it into the smoldering embers, the reaction was immediate. A strong, steady fire erupted from under the log and began consume it. Within seconds, tendrils of flame were licking up the side of the log. Soon, a roaring fire had sprung to life again where just minutes before there had been nothing but a few struggling embers.

"That's better, isn't it?" Clow said, the light from the roaring fire dancing on his face. "Did you see how that worked, Syaoran?"

Syaoran shrugged, feeling completely hopeless. The moon was low in the sky now with a bluish hue of the sunrise near the horizon. "The log gave the fire something to feed from."

Clow nodded. "Now take it a step further. Imagine the dying flames represented Sakura-san's dying soul."

Syaoran turned to Clow, a small spark of realization slowly dawning on him.

Clow's small smile spread a bit. "The virus inside Sakura-san is a modification of the virus that you were able to fight off fifty years ago. Although Chaos did alter the original design, many things about the virus remain the same, including its *weaknesses* . There is something in your soul, Syaoran, that can cure Sakura-san's illness.

"A soul's energy can't be recreated out of nothing, but it can be mixed with compatible energy. If you give Sakura-san what is left of the energy that keeps you bound to this plane, that energy will cure her because it contains the essence of whatever it is about you that was able to negate the effects of Order's virus back then. It will give her the extra push she needs to survive."

Hope brimming in him, Syaoran ran for the door. Right before he reached the handle, however, he paused. "But how do I give her my own energy? I didn't even know I had it."

Clow shook his head. "It's not something that can be instructed. But if you want to help her enough, I know you will find a way to make it happen. Just remember, Syaoran, that the energy you have is the only thing that binds you to this world. When you give it up, the Void will take that as a gesture of defeat. There is no other way to save Sakura-san's life, but you must be prepared to receive the consequences of your actions."

Syaoran yanked the door open before Clow was even done talking.

"I was going to disappear at the new moon anyway," Syaoran said bitterly. "Making what's left of my soul useful to the only person in the world who matters is nothing to regret."

He ran from the house then, slamming the front door hard as he left.

"Sakura-san would certainly disagree," Clow said quietly, snuffing the fire in the hearth with a wave of his hand.

As the landscape slid by in a blur, Syaoran found himself passing through the park. It was strange because the park wasn't exactly on the way between Clow's mansion and Sakura's house. But his feet had taken him here anyway.

Perhaps he just wanted to see it one more time while he had the chance.

As he dashed through the bushes that surrounded the penguin slide, something around his neck went taught and drew him back. He struggled for a moment before finding that the scarf Sakura made for him was caught on a branch. It took him a few panicked moments to get the scarf untangled. The second it released, he started running again, only to jog to a stop a few feet later.

What would happen to the scarf when he was gone? Would it disappear with him? He couldn't bear the thought. This messy hunk of yarn was somehow a part of him. If he couldn't stay, then maybe, at least, Sakura's gift to him could.

Syaoran took it off his neck and looked around. Where to put it?

He happened to look up at the apartment complex that towered over the park. His eyes wandered up to the floor where the light in Wei's apartment was still on.

Making a split-second decision, Syaoran raced into the complex and up the stairs. Within seconds he was standing in front of Wei's door and knocking in short, panicked bursts.

The door opened almost immediately.

"Syaoran?" Wei said. He had an odd expression on his face, somewhere between surprised and relieved.

"Sakura's sick," Syaoran said, his voice shaking only because no other part of his numb body had the capacity. "She'll die if I don't do

something."

He gingerly held the lumpy scarf out to Wei. "This is the second most important thing in the world to me, but I can't bring it where I'm going. Would you keep it? I just want to leave knowing that it's safe."

Wei reached out and took the scarf from Syaoran as if taking something precious from a person who was about to fall from a cliff. "Of course I will keep it, Syaoran. But shouldn't you give it to Sakura-san so she will have something to remember you by? Otherwise she may come to think of you as only a dream."

Syaoran backed up a few paces. "But I really am just a dream. And it wouldn't be fair to her to let her think anything else."

Then he turned and took off down the fire escape steps.

Wei stayed in the doorway long after Syaoran's footsteps had faded, clutching the scarf in one hand.

"Dreams are meant to come true," Wei said to the scarf. "It is unfair to your mind to think they are meant for anything else, especially something as horrible as oblivion. Oblivion is a graveyard for dreams, not an afterlife. Do you think he will understand that in time?"

Getting no answer from the scarf, Wei stepped back into the apartment and quietly closed the door, but not before eying the brightening horizon out the window at the end of the hall.

The sight made him feel ill.

Disclaimer : CSS is the property of CLAMP and all related companies.

Special Thanks to Snickerer for beta-reading for me and getting the kinks out of this chapter. Faucet... Gah! -.- Special mention goes to

Broadway Belle. Sorry I was lazy.

See my profile for update rantage. ;)

Leaving a Void

Chapter Nineteen

Leaving a Void

Sakura didn't know that a color itself could be physically painful, but the green of the walls was so blinding that it made her eyes feel like they were being pushed inside her head. Even when she closed them, the color seemed to seep through the lids until she only saw green there too.

She had no idea how long she'd been wandering the endless maze, but it had been long enough to make her certain that there was no way out that would lead her back home. She was as sure of that as she was sure the maze was green. And yet, she couldn't stop her feet from wandering through the halls. They seemed to move her forward on their own, her energy draining into the ground with each futile step.

It didn't matter how many different paths she took, or how many times she backtracked to turn a corner she was certain she hadn't seen before. There were probably hundreds of thousands of different ways that she could make a path in the maze, but they all ended in only one place.

And, as her being filled with a dark, smothering dread, she found herself facing the only exit the maze had to offer- the place to which every path seemed to flow toward.

It was a hole in the center of the maze, its bottomless depths so still and black that it could have been painted there, except for the way tiny flecks of green were tearing away from the floor and disappearing into the blackness. She had been faced with the sight hundreds of times since finding herself in this place, but it never failed to take the breath from her body.

Sakura found herself suddenly on the ground, exhaustion overwhelming her with the realization that her legs had finally given up. The green floor was so cold that it felt as if she were sitting on a block of ice. The cold tore at the skin on her bare legs until she was sure that they were on fire. But she couldn't even find the strength it would take to simply reposition her legs. All she could do was sit there helplessly, staring at the hole as it gobbled up the maze a few inches at a time.

She felt a horrible wave repulsion and sadness as she stared into the total blackness. She had no idea where the hole would lead her, but she knew that it wasn't back to her life. It went somewhere else final and total; somewhere that would make the people who loved her very sad. Once she went in, she could never come out.

But she was so tired. The blinding green walls seemed to be closing in on her and the stale air was suffocating. A wave of chills slid down her spine and she quaked violently. Her breathing was rapid and shuddered and no matter how long she sat there motionless, she just couldn't catch her breath. When she tried to move, even if it was just to lift her hand off the ground, a stabbing pain erupted from her fingers and down into her toes.

It hurts, Sakura thought, too tired even to speak. A few tears fell from her eyes, taking the last ounce of her strength with them. The hole seemed to feed off her weakness and gobbled a nearly a foot of the floor in a matter of seconds. The ground under her right leg began to crumble as the green gave way to black.

Sakura sat as limp as a rag doll, unable to summon the tiniest bit of strength it would take to simply move her foot.

I'm sorry everyone, Sakura thought, feeling an overwhelming sadness, even though no tears could come. *I'm just so tired*.

The blackness had swallowed her leg. The next time the floor crumbled, her entire body would slip inside...

"SAKURA!"

And suddenly, her entire body surged with protest, even as she slipped into unconsciousness.

No... I'm not ready to leave yet

Syaoran grabbed Sakura's limp body and tried to tear her away from the black tendrils of the Void that had wrapped around her ankles and waist. The tendrils looked fragile enough, like brittle strands of ink-colored hair, but they held onto Sakura as if they were steel cables. He pulled as hard as he could, but the more he pulled, the further she seemed to sink.

"No!" Syaoran yelled at the hole. The darkness flared at his words. "You can't take her!"

The Void shuddered for a few moments and then the tendrils around Sakura's legs and waist slipped back into the hole like someone slurping up spaghetti. With the resistance suddenly gone, Syaoran was able to stumble back a few feet, dragging Sakura with him. Then he reached down and scooped Sakura into his arms, taking her as far away from the hole as he dared to move her. He gently put her on the ground in front of one of the many openings that lead from the twisting hallways of the maze.

She was so pale that the fever in her cheeks looked like red wine stained on white carpet. Even her disheveled auburn hair seemed to have lost some of its color. When she took a breath, her entire body trembled with the pain of trying to jam air into her liquid-filled lungs.

Behind him, the Void grumbled hungrily at the sound of Sakura's strained breathing. It was a haunting noise, like the howl from an alien beast on the hunt.

Syaoran's gaze skipped to the bright green walls and he realized with an odd sinking feeling that he'd been in this place before. It was

a long time ago when he had accidentally wandered into Sakura's dream. The memory was so strange and hazy that it seemed like it happened in another life. With a jolt, Syaoran realized that it kind of had happened in another life... He was a completely different entity than he had been in that memory. And it was all because of her.

With the thought of how much he owed Sakura, Syaoran took her hand and held it tight. Now that he was sitting here with Sakura's life draining away right before his eyes, he wasn't sure what to do. He figured that if he wanted to give his energy up to her, he just would. But nothing happened.

Syaoran gritted his teeth. This was it: the reason he was here; the reason he risked so much and threw away so much- all for her. If at this very last moment he couldn't do anything for her, what was the point of his existence? He had made a promise that day in Sakura's room... a promise that he had no idea would be so difficult to keep. But it wasn't the burden of responsibility that was so difficult. It was what he was giving up that hurt him more than he dared to tell his heart. Because if he was truly honest with himself about how he felt, he wouldn't have the strength to do what he was about to do.

So he turned his thoughts to why he'd come to Sakura in the first place. He told himself that he was obligated to protect her because he was the only one who knew she was in danger. And if nothing else, he was going to keep his promises.

With that small epiphany, Syaoran felt a hole develop in his soul like a crack in a dam wall. Green energy spilled out down his arm and glowed a bright pink where his hand met Sakura's.

"Come on, Sakura..." Syaoran said softly. "Please let this work."

Moments later, to Syaoran's utter relief, Sakura's eyes fluttered open and the color returned to her face.

"Syaoran?" she whispered, the word escaping her lips like a sigh. She smiled softly up at him for a moment before seeing the green

walls just behind him. Then she sat up like someone had grabbed her shirt and tugged, her eyes wide with dread.

"What are you doing here?" she said, her words clipped and panicked. The grip on Syaoran's hand loosened just a bit. "There's no way back once you come in! The only way out of here is through that hole. And I don't know where it goes, but it's not home..."

Syaoran followed Sakura's gaze to where the hole gapped in the ground. A shiver ran down his back. "I've seen that before. It's the called the Void," he couldn't stand to look at it any longer, so he turned back to Sakura. "You don't belong in there."

"But there's no other way out," Sakura whispered, her voice strained and tired. "And I'm so sick of this place. I feel like it's eating me alive. A few seconds ago I thought that I might go crazy here... I just wanted somewhere that wasn't green."

Her voice has risen to a frightened, shamed crescendo. Tears began to leak from the corners of her eyes. "Syaoran... I was about to give up. If you hadn't come, I'd be in there right now."

She reached up and grabbed him tightly as if he was the piece of driftwood that kept her afloat in a turbulent ocean. "It was so stupid. How could I ever think that wherever that hole goes is better than here?"

Syaoran just held her for a moment as she cried softly and trembled in his arms. He didn't know what he should say, but the words began to tumble out of his mouth anyway.

"When you're in pain, all you can think about is when it will end," Syaoran said. "And if the pain stays long enough, you start wondering what you can do to stop it. Giving up is so easy, I know. But you didn't give up, Sakura. Somehow you knew that everything you see here is just an illusion. The Void weakened you and then tried to trick you into thinking the only way out of here is into the darkness."

Sakura nodded vigorously. "I don't want to leave through there. But I swear that I've looked everywhere for another way out. Every path leads right back to that thing."

"There's always another way out," Syaoran said quietly. "It's just that sometimes it's not exactly straight forward."

Syaoran lifted his head to look up to the ceiling and, after a moment, Sakura followed his gaze. It seemed so natural, but she hadn't thought about it until that moment.

It was a beautiful night sky with the hint of sunshine just peeking over the edges of the maze walls. The green was still assaulting, but the color seemed to soften and blur at the edge of the sky. The stars twinkled softly like faraway street lights.

"Why did I think the maze had a ceiling?" Sakura asked quietly, staring at the sky. "I always thought that I'd look up and only see more green."

"That's why I'm here, I think," Syaoran said. He seemed lost in the sky as he held her hand tightly. "I needed to show you this. You couldn't see it before because the maze didn't want you to."

"But I can't climb the walls," Sakura said, her mind beginning to move again. "They're way too high. I'd get nowhere."

Syaoran nodded. "Yeah. To get over those walls, you'd need wings..."

He trailed off and then stared at Sakura for a long moment as if trying to memorize the exact color of her eyes and count every hair on her head. Then he slowly drew his arms around her shoulders and brought her close to him, his arms wrapped around her back.

She could clearly feel his hands resting on her shoulder blades. It felt as if he had touched warm cotton to her skin where his hands were and the sensation began to spread all down her back. Then it

seemed to melt inside her and shot deep within her soul, exploding like a firework that lights up the dead of night.

Warmth flooded her painfully frozen limbs, reaching all the way to the tips of her fingers. The heavy pain finally washed away, replaced by a feeling of weightlessness, as if she could waft away on the breeze.

"What was that?" Sakura whispered to herself as Syaoran guided her to her feet. He kept one hand on her back while he held Sakura's hand with his other. Sakura's mind began to sharpen and the things that had once been blurred with tears came back into focus.

"Feel any better?" Syaoran asked. His voice had taken on a strange quality, as if he were talking from very far away.

Sakura nodded slowly. "A thousand times better, actually. But why-?"

She turned around to find Syaoran standing there, gazing at her serenely as if everything in the world suddenly made sense. However, it was right at that moment when Sakura's own world plunged into confusion.

He was disappearing right before her eyes. Already, she could see straight through him to the green walls that stood looming like the sheer side of an unclimbable mountain. The only thing left of him was the faint outline of his body lined with skin tones and his smiling amber eyes.

"Syaoran!" Sakura said, grabbing the line of his shoulders. She could still feel him there, but it was like his skin was made of water that was sliding down a drain. He began to slip from her grasp. Panic welled up inside her. "What's going on?"

It was only then that Sakura realized that it wasn't Syaoran who was slipping away at all. It was her. She was being drawn into the sky as if she were a feather on the wind. Syaoran gripped her hands tightly, but the look in his eyes told her that it was only a matter of time before he would let her go.

"I don't understand!" Sakura said, tears falling from her eyes. They drifted upward as if gravity had reversed. "Why is this happening?"

"I finally figured it out," Syaoran said so softly that Sakura had to strain to hear him. "I can't change anything by just flinging energy out into the world and hoping that it will make a difference. Energy must be focused and shaped before it can help anyone do anything."

While Sakura tried in vain to figure out what Syaoran was talking about, he reached up behind her with a hand that she could barely see and plucked something from her back. He brought it into Sakura's line of vision.

It was a long, pure white feather that was shining so brightly that it seemed to be made of light. He put it behind Sakura's ear and smiled faintly.

"These will get you over the wall," Syaoran said.

Sakura put a hand behind her, groping wildly around her shoulder blades where Syaoran's hands had been just a few minutes before. Using her sense of touch, she made an image in her mind.

Wings had grown on her back. But they weren't made of feathers, really; more like light captured inside shards of glass. The wings were lifting her upwards without moving at all and she realized with a sinking sensation under her lungs that she had no control over them. She couldn't stop herself from slowly drifting from Syaoran's grasp.

Even as she was realizing this, her grip on Syaoran's forearms slipped and she jerked a few feet further into the air with a yelp.

"Come with me," Sakura said pleadingly. The tears were falling freely from her eyes now, sparkling suspended in the air like bubbles glinting off the sun.

But Syaoran only shook his head, the impression of his messy chocolate hair falling into his eyes. "I can't."

"Why?" Sakura sobbed. She hurt so much more now than she did when wandering alone in the maze. Now it was her soul that was throbbing with an emptiness, as if all her bones had suddenly disappeared from her body.

"Because I'd only weigh you down," Syaoran said. "Those wings were made for you... and only for you."

Sakura's grip slipped a few more inches. "No!"

"I have to go, Sakura," Syaoran said. "I know it seems like you're the one leaving me, but I'm just sending you back where you belong. It's just like I promised I would."

"Then promise me that you'll come back," Sakura yelled. A sound like static was beginning to pulse in her ears. "If you can go, then you can come back!"

Pain welled up inside Syaoran's eyes. It was the same pain that was leaking from Sakura's wings and into her soul. "I've made way too many promises, Sakura. I think that's why the universe is angry with me. But... maybe you can promise me something instead."

"Anything," Sakura said. She was hoping with every molecule in her body that his next words would be some magic spell; something that would give them a way to escape the maze together.

"Be happy, okay?" Syaoran said, reaching up to brush a strand of disheveled hair from her face. "Because if you don't enjoy the life that these wings give you, then everything was for nothing."

Sakura wanted to shake her head wildly in protest. She wanted to scream at him and demand answers. She wanted to do anything but leave him by the hole that would eventually take him the way it wanted to take her...

But Syaoran's eyes pleaded with her silently. They seemed to be saying so much more than he could ever possibly explain. A certain

painful sadness was trapped beneath that glassy, amber surface. She knew that if she were to tell him what she wanted to say - that she couldn't possibly be happy without him in her life - the glass would shatter and the pain would devour him.

So she slowly nodded, tears sliding from the edges of her eyes with the motion. Her movements were soft and strained so that she wouldn't disturb that fragile glass.

"Okay," she whispered as if agreeing to alter the planet's orbit. "I promise."

Sakura could almost see the relief flood through Syaoran at her words and he smiled. It was a sad, sad smile, but it seemed to eclipse the pain by just a bit. Sakura felt that she would make a million more promises if she could make that smile stay.

And then Syaoran was pulling her close to him even though it was like pulling a boulder straight up through the pressure of a thundering waterfall. He gripped her shoulders tightly and brought his face so close to hers that she swore she could see into his soul. Their lips brushed softly and she could feel the heat from her own breath beating against his face. She had the fleeting thought that maybe it would be possible to be happy if she could keep the very next moment in her mind forever...

But it was just then that Sakura's hands slipped right through Syaoran's body as if he had suddenly turned into mist. Without his grip holding her down, she began to drift into the sky like a leaf swept away by a strong river current. The shadow of Syaoran's mouth was moving, but she couldn't hear him. Sakura tried to say something - anything - but she was couldn't even clench her fists. All she could do was look down into his eyes that got smaller and smaller until tears blurred her vision and she could see only green.

Syaoran watched Sakura fall into the sky until the clouds above the maze swallowed her from sight. As soon as she was gone, Syaoran

felt his legs give from under him and he fell to his knees. He gazed at his hands, finding them transparent with only the pale hint of an ashen skin tone brushed onto the air where his hands were. He felt like a puff of air must feel as it carries someone's last breath into the world.

Suddenly, the maze melted all around him like colored water sloshing down the side of a wall. Sakura's room appeared in its wake, tinged orange from the sunrise. Tomoyo and Eriol were sleeping slumped against the wall across the room, Tomoyo's head resting gently on Eriol's shoulder. Touya was laying stretched out on the floor beside Sakura's bed, snoring fitfully.

"What happened?" Syaoran asked no one. His voice was strange, like an echo from a noise that died long ago. "Where did the maze go?"

"Sakura-san's nightmare has ended. And thus, the maze no longer exists."

Syaoran turned his heavy head toward the sound. There, standing by the door, was the same sleek, black panther-like creature Syaoran had seen during his first sunset after Clow's procedure. Its deep blue butterfly wings were tucked close to its flank as it stared at Syaoran with piercing sapphire eyes.

"It's really quite impressive what you have done here," Spinel said. "Even with all the help you received from Yue and Clow, your chances of actually changing that girl's fate were... slim at best. But it seems you have done the impossible."

Spinel's words sparked something in Syaoran. He turned around and dragged himself over to Sakura's bed. Each movement was like trying to pull himself out of quicksand.

But eventually he was able to get over to where Sakura was laying in her bed. The red had disappeared from her cheeks and color had begun to drain back into her skin. Relief flooded him with the sight.

But the feeling of relief quickly turned to ice with the sudden realization that not everything from the maze had gone away. With a dread weighing in his soul as heavy as lead, Syaoran found that Spinel Sun was standing beside the Void. Somehow, in the dim morning light flooding in from Sakura's window, the pit looked more black than it had in the maze.

"Why is that here?" Syaoran said, stumbling up against Sakura's bed. "I thought you said Sakura was safe."

Spinel nodded slowly. "She is. The Void is here for you."

A strange mix of relief and hopelessness surged through his soul. He could feel the Void breathing.

"You must forgive me," Spinel said after a few moments. "Leading souls into the Void isn't my usual post. However, Keroberos doesn't seem very cooperative at the moment, so I've taken the duty upon myself. I hope you will understand the lack of finesse. Now, Li-san, if you please..."

Syaoran slowly got to his feet and began walking toward the Void. It was as if he were a person made of sand who was walking into the wind. With each step, he felt a little piece of his soul fly away until he felt like there was nothing left of him.

He knew this day had been coming. He had been prepared for it since the moment he woke up in Clow Reed's home with a tangible body- something that should have been completely impossible. He understood that the only way to make everything balance out was to do something else that should be completely impossible.

And, for him, that was leaving Sakura.

Much too soon, Syaoran found himself on the edge of the pit, gazing into the absolute darkness. He turned back to look at Sakura laying on the bed. She stirred a bit as he watched her.

"Sakura..." Syaoran said. Tendrils slithered out from the Void and wrapped around his limbs- or what was left of them. "Remember what you promised me. Please don't let it all be for nothing."

The tendrils tugged fiercely and Syaoran found the blackness rapidly swallowing his field of vision.

And then, suddenly, there was only the blackness.

Blackness, and a sound like static.

Sakura opened her eyes to a blurry gold color covering her field of vision. It took her a few moments to register that the gold was emanating from the sunlight streaming into her room from the window.

Why in the world had she expected to see green?

She tried to sit up, but her muscles screamed in protest. It was like she had run a marathon the day before, but she hadn't... had she?

Come to think of it, she couldn't remember anything about the day before. She strained her memory, but the only thing that came back to her was Syaoran's face, his eyes heavy with concern. Sakura felt her stomach twist with the image. Something must've been very wrong to make him look like that...

In her memory, she was looking down on him from someplace very high. Then the memory jumped like a warped section of an old filmstrip. Now the image had changed slightly and she wasn't looking at him from so high up, but she still wasn't quite on the ground. The vision faded to black, but not before she caught a glimpse of Touya's black hair to one side of her head.

That's right... Sakura thought. *Touya was carrying me home because I was sick. I couldn't walk and everything hurt so badly...*

She felt well enough now, though. Maybe a little sore, but certainly better than she had been feeling in her memory.

However, something about the fact made her wary. It was as if someone had told her that she'd won the lottery when she didn't remember buying a ticket.

With considerable difficulty, she was finally able to pull herself up on her elbows to take a look around. She was surprised to see Tomoyo, Eriol, and Touya all sleeping in various spots around the room.

Why in the world is everyone in here? she wondered. *It's like they were keeping vigil or something...*

A horrible feeling of uneasiness began to grow in the pit of her stomach as the sleep cleared from her mind. When she glanced around the room, she had the distinct feeling that something was missing. It was as if something had been stolen from her while she slept.

As Sakura's mind began to whirl, Tomoyo stirred and opened her eyes. She rubbed them daintily for a few moments before looking in Sakura's direction. When she saw Sakura sitting up, every trace of grogginess instantly disappeared from her face.

"Sakura-chan!" she exclaimed, jumping up from her spot on the ground. "You're awake!"

She came up to the bed and touched a gentle hand to Sakura's forehead, almost as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"Tomoyo-chan..." Sakura said, surprised at how gruff her voice sounded.

When Tomoyo heard her voice, it seemed she was finally convinced that she wasn't dreaming. She turned around to address the room.

"Sakura-chan is awake!" She yelled. It was the first time that Sakura had ever heard Tomoyo actually yell something.

But it had the desired effect. Moments later, Touya was up and feeling Sakura's forehead as Fujitaka came rushing into the room. After a few hectic moments and some general questions, everyone seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief. Well, everyone but Eriol. He was standing by the wall with a kind of bittersweet smile on his face. Sakura got the impression that he knew exactly why she felt like she was full of holes...

"Why is everyone here?" Sakura asked Touya as he reached over her for the compress that had fallen from her head during the night.

"We were worried about you, Sakura-chan," Tomoyo answered. She took Sakura's hand and squeezed it. "It didn't seem right to leave you like that."

It was when Tomoyo grabbed her hand that Sakura was finally able to place what was missing. The realization hit her like a lightning strike.

"Where's Syaoran?" she asked. She looked wildly around the room, expecting to see him somewhere, his amber eyes serious and locked onto hers.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sakura could see Eriol's body sag ever so slightly.

"Hey, yeah," Touya said, his eyes darting around the room suspiciously. "Where did he go? I didn't hear him leave."

"I'm sure Reed-kun just went home to get some rest," Tomoyo said quickly. "He must be exhausted after just watching you all that time. He'd just sit right here, holding your hand. He refused to leave your sight for even a second."

Sakura brought her hand to her chest. It was warm and tingly- such a different sensation from the rest of her sore, tired body.

"He'll be so relieved to know you're feeling better, Sakura-chan," Tomoyo said, smiling. "I bet you that he's already on his way back over here to see how you're doing. I know he can't stay away for long."

Sakura smiled faintly, but she was so sure.

Because that emptiness she'd felt before, the emptiness that could only be filled by Syaoran's presence...

It was back now.

And it hurt so much more than the soreness that the illness had left behind.

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So Close

Chapter 20

So Close

The tendrils released Syaoran in front of a door. It was a modest, unassuming door with a brushed brass knob and a messy, cracking frame. The only odd thing about it was that it was painted white.

A splash of white in the heart of darkness.

Feeling like he had little choice, Syaoran reached out and turned the knob. The door creaked open and Syaoran stepped into the room beyond it. He reached behind him to shut the door, and thereby shutting out the Void and the horrible static noise it made, but the door wasn't there anymore. Now there was only an open hole where the Void brewed menacingly just beyond the frame.

Syaoran turned away from the blackness to examine the place in which he'd arrived. It was an all-white room, which was pretty much all that could be said about it. The light that illuminated the room seemed to come from nowhere, so nothing cast a shadow- not even the corners of the walls, if there were walls at all. Without a reference like a shadow, Syaoran found it impossible to tell if he had landed in whole other world that went on forever, or if he was inside a box the size of a closet.

After he spent a very long time peering into the absolute whiteness of the room (which was better than turning around and watching the absolute darkness of the Void), figures began to take shape in the space just beyond Syaoran's eyesight. It was like someone was fading into the distance as they approached, except they didn't seem to be moving.

"I think he's finally getting used to it. Are you okay there, kiddo?"

The voice made Syaoran momentarily think about jumping back into the Void. Of all the people in the world who he had to deal with now... But even they were better than the horrible blackness behind him.

Ruby Moon and Spinel Sun finally faded into view.

"It takes awhile to get used to this place," Ruby Moon said, her hands resting on her hips. "Too bad you can't see the rest of it. It's really something."

"What are you talking about?" Syaoran said irritably. The bright scarlet of Ruby Moon's hair and the deep blue of Spinel's fur against the stark whiteness was becoming painful. He had to shield his eyes. "There's nothing here at all. It's just a whole lot of white wasteland."

Ruby Moon chuckled softly. "That's such a *human* answer. It's so endearing."

"Enough, Ruby Moon," Spinel Sun said, his wings flaring. "Let's get on with this."

"Right, right..." Ruby Moon said. She stepped forward and rested one elbow in the palm of her other hand while holding her chin. "Suppi was generous enough to let me sit in on this session. Usually I couldn't be bothered with something as mundane as a soul's Judgment, but you have me intrigued, kiddo. Just what *will* they do with someone like you? You've crossed just about every line that is remotely possible for an earthbound soul, and yet you didn't really mean any harm. I'm very, very anxious to see this."

Ruby Moon stepped back and Spinel Sun, while he didn't seem to move at all, became the center of Syaoran's attention.

"Before we proceed, let it be known that your fate is already sealed," Spinel said, his grandiose tone oddly fitting under the circumstances. "This is not a bargaining session. No answer you give me can

possibly change the destination of your final departure, so you may as well be truthful and forthright. Do you understand?"

"Yes..." Syaoran said. He felt like the white was smothering him now.

"Tell me, Syaoran Li," Spinel said. Syaoran went ridged at the mention of his name. "What is it that you want most at this very moment?"

"I want to be together with Sakura," Syaoran said, surprised at the way the words flowed from him. It was as if everything else about him had been swept away, leaving only a strong desire to bear his soul for everything it was. "On earth."

"Why do you think you deserve such a thing?"

"Because..." Syaoran thought hard. Even with the irresistible urge plaguing him to pluck the answers from the absolute limits of his unconscious mind, he still found it hard to say exactly what he wanted. "Because I've sacrificed so much already. I don't understand why, after everything I've given up, more is taken from me."

"And therein lies the heart of your confusion," Spinel said. "You believe you are entitled to something that you never paid for in the first place."

"I paid!" Syaoran yelled, getting angry. "My life was taken from me and then I gave up what was left of it to save an innocent person! How does that condemn me to a place like this?"

"You are mistaken," Spinel said, speaking with the patience of an entity that knew exactly what it was talking about. "It's true that an unconditional sacrifice is always rewarded. However, when one offends the balance of the universe, a sacrifice is required as a penalty. You did not make the initial sacrifice. Therefore, your penalty has yet to be paid."

"What about giving up my life fifty years ago?" Syaoran asked.

"You did not willingly sacrifice your life," Spinel said. "It was taken from you."

A sense of doom was beginning to choke Syaoran. He knew he was getting truthful answers. Lies seemed impossible in this place. It was as if conversation was boiled down to its absolute essentials.

"What about the efforts I made to get close to Sakura so I could save her?" Syaoran said, knowing that he would get a perfectly reasonable answer. "No one else could do anything for her! I was the only one who knew!"

"When you say you were the only one who could help someone, you speak of obligation," Spinel said. "It was the weight of responsibility for Sakura Kinomoto's life that compelled you to seek something that was not yours to begin with. You were a ghost; a being that can float through life, but never interact with it. And then, suddenly, through a procedure that defies the cycle of life, you became something almost human. You were able to manipulate objects, people, and even the course of fate through this procedure- which is something absolutely forbidden to an entity that has already expired its chance to make its mark on the world. You had not sacrificed anything yet. You only gained. Gained life, gained wisdom, gained love.

"But these gains were not handouts. They are part of a cosmic contract you made the very moment you agreed to defile the cycle. In this case, the agreement was that you had a limited amount of time to meddle in the affairs of the Living. After the allotted time expired, you would be expected to make your payment at that time."

Spinel's last sentence rang harshly in the room as if the creature had shouted it, but he had not raised his voice at all. In this horrible white room, the essence of truth in every word was enough to make Syaoran feel like his soul was being turned inside out. All his misconceptions about his place in the world were being brought into the light to be scrutinized, dissected, and refuted. He couldn't possibly deny anything Spinel said because he could feel the truth in

them like one sees the jagged hole in a broken window. In this room there was no doubt or uncertainty.

There was only an incredible sense of hopelessness and regret.

"Now is that time," Spinel said. His expression and tone hadn't changed in the slightest, but Syaoran could feel the power in the words. It was a heaviness, like a gavel about to come down in a courtroom. "You must understand that a sacrifice only has meaning when you give up something absolutely precious. Your time on Earth as a ghost was your intended sacrifice, but do you want that kind of existence again?"

"No," Syaoran whispered toward the white floor.

The very thought of being around Sakura, but never able to talk to her or feel her while she never even knew he was there... No, he couldn't stand that. It would be worse than oblivion; it would be torture. And the universe didn't want to torture him, it only wanted to take what it was entitled to.

"Then you know why you can't give us that in exchange for what you have done to the cycle," Spinel said. "We don't want your past, Syaoran Li. It is dead and worthless. For your sacrifice, we require something bright and full of life. That is why we are taking away your hopeful future with the person you care for the most."

Spinel got off his haunches and padded forward, which made Syaoran instantly stumble backwards. Something in the creature's eyes made Syaoran feel like he was being cornered.

"We sentence you to the Void for purification, Syaoran Li," Spinel took another threatening step forward while Syaoran backed up again. "There, oblivion awaits your soul."

Syaoran couldn't say he didn't deserve it. He couldn't complain about unfairness. All his pitiful excuses had been laid out before him and

completely shattered. There was nothing left for him except to accept his punishment.

To make his sacrifice.

"I told you that I would be the one to break you," Ruby Moon's voice sounded clearly beside him. "But Suppi does such a good job, don't you think?"

Syaoran backed up again. The woman's presence was suffocating.

"And just so you know," Ruby Moon said, sliding up to touch Syaoran's face with the tips of her fingers. "This has nothing to do with how I feel about you. In fact, I really, really liked you, Syaoran Li. That's what makes this so hard."

Ruby Moon raised her hand and gave a confident, forceful push on Syaoran's chest. He stumbled backward again, and then, suddenly, he was falling. He had been pushed beyond the door to the white room and into the blackness of the Void.

The deafening static noise pressed in all around him.

"You didn't watch, Yue."

"I know what happened. As soon as his judgment was announced, I could see it play out in my mind. That was enough."

"He took it well, though. He hardly resisted at all in the end."

"They never do, do they? In the end, the truth is too much for their poor little minds. He never even stood a chance against Spinel Sun's undeniable logic."

"Aw, come on Yue. Lighten up, okay? It's not like it was for nothing. We did it, we won another era! That's something to be happy about, right? What's one life for all we've gained?"

"But he only accomplished half our goal, Keroberos. We came up short once again."

"Hey, but he was so close. I really thought the kid would pull through."

"It certainly was the best opportunity we ever had. But even after everything that we subjected him to- all the signposts we put down and all the things that were practically handed to him, he still didn't understand in the end. Perhaps it truly is impossible for humanity to comprehend the lesson we've tried to teach all these millennium."

"We'll try again, Yue. We were so close his time. It's all a matter of trial and error. We'll get it someday."

"But it's too late for him. I suppose I should be in mourning for his lost soul, but it won't matter soon. He probably doesn't even remember me now. And maybe that's for the best. Perhaps, knowing that, I can try forget it all as well."

"Now I know that's a lie. You never got your forgiveness, Yue. If I know anything about you, you'll hold this dark spot in you for a long, long time. You shouldn't, but you will. Man, I hate having to spend time with you when you're all mooney."

"Then I suppose you had better get used to it, if you know me so well."

It was such a strange sensation: falling down and down while he stared up to where he came from, but seeing only black. With such an absolute blackness surrounding him, he may as well have been blind.

It felt as though he were falling through a canopy of cobwebs. Every movement downward was met with a whisper of resistance, like something was trying to keep him from sinking further. But the weight

of his own weightless soul was too much for the fragile threads and he simply continued to fall.

To fall and fall and fall...

Eventually, with a mind that felt like it was made of cotton being pulled thin, Syaoran realized that there were other souls around him. He passed dozens of beings as he sank lower and lower. Most of them paid him no mind, but he could feel a handful watching him with confused and frightened gazes as he fell away from them like a stone sinking in a vat of ink. He wondered, fleetingly, why he was dropping so fast compared to everyone else.

And then, finally... finally... the sinking motion slowed. After struggling awkwardly for quite a bit, he was able to take control of his soul and pilot it around inside the darkness. It was like trying to swim while tied up inside a canvas bag, but he was grateful even for the tiniest feeling of liberation. His sense of direction was extremely impaired after such a lengthy fall through complete darkness, but he was eventually able to at least make out which direction he'd fallen from, and which direction he was headed toward. In the direction of what he'd aptly decided to call the "bottom" of wherever he was, he could make out a tiny pinpoint of light. Well, "light", if that was the word for it. It was more like the eerie, non-glow that emitted from a blacklight. And it was very, very far away.

"What is this place?" he asked himself.

"You couldn't have forgotten already."

It took a moment for Syaoran to piece the words together in his mind and make sense out of them. And it took even longer for him to figure out just where the voice had come from. The sound was strange- not at all like the voices he was used to hearing. It seemed to speak beyond words, with just feelings and vague impressions of senses. And it didn't seem to come from anywhere, really. More like it spoke right inside his own mind.

But, eventually, he found the source. It was coming from the faint outline of a human body next to him that seemed to be etched into the blackness like lines scratched on a dark piece of wood.

"I know you can't be that far gone already," the soul said. "It's probably only the shock. Just think back as far as you can."

When Syaoran made the tiniest bit of effort to remember anything before the darkness, a flood of colors, sounds, and faces swept all the grogginess from his mind. Memories came back to him like reality hits someone who has just awoken from a dream.

"This is the Void," Syaoran told himself. The memory of the darkness wiping Sakura's face from sight played over and over in his mind. "I'm inside the it."

Syaoran could feel the soul beside him nod. *"That's right. I knew you couldn't have forgotten so soon. After all, I've been here a lot longer than you have and I haven't forgotten."*

"How long have you been here?" Syaoran asked.

But the soul just shook the vague outline of his head. *"I don't know. Every moment seems like an eternity. It's kind of hard to judge time in here. In fact, I don't think it even exists here at all. Not for us."*

"Why are we all here?" Syaoran asked, sensing all the souls around him. "I thought... I thought that once I walked into the Void, that would be it. Why am I still here?"

"No one tells us anything," the soul said after a few moments. "But I think it's because of things like that."

Syaoran could feel the soul gesture to a place in the darkness where another soul was floating past. It was sobbing softly, its vague body balled up with the hands covering the face. Syaoran watched it cry for a few moments more before turning back to the soul beside him.

"We've all lost something," the soul said. "It's those memories of loss that keep us linked to the world we left behind. Before we can move on, we need to forget everything, so the Void steals our memories. One by one. And so, little by little, we forget."

"Forget...?" Syaoran said. The word frightened him to the core.

"That's what the Void does to you," the soul said with conviction. "Do you remember that strange feeling as you were falling? The feeling that you were dropping like a rock through wet rice paper?"

Syaoran nodded slowly. *"I thought they were cobwebs. They tore so easily."*

"Those were your memories," the soul said. "Each time you sink, you leave another one behind. That way, nothing will keep you hanging onto your old life once you get to the bottom."

"No!" Syaoran yelled. He filled his mind with images of Sakura just to make sure that he still could. *"I won't just forget her."*

The soul nodded with sympathy. *"I know exactly how you feel. That's why I'm here. I refuse to forget her."*

The two of them floated in silence while the lifetime of a star seemed to pass. But the oppressive static noise in the Void eventually spurred them into talking again. They talked about things like the shapes clouds took and the way ice tasted; stupid, mundane things that reminded them of what they left behind.

Syaoran could only hope that talking about things would keep the memories from slipping away. But as he sank once again and suddenly couldn't recall the word for the color that swirled around inside sunshine, a feeling of hopelessness crushed him.

Please, Sakura... Don't let this be for nothing.

It was a few days before Sakura was able to get out of bed. She felt like she had been trampled by a horde of stampeding elephants. Everything was sore, especially the muscles around her lungs. Every time she took a deep breath, it was as if the organs in her middle were trying to stretch outside her skin.

The doctor came back one morning to examine her. He raved the entire time about how lucky she was and implied, with a very tactful stream of words, that she should be dead. When Fujitaka asked him what they should do, the doctor's advice was: bed rest for few days to ensure a total recovery. This would give the fluid in her lungs some time to empty out and her immune system a chance to settle down.

So, with not much else to do, she spent most of the time drifting through the fractured memories of the last few days. Every so often, whatever she was thinking of was washed out by a blindingly bright green color. And it always happened whenever she thought about Syaoran. She could remember the warm feeling of his hand in hers as she shut her eyes, but anything beyond that was just... green.

Why green? Sakura asked herself constantly. *You'd think my memories would be black if I was just unconscious.*

Tomoyo visited often during the week, and Eriol was usually with her. Chiharu and everyone also dropped by once or twice to give her get-well cards and charms. They talked about how everyone missed her at school and what they would do together once she had totally recovered. Sakura smiled and acted cheerful enough, but she was always glancing toward the door as if expecting someone else. Whenever someone would step into her room from the hallway, her face fell.

"Tomoyo-chan..." Sakura said one afternoon while Tomoyo was visiting.

"Yes?" Tomoyo said. She was cleaning up around the room even though Sakura told her it wasn't necessary.

There was a long pause as Sakura squeezed her bedsheets in her hands. A tingling sensation was building at her fingertips, but she ignored it.

"Sakura-chan...?"

"Have you seen Syaoran?" she asked, finally blurting out the words like an uncontrollable cough.

The painful part was, Sakura already knew the answer. She could feel the emptiness as if she could actually see the hole he'd left behind.

"No, I haven't," Tomoyo said, her eyes to the floor. "Reed-kun hasn't been to school since the day you got sick. The funny thing is, everyone keeps asking me if he's with you."

"Well, he's not," Sakura said.

An awkward silence floated between them. The oddest part about it was that Tomoyo and Sakura had never shared an awkward silence the whole time they'd known each other. Sakura was sure it was her fault, but Tomoyo was wrestling with her own emotions, too.

"Where do you think he went?" Sakura asked eventually. "I know he was here, by my bed. I remember that much. But anything beyond that... It's just a blur."

Sakura looked over to Tomoyo and was surprised to see something almost like anger on her face.

"I really believed him," Tomoyo said after few moments. "When he promised me he'd tell you, I actually believed him."

"Tomoyo-chan," Sakura said quickly. She leaned forward in her bed. "What are you talking about? Did he say something to you?"

Tomoyo turned to her, guilt in her eyes. "I should have told you earlier, Sakura-chan. I'm sorry, but when he begged me not to say

anything to you, I just couldn't say no."

Tomoyo came over, dragging the chair from Sakura's desk to her bedside. She sat daintily in the seat and looked directly at Sakura as she talked.

"That night at the carnival... You remember it, don't you?" Tomoyo asked, wary of how confused Sakura had been acting lately.

"Of course," she said, remembering the paramedics and the feeling of being dunked in ice water. "How could I forget?"

"Way before the ice skating, when you and Eriol were playing a game together, I asked Reed-kun what he was doing for Christmas," Tomoyo said, talking as if she was unloading a huge burden from herself. "And I'll never forget his response. He told me, 'I won't be around for Christmas. I'll be gone by then.'"

Sakura's heartbeat froze. Even back then he knew he was going away and he never said anything? Why? Maybe he thought that she wouldn't care. After all, they'd only known each other for a month—even if it seemed like they'd been friends for years.

"Where did he say he was going?" Sakura asked. "Why did he have to leave?"

But Tomoyo shook her head. "It never came up. I'm sorry, Sakura-chan. I just never thought to ask. But he did say..."

"What, Tomoyo-chan?" Sakura said, leaning forward and rest her hands on Tomoyo's. "Please tell me everything. I really need to know."

Tomoyo took a deep breath as if a lot of air would soften her words.

"He said that he wasn't coming back, Sakura-chan."

Promise me you'll come back!

Sakura felt her eyes widen. For just a moment, the curtain of green had parted and she could see a little piece of memory. It hadn't been there long, but something about the conversation was stimulating her into remembering just what had happened behind all that green.

"He wasn't trying to upset you," Tomoyo said quickly, mistaking Sakura's glazed expression for hurt. "He was just afraid that you would be very sad if he told you."

Sakura's head snapped.

"What did you say?" Sakura asked.

"He just wanted you to be happy."

Be happy, okay?

That was his voice. Syaoran had said that. What was more, Sakura could clearly see Syaoran's amber eyes surrounded by all the green.

But the memory was odd, as if it were déjà vu. She couldn't be sure if it had really happened at all...

Even if it felt so real.

Where have you gone?

"What's her name?" the soul eventually asked Syaoran.

"Sakura," he said instantly. "What about yours? What's her name?"

"Mitsuki," the soul answered.

They were silent for the longest time.

"I won't forget her. I can't."

"You shouldn't worry," the soul told Syaoran. "I think there are some things the Void can't take from us."

But Syaoran wasn't so sure.

Because the soul that had been crying had stopped suddenly.

And it wasn't because she had run out of energy.

By the time the weekend rolled around, Sakura felt good enough to go outside. The last of the soreness had left her muscles and she was able to keep her head up without any dizziness.

"What do you want to do?" Tomoyo asked over the phone. She had been calling constantly lately. "Let's go somewhere to celebrate your good health."

"Actually, I'd kind of like to go down to the park," Sakura said without really thinking about it.

"Great idea," Tomoyo said, a soft smile in her voice. "I'll pack a lunch and we can head down there. I'll invite Eriol-san too. I think the fresh air will do you good, Sakura-chan. You've been cooped up in that house for way too long."

"Yeah," Sakura said.

Tomoyo kept talking, but Sakura wasn't really listening anymore. Instead, she was looking out her window to the place where Syaoran had waited for her nearly every morning.

But, today, there was no one there.

And it pained Sakura to think no one would ever be there again.

Be happy, okay?

Sakura shivered. Had she really agreed to that?

Was it even possible?

"How is she, Tomoyo-san?"

Tomoyo glanced at Eriol and sighed a bit.

"She's feeling much better, if that's what you mean."

"You know that's not what I meant at all."

"She's understandably upset," Tomoyo said after a beat of silence.

"And very confused. Truth be told, so am I."

"I'm sure he didn't mean it to happen this way," Eriol said, hoisting the huge picnic basket further up his arm. "He liked her very much."

"Oh, that was obvious. From the first gaze he gave her, I knew," Tomoyo chuckled to herself. "I knew long before he did."

"You are ever the observant one, Tomoyo-san," Eriol said, smirking.

They fell silent as they approached Sakura's house. As they cleared the little hill, they could see Sakura standing by the entrance to her house with her back against the little wall in front.

Her head was down, but as soon as she heard Tomoyo and Eriol's footsteps on the pavement, she lifted her head and waved enthusiastically. But the odd smile on her face made the Tomoyo and Eriol exchange glances. It wasn't exactly like her old smile. It was like a poorly-made counterfeit that she was desperately trying to pass off as the real thing.

"Good afternoon, Sakura-chan," Tomoyo said as she pulled Sakura into a little hug. "Are you sure it's alright to wait out in the cold like this?"

Sakura waved her arms and grinned. "What are you talking about? The weather's wonderful. Besides, I couldn't stand to be locked up in

that house for another second."

"Shall we?" Eriol said, faking a grunt of effort. "This basket may look innocent enough, but it seems as if Tomoyo-san was successful in packing an entire dimension inside."

Tomoyo chuckled. "Oh, close enough. I couldn't very well be stingy on the first day of Sakura-chan's full recovery."

Sakura giggled quietly and the three of them started down to the park.

Eriol and Tomoyo found themselves doing most of the talking, which was odd in itself. Normally, Sakura would never run out of things to say, but now she was oddly silent and seemed content to listen to Tomoyo and Eriol discuss things that weren't really important at all.

When they entered the park, Tomoyo and Sakura instinctively headed toward the Penguin Slide, only because it was the most noticeable landmark around and there was a large open field to one side.

"Actually," Eriol said, splitting off in a different direction and beckoning them forward with a toss of his head. "I think the field on the other end will be less crowded."

"Oh, right," Sakura said, trotting after Eriol. "Kids'll be swarming all over the slide on a great day like this."

Tomoyo gazed quizzically at Eriol because she was pretty certain that there wasn't a field on the other side of the park. There were just a few big oak trees, a lot of dirt, and an apartment building.

But Eriol only returned her confused glance with a sly smirk.

There he goes again, Tomoyo thought to herself. *I'm sure he knows what he's doing, but I wonder...*

Eventually, the trees came into view, followed by the whitewashed apartment building.

As soon as Sakura saw the huge complex looming near the park's horizon, she knew why she'd wanted to come. Without a word to Tomoyo or Eriol, Sakura broke away from them and walked quickly up to the stone path that lead into the building's front lobby. Behind her, a confused Tomoyo was calling softly, but Sakura was afraid that if she spoke a word or turned back around, the memory of being with Syaoran inside the building would be scared away like a grazing doe at the snap of a twig underfoot.

She entered the lobby and looked around, following her memory.

Third floor, Sakura thought almost frantically. She opened the door to the stairwell and began to climb, her clanging footsteps echoing loudly against the walls.

Fifth door down, she thought as she emerged onto the third floor.

She counted the doors as she went down the hallway, her heart thumping. When she reached the the fifth, she was positive it was the right one. There wasn't a doubt in her mind. And yet, she couldn't bring herself to knock. The emptiness was strong here. If Syaoran was behind that door, would she still feel so lost?

And then, suddenly, she was knocking as if some unafraid part of her mind had taken over. It was the part of her that knew, just knew, what *wasn't* beyond that door. And that part wanted her to get it over with.

Moments after the knock, the door opened and Wei appeared in the frame. He smiled softly, but it was a sad, sad smile. Something about the expression made Sakura's vision fade to green.

"Sakura-san," Wei said. As he spoke, his face softened into a genuine smile. "I heard you weren't feeling well. It's good to see you back on your feet."

"Who told you I was sick?" Sakura asked, slightly surprised.

"Syaoran, of course," the old man's expression darkened. "Right before he left."

"He's..." Sakura strained for the words. "Really gone?"

"Yes, Sakura-san," the old man's face fell. "He has moved on from here."

"Moved on?" Sakura said. A tingling was expanding inside her nose as tears threatened. "What do you mean? Where did he go? Why?"

"I wish I could ask him," Wei said softly. "Because he is the only one who really knows."

"I don't understand," Sakura said, squeezing her right hand to her chest. It was tingling. "He was there. I can remember..."

But then green flooded her memories, swallowing Syaoran's amber eyes.

"I'm sorry," Sakura said, shaking her head. She was also trying to shake the tears away. "I'm just really confused. Sometimes I think Syaoran was there, and then..."

She looked up at Wei and smiled shyly. "I must have been dreaming."

The smile disappeared from Wei's face as if Sakura had flipped a switch.

"Wait here," the old man said suddenly. "I have something for you."

"Something for me...?" Sakura began, but Wei had already gone back inside the apartment.

He reappeared a few moments later, holding a green scarf. Sakura recognized it immediately. After all, she'd spent two days working on

it nonstop.

"That's..." Sakura stammered.

"He asked me to keep it," Wei said. He folded it neatly and then held it out to Sakura. "But I think you need it much more than I do."

Sakura took the scarf and held it as if it would vanish if she squeezed it too hard. She looked up at Wei with an expression that was beyond the words "How?" and "Why?" Besides, she would never get the answer she needed out of this man. He seemed just as helpless and empty as she was.

Wei leaned close and put a gentle hand on Sakura's shoulder. He looked directly into her eyes when he spoke, as if he could see a movie playing in her head.

"It wasn't a dream, Sakura-san. Never allow yourself to think otherwise."

Touya was setting out plates for dinner as the front door opened and Sakura stepped into the foyer.

"Hey kaijuu!" Touya called to her. "Dinner will be ready in half an hour."

Sakura appeared in the doorway a moment later. She was smiling softly, but her eyes were holding back tears.

"I already ate with Tomoyo and Eriol," Sakura said. The cheerful tone of her voice did not match the expression in her eyes. It made her words sound strained and fake. "So I guess I'll just go to bed. I'm feeling a little lightheaded after being out for so long."

Touya stared at her for a few moments, trying to think of something to say. But, as her big brother, there was only one thing he could tell her.

"Okay. Goodnight, then."

"Goodnight," she said, flashing another odd smile before heading up the stairs.

As she disappeared up the stairway, Touya caught sight of the green scarf balled up in Sakura's hands. He instantly recognized it. After all, he had watched Sakura work on it night and day for two straight days- only to give it away to a certain brown-haired *gaki* .

"I knew it," Touya said through gritted teeth as he stared at the dining room table. "I knew he'd just end up hurting her. That stupid little brat."

Just where the hell did you disappear to ?

" *Come to think of it, I don't remember your name,* " the soul beside Syaoran said over the static noise of the Void. " *Have I forgotten it?* "

Syaoran shook his vague head. " *I don't think I ever told you. It's Syaoran.* "

" *That's a nice name,*" the soul said after a few moments. " *I'll try not to forget it.* "

" *What's your name ?*" Syaoran asked after several long beats of silence.

But the soul simply shook his head. " *I lost that a long time ago. In fact, I've forgotten almost everything about myself. I don't even remember my favorite color.* "

" *Doesn't that scare you ?*" Syaoran asked quietly. " *Aren't you afraid that you're missing something important?* "

" *Not really,*" the soul said. " *You can't miss what you don't know is there.* "

" But if everything else is disappearing from your mind and you don't care, " Syaoran said almost frantically. " Then aren't you afraid you'll react the same way when you forget Mitsuki ?"

The soul was silent for such a long time that Syaoran thought he'd drifted away. But finally, he spoke up.

" Who is Mitsuki ?"

Dread washed over Syaoran and the Void's static pulsed loudly in the awkward silence.

" Mitsuki !" Syaoran yelled finally. He wanted to grab the soul and shake it, but he didn't really have limbs anymore. " She's the one thing you swore you would never forget !"

" I did say that, didn't I ?" the soul said. It paused for a few thoughtful moments. " But now I can't remember why. Well, if I can't think of it now, then it probably wasn't worth remembering ."

" No..." Syaoran threw up images of Sakura in his mind like a wall between himself and the light at the Void's bottom.

But the light was growing stronger all the time, getting bigger and brighter.

He must have been sinking again.

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A/N : This is not the end. Please see my profile for ramblings.

Falling Both Ways

Chapter 21

Falling Both Ways

" I know you, don't I? "

He lifted his head up to search for the sound. It seemed like it was being directed toward him. That was odd, because he hadn't been spoken to in a very, very long time.

" Yes. I remember you, too, " he said, nodding in the direction of the soul floating a little above him.

It was the same one he'd met so long ago when he first fell into the Void, even though its form had changed significantly since then. Now, instead of looking anything like a human being, it was just a vague blob of soul.

" You're the one who forgot your Mitsuki ."

" Who ?"

" Never mind. That was a long time ago, anyway ."

Silence stretched between them until the soul finally spoke up again.

" What is your name again? I know you told me and I promised to remember, but I can't anymore. "

He poised oddly on the edge of an answer, unable to respond.

" I... don't remember it either, " he strained his memory, but found that the only name he could recall anymore was Sakura's. He brought images of her up in his mind and studied them closely.

" It doesn't matter what my name was, anyway," he told the soul. But he was also reassuring himself. " All that matters is that I never forget Sakura. I swear I won't. I can't. This place can take whatever else it wants from me, but not her. "

" Good luck," the soul said skeptically. It floated away.

He watch it go, wondering why he had sunk lower than that soul, even though it had been in the Void for so much longer.

He finally concluded that the Void must have wanted to be rid of him desperately.

And I can't even remember what I did to anger it anymore.

A few days passed. Once seven went by, it had been a week. Four weeks turned into a month.

Christmas came... and went.

New Year's came... and went.

Sakura felt like some omnipotent being was flipping through a calendar that contained the days of her life. One just seemed to cascade into another like the turn of a page. Each day the sun rose, got stuck high in the sky, and then sank again.

But that wasn't to say that she was drifting through life with no purpose. She had a definite purpose.

Be happy, okay?

At first it had seemed impossible, but now it was more like a distant ambition. It was like a young girl fantasizing about being a singer or a model. It would be difficult and take a lot of hard work, but she could do it if she was dedicated and persistent.

She wore a lot of bright yellows and pinks. She smiled all the time and hummed cheerfully to herself even when no one was around. She joined a few clubs at school, but didn't overload herself. She spent a lot of time with Tomoyo and everyone. They went shopping, they went to the park, they went out to eat. And slowly, slowly, the green began to fade from the back of her mind.

But, no matter how much happiness she poured into her life, the hole he'd left refused to fill up and smooth over.

"Sakura-chan just doesn't seem as cheerful," Sakura overheard Rika say to Chiharu one morning in the courtyard. Sakura stopped in her tracks to eavesdrop. "It's not totally obvious, but I think something is bothering her."

Sakura clenched her teeth for a moment and then bounded into the courtyard, waving wildly.

She resolved herself to try harder.

"How is Sakura-san?" Yukito asked as he put a bowl away. Touya handed him another from the drying rack next to the sink.

It had been over a month since Sakura had been sick, but everyone still asked about her frequently. And they always said it in a way that made it sound like she was still ill.

"Everyone's been asking that so much lately," Touya said, fishing another plate from the warm water in the sink. "It sounds to me like a broken record."

"You can't blame me for asking," Yukito said, chuckling. His tone instantly sobered up, though. "I can't get that image out of my head, even after all this time. I really thought... She was so pale, Toya."

"I know exactly what you mean," Touya said darkly. "But she's better now, I guess."

Yukito eyed Touya as he handed him another dish. "What do you mean, 'I guess?'"

Touya sighed deeply and put down the plate he was drying.

"She's not herself," Touya said, staring at the counter. "She smiles, but it's hollow. She talks, but it's about trivial things. She listens to what people have to say, but it's like she's staring right through them."

"Do you think she's still not feeling well?" Yukito asked. "Maybe she's trying to hide it again-"

"No, no," Touya said quickly. "There's nothing wrong with her. Not like that, anyway."

Yukito nodded slowly. "I had to ask."

"I know. I almost wish it was something like that," Touya said. He began drying the plate again, buffing it hard enough to take the coating off. "If it was just something wrong with her body, I could take her to the doctor and they could fix things. They could give her something to ease the pain, you know?"

Just then, the front door opened and Sakura's shadow fell across the foyer as she took off her shoes and headed for the stairs.

"Hey kaijuu!" Touya called after her. "Dinner's in an hour, okay?"

Sakura appeared in the doorway. She was dressed brightly in a pink skirt and a clean white turtleneck sweater with a dark green scarf tucked under the over-sized collar. Her infamous 'egg' backpack was swung over one shoulder, bearing a big yellow button that read "SMILE!" in bold black letters on the strap. And Sakura was smiling, but it was such a sad, sad smile.

Touya would have been happier to see her with tears streaming down her cheeks than with that smile plastered on her face.

"What are we having?" Sakura asked. The tone of her voice did not exactly match her expression. It was like two very different, but upbeat, songs were being played at the same time and now the tempos were all out of sync, becoming a jumble of nonsense.

"What does it matter?" Touya said playfully. "You're going to have to eat whatever I make you."

He braced lightly for her indignant, Sakura-ish response, but it never came. Instead, she just laughed.

"I'll be down for dinner when it's ready, then," she said, her smile like a horizontal crack in broken glass. "I want to start on my homework."

She waved, and then bounded up the staircase.

"See what I mean?" Touya asked quietly.

"Odd," Yukito finally said after searching unsuccessfully for the correct word.

It was dark, but it had always been dark. Always, always.

But, in his clouding mind, the whisper of a memory remained like the fantastic objects that can only exist in a dream: splashes of a color, one like the sun makes just as the horizon hits it, and the other like two slabs of jade smiling brightly.

Together, the colors had a name once. They had a face around them, too.

But name was gone now. The face was gone too. All that remained were those vague colors and the overwhelming feeling of attachment to them.

He was sure that feeling would never - ever - leave him. Not the way that face had, anyway. Even as he drifted slowly, steadily downward,

he kept those colors close and tried to burn them into his soul.

And still the Void gathered in around him.

It made this noise. A noise like pulsing static that beat right inside his soul. He tried counting the beats in a desperate attempt to stay focused, but lost track almost as soon as he started. The sound made it hard to concentrate. And besides that, he began to realize that numbers were meaningless. Everything everywhere never had a beginning and so nothing ever ended. And if that was true, then there could never be such a thing as a "first" just as there can never be a "last". There was no place to begin counting and no place to stop. It was only an endless chain of infinity that made numbers meaningless.

Soon, he was content to just listen to the endless pulsing. As he listened, it began to form a strange sort of cadence- a timed, deliberate pattern of rising and falling sound. The Void seemed alive with the rhythm; it breathed and surged in time to the beat.

He found himself flowing with the rhythm. It ran through him and swept him along its relentless current. He was being pushed and pulled at the same time so his soul began to spread thin. It didn't hurt, but he panicked and struggled against it.

In instant response to his protest, the pulse suddenly dwindled to a slow, sluggish thump. It still moved him, but it wasn't nearly as frightening.

The colors faded back slowly. They were dull and blurry now, but they were back. He held onto them and filled his being with the emotion that wafted from them...

Even if it felt like he was drawing heat from dying embers.

Tomoyo stood motionless in the doorway to the classroom, watching Sakura as she sat her desk with her head in her palm, staring

listlessly out the window. Tomoyo clutched the video tape she was holding to her chest as if it were a squirming animal that was trying to get away.

The halls of the school were so quiet that the sound of the sunshine spilling in from the classrooms could almost be heard splashing against the walls. So when footsteps broke up the oppressive silence, Tomoyo was happy to turn to greet the approaching person.

"Ah, good morning, Eriol-san," Tomoyo said, smiling widely.

"Tomoyo-san, good morning," Eriol replied, a small smile engulfing his eyes as he came closer.

"What brings you here so early?" Tomoyo asked, lowering the video tape from her chest.

"I had a momentary memory lapse," Eriol said, chuckling and tapping the side of his head. "I was halfway out the door before I realized that I was no longer assigned to morning chores with you. Sakura-san was moved back with you in Reed-san's absence, correct?"

Tomoyo nodded and responded politely, even though she didn't believe Eriol's story in the slightest. Eriol Hiiragizawa was not one prone to memory lapses, especially about things like schedules. Besides, it was big gossip when Terada-sensei announced several weeks ago that Syaoran Reed had been removed from the school by his guardian. And Tomoyo was certain that Eriol, like herself, would never be able to forget how Sakura's face fell when the teacher passed out the new chore schedules with Syaoran's name missing.

But Tomoyo wasn't going to pressure him about his real motives for being at the school so early. She was just glad for his company.

"What is that, Tomoyo-san?" Eriol asked, gesturing to the video tape in Tomoyo's hands.

"It was a project I was working on," Tomoyo said. She looked down at the tape and brushed a few fingers lightly over its sleek, unmarked surface.

"Was?" Eriol asked.

Tomoyo smiled to herself. Eriol could always pick up on the slightest thing. The intonation on that single syllable had given away so much to him. But she couldn't say it was unintentional.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I don't think I can finish it now. You can't replace a fallen star."

Any other person would have pressed more questions, but Eriol had already gleaned enough information to know what Tomoyo was talking about. It was almost like they didn't need words.

"It's so sad," Tomoyo said after a few moments. "A story without an ending."

"Why did you bring it here?" Eriol asked. "There must be a reason."

Tomoyo sighed and moved a bit further down the hall, away from the classroom. Eriol followed.

"Sakura-chan told me that she wanted to see it when it was done," Tomoyo said. "But even if it doesn't have an ending, it is technically finished because I simply can't do anything more with it. So I have to wonder... does that mean that Sakura would want to see what is on this tape?"

"It's your project and Sakura-san is your friend," Eriol said gently. "What do you think you should do?"

"If I knew that," Tomoyo said, a sad smile breaking on her lips. "I wouldn't be standing here on the edge of indecision, now would I?"

"If you need confirmation that you're doing the right thing," Eriol said. "Why don't you simply ask Sakura-san? Tell her about your project"

and then she could decide whether she wants to watch it or not."

At this, Tomoyo shook her head vigorously, a gesture that may come once in a lifetime for someone like Tomoyo Daidouji.

"I can't do that to her," Tomoyo said, her expression pulling with pain. "It would be torture to make her choose. She has no idea what is on this tape, Eriol-san. In the end, I believe it is my burden to either trick her into watching it or let her live on in ignorance of its existence."

Eriol nodded thoughtfully. "You are a wonderful friend, Tomoyo-san. I think you have the right idea."

"Yes, well..." Tomoyo said, gripping the tape hard and refusing to meet Eriol's gaze. "Unfortunately, having the right idea doesn't give me the right answer."

"Then I suppose the answer lies in an age-old question," Eriol said, leaning against the wall. "Whether it is better to live in ignorance or drown in truth."

"I think that's a little dramatic, but I see your point," Tomoyo said, smiling a bit despite herself. She paused while she mulled Eriol's last words for a moment. "However, I don't think this is about truth and ignorance. I think it all comes down to happiness and sadness."

"Meaning that this tape has the power to inspire both," Eriol said.

Tomoyo nodded faintly. "She's trying so hard to be happy, but I think the problem is she's actively seeking out the source. Happiness isn't *found* ; it is *made* . I'm afraid that Sakura-chan, in her confusion, has forgotten that.

"I know that she will come to terms with this on her own," Tomoyo continued, letting her thoughts pour out of her and into Eriol's presence. She felt like he was absorbing them so they wouldn't clamor around inside her own head any longer. "Sakura-chan is very resilient and so smart. In time, I know she will forget all this and

move on... But something about that is so disturbing that it hurts right here."

Tomoyo laid a palm on the area right below her breastbone- at the bottom of her heart. She raised her eyes shyly to Eriol. "Silly, isn't it?"

To her surprise, she found Eriol's face set firmly in the most serious expression she had ever seen him use. There was no tiny smirk in his lips; no knowing look in his eyes. Just a look that bordered on mourning.

"Do you really think that it's alright to let her forget something that made her happy?" Eriol asked, his face instantly softening again.

"If the happy memory only brings back pain, then yes," Tomoyo said quickly. "In fact, I think it's my top duty as Sakura-chan's friend to keep her as far from anything painful as possible."

But Eriol just shook his head. "No, Tomoyo-san. That is certainly not your top duty. As Sakura-chan's friend, you can't possibly keep her from being hurt. Pain is life. After all, how can a person know true happiness if she has never known the depths of despair? It's like trying to know how close you are to the surface of an ocean when you have never touched the bottom."

"But I'd do anything to take her pain away," Tomoyo said quietly. "If only I could."

"Would you ever wish that feeling in your chest to go away if it meant that you had to forget Sakura-san?" Eriol asked with one eyebrow slightly raised. The sly, know-it-all smile was back in his eyes. "After all, if you hadn't met Sakura and become her friend, you wouldn't even be in this situation."

Tomoyo's eyes widened. Forget Sakura? That would be the worst punishment anyone could even bring down on her. She would let her heart rot away before she gave up the memory of her best friend.

"I think I understand," Tomoyo said, smiling. She clenched the video tape hard on the pads of her fingers. "Even if it causes her pain... She needs to see this, doesn't she?"

"I think so," Eriol said, smiling softly. "In fact, I believe it's vital. This tape will be her 'bottom', Tomoyo-san."

Tomoyo gave Eriol a very dark look. "That's not very comforting, Eriol-san."

"Oh, on the contrary," Eriol said, his soft smile having dissolved into his trademark smirk. "I feel the most assured I have in weeks."

Because it's only when you hit the bottom that you suddenly know which way is up.

At first, there was a terrible feeling of loss.

Something was missing.

Something precious.

But it was gone now.

Gone...

There was only this light.

It was a glow like darkness itself was burning.

And it was everywhere.

Maybe the darkness was better than this light.

Because this light...

It pressed so hard.

Crushing.

Smothering.

Was it down?

Was it up?

Did it really even matter?

And now...

Was there ever such a thing as space?

Was there ever such a thing as time?

Was there ever such a thing as... things?

Was it all a dream?

Why did this hurt so badly?

This light...

Was it at the bottom?

Why did that matter?

Nothing mattered, really.

What is this place-?

Sakura raced into the house and bounded upstairs to her bedroom, clutching Tomoyo's video tape tightly to her chest. She grinned brightly as she popped the tape into the VCR and flopped down on her bed. The TV turned on automatically when a tape was inserted and, like it was drawing its energy from Sakura's eager disposition,

the auto-play feature took over and began the tape without any further instruction.

Sakura stuck the sticky note that had been attached to the tape on top of her headboard. She had read it hurriedly as Tomoyo handed her the tape on the way home from school. Tomoyo's expression had been hard to read, but Sakura just took it at modesty about her work. The note, however, made even less sense.

Dear Sakura-chan, this is the project that I have been working on. You asked to see it when I was finished, but I've run into an artist's block of sorts and I don't think I can find a good ending. Eriol-san said you might have some idea on how to finish it, so that's why I'm giving it to you. I hope you don't mind... Love, Tomoyo

Sakura grabbed a pillow behind her to hold in her arms as she waited for the title of the film to come flying across the screen as it usually did in Tomoyo's films. But nothing happened for a few moments. The tape just played blackness.

Then, suddenly, the screen came to life. The unmistakable landscape of the sidewalk and street just outside the school gates blinked onto the TV. The trees lining the sidewalk were bare; it must have been early winter. The background chatter of kids hanging around in the courtyard behind the camera faded out of the speakers.

After a few moments, a figure appeared bobbing over the sidewalk's horizon. The camera zoomed in and focused on the person.

Sakura had to stifle a snort of laughter when she released it was herself. She tried to think back to when this shot was taken, but couldn't recall the exact day. Tomoyo had taken so many shots of her over the couple of years they'd know each other that each session seemed to blur into one another.

" *Good morning, Sakura-chan,* " Tomoyo's voice sounded clearly just behind the camera lens.

As Video Sakura came a little closer, the obvious distress and embarrassment in her expression became sharp and focused.

" *Is everything okay?* " Tomoyo's voice asked gently. The camera pulled in closer to Video Sakura's expression.

Video Sakura shook her head vigorously.

" *He... He followed me,* " Video Sakura said meekly. Her head remained pointed at the ground. " *The whole way.* "

In the background, another figure faded into view. The camera didn't move off-focus from its current subject, but even with the blurry image, Sakura found her heart leaping into her chest nonetheless.

Syaoran... Sakura thought, staring at the blurry patch of chocolate hair.

The camera swung off the out-of-focus little figure and the scenery changed. Video Sakura was now putting things into her locker inside the school.

"He must hate me," Video Sakura was saying. "He must really, really hate me. I can feel his gaze burning holes in my head."

Like a reflex, Sakura lifted a hand to feel the back of her head. She missed that feeling so much now...

The camera flicked and a new scene began.

" *Is he there?* " Video Sakura was asking.

" *Of course,* " came Tomoyo's cheerful voice.

Sakura squinted at the TV to get a glimpse of the blurry figure just over Video Sakura's shoulder, but he was even farther away in this shot.

Sakura grabbed the remote to her television. She wasn't sure what in the world she was going to do with it, but she held it up the the TV anyway. She didn't know if she was going to pause the tape, rewind it, fast-forward it, or just shut it off. She hit a button (still not knowing which one), but the TV didn't respond. With a fleeting thought, she remembered that the batteries had gone dead a few weeks ago and she hadn't replaced them. And there was no way that she could get up to manually operate the VCR with her shaky legs and fingers.

On the screen, the scene had changed once again. Now it was early morning in a quiet classroom.

Sakura's breath caught in her throat. Syaoran was standing very near the camera, writing something on the chalkboard that was just out of the shot. His amber eyes were narrowed seriously at the board as if he were concentrating every ounce of energy he had into writing the date there.

The tape wavered slightly on the television, startling Sakura. She shook her head.

It was only a tape. It wasn't real.

Not anymore.

" *Good morning Tomoyo-chan!* " Video Sakura said brightly, appearing in the door frame.

" *Good morning...* " Syaoran said after an awkward pause. His voice was so soft that the speakers on her TV barely picked it up. Sakura had forgotten how quiet Syaoran had been in the beginning.

Blink. Scene change. A cool winter morning outside Sakura's house. The back of Video Sakura's head.

" *Good morning everyone,*" Tomoyo's voice sounded behind the lens.

" *Tomoyo-chan!* " Video Sakura exclaimed, turning around. She laughed into the TV screen. " *Still working on your project, huh?* "

" Yes, " came Tomoyo's reply. The camera focused deeper on Sakura's smiling face. " *And I feel like I'm going to get the perfect shot today. Everything's coming together nicely.* "

Video Sakura's smile pressed a little wider. In the background, Syaoran was staring discreetly at the camera with a perplexed expression. It was such a change from the oddly emotionless Syaoran from the scene before.

" *You'll let me see it when it's done, right?* " Video Sakura asked.

" *Of course I will,*" Tomoyo said. Then she added, " *but I hope you will see it for yourself all on your own.* "

Video Sakura looked confused, but from her bed, Sakura sagged.

"Tomoyo-chan..." she said quietly to the TV. "Why are you showing me this?"

" *Good morning, Reed-kun,* " Tomoyo said as the camera swung off Video Sakura and onto Syaoran. He became visually uncomfortable as the shot pulled tighter.

" *Morning Daidouji,*" He replied, staring at the ground and shoving his hands into the pockets of his blazer.

Sakura couldn't help but stare. There he was... There he had been. This shot was taken right outside her house. Unconsciously, her eyes flicked to the sidewalk below her window.

He'd really been there. The tape proved it.

She had never forgotten him. On the contrary, she thought of him during every moment of every day since he went missing. Those amber eyes were tattooed on her memory.

But... sometimes she wondered if, somehow, it was all a dream.

Not her dream, though.

His dream.

The images on the TV skipped and the scene changed once again. It was the night of the carnival. Tomoyo kept the focus on Video Sakura for most of the time, which made Sakura desperate for any shot containing Syaoran. Whenever he was there, her heart skipped a beat as if pausing to let every neuron, muscle, and nerve in her body fully take in his image.

As she watched the scenes on the television, flashes of scenes that were not on the tape would play in her own mind. They were the scenes that Tomoyo hadn't been around to film. Watering cans, kites, and math filled her head until they pushed up against her mouth and forced her into a smile.

And then there was green.

"Be happy, okay?"

Sakura exhaled, the breath stolen from her body.

She could see it all now.

The maze. The huge hole in the ground. The Syaoran who slowly faded from her grip and suddenly fell away from her...

And her promise.

"Be happy, okay?" Syaoran had asked her, his transparent eyes pleading.

"Okay. I promise."

Sakura shook her head and squeezed the pillow she was holding tightly to her chest.

"How could I..." Sakura asked no one. "Promise something like that?"

Sakura heard herself scream. For a moment, she thought she'd broken down completely, but then she realized that she hadn't screamed herself. She snapped her head up to stare at the TV screen.

Tomoyo had caught some of Sakura's ice-skating accident on tape. Sakura watched herself flounder in the water for a few moments before, true to her memory, Syaoran had appeared, literally out of nowhere, to carry her to shore.

Despite everything, she blushed at the image of Syaoran carrying her princess-style to the embankment. She slid off the bed to the floor in front of her television without moving her body. With trembling fingers, she reached up to rewind the tape.

She watched again as she fell into the lake. Ice and water flew up chaotically, showering the air with a fine mist. That's when Syaoran appeared, falling into the water like he'd suddenly been dropped from the sky.

Sakura shook her head. It could have been just a trick of the camera and the fading light. After all, Tomoyo was quite far away and the scene was hectic with Tomoyo flailing around and everyone screaming.

But still...

Sakura let the tape play on. Syaoran set her down on the embankment as the crowd surged around them to keep the cold out. And even though Tomoyo was still far off, their conversation was just audible above the shouts of the crowd and Tomoyo's efforts to get over to them.

" *Are you okay?* " Syaoran asked her, a sort of panicked relief in his voice.

" *Just cold,*" Video Sakura said, her teeth chattering. " *What about you?* "

But Syaoran just shook his soggy head, a rain of water droplets flying from the tips of his hair and sparkling off the light behind him.

" *Never mind me.* "

And then the screen went blank. Seconds later, there was only static.

"No," Sakura moaned, fast-forwarding the tape. But there was nothing left after that.

"This isn't right," Sakura said to herself over the static. "I don't understand. Why did you go? Where are you? I miss you..."

She wasn't talking to herself anymore. Now she was making an effort to release the words into the world so that they could be heard by the person who needed to hear them. She didn't scream the words, but she simply willed them to reach him wherever he was.

"It wasn't a dream, was it? It was real- all of it was real. I don't know how that was possible, but every cell in my body tells me that I didn't imagine what happened in that horrible place. Somehow you were with me in my dreams. Somehow, you were always with me. Until now. Why did you leave, Syaoran?"

"If you had wanted to leave, it would be different. I don't think it would be this hard for either of us. But now I'm being torn apart by the fact that you wanted to stay. Why did you feel like you had to leave me? I don't understand. It doesn't make sense!"

"*Be happy, okay?*"

"*Okay. I promise.*"

Sakura trembled with the memory.

"Promise..." Sakura said. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. "I don't want to promise anything. I shouldn't have to. And you shouldn't either. We should just... be. Promises mean nothing and imply that the task is so difficult that it's almost impossible. I promised you that I'd be happy, but I can't be happy when I know you're suffering. So I'm done with promises, Syaoran. Just come back. No promises, no compromises... Just come back."

If he really wants to, Sakura thought desperately. He'll come back.

" This isn't right ."

" I don't understand ."

" Where are you? "

The static flared to cover the sound, but it couldn't quite drown it out. The sound was so different from the droning and empty static that it was like trying to blank out the sun with a mesh screen.

The sound tugged at something. In the darkness, inside this nothingness, the noise pulled at something that wasn't there. The noise...

Like an unfolding, it came back.

Words. That's what the noise was. It was a deliberately formed sound that carried meaning. It was meant for communication.

So it was ignored.

There was no need for communication here.

This place was transcendence beyond communication.

" Come back ."

Back? There had never been such a thing. This was the very place where "back" began. A place of infinite emptiness; the starting and ending point of those things which were never born and can never die.

It was a place where there had always been only darkness.

Always, always.

Except...

" I miss you. "

Except that there hadn't been just darkness when the sun glinted through gaps in the leaves of an oak tree beside a large open field.

Except that there hadn't been just darkness when rain splashed gently against a window pane, tapping out an erratic rhythm.

There hadn't been any darkness at all when a warm feeling pulled at his lips and forced him into a smile...

Lives. People. Self.

My smile. Me.

He recoiled from the darkness, backing away frantically and gathering up his soul all around him.

For a moment, for an eternity, he hadn't existed as himself. The Void had taken his soul and spread it so thin that the darkness had absorbed it like a drop of green coloring dispersed in a vat of ink. It was as if he'd been assimilated.

With a sickening, sinking feeling, he finally realized just what this dark light was. It was the remains of countless souls who had lost themselves entirely to the Void. They couldn't even be called souls in this form. They weren't "them" anymore.

This is the Void.

I forgot where I was. How could I forget?

He felt memories come back to him like steel shavings released into the air around a magnet.

" Why did you leave, Syaoran? "

Now that he was falling away from the light, the words rang clear and crisp through the static like a radio frequency tuned to the right station.

Syaoran. The word rang deep inside his soul and welled up to touch his mind.

My name. That's me. Me.

He'd forgotten what it was to be himself- to have something as personal as a name. For the longest time, or maybe for only a second or so, the Void had convinced him that he was part of it and not an individual. There he hadn't had memories or even a fleeting thought that belonged just to him. He had joined a collective conscious that even now was trying desperately to pull him back in.

But he could stay away as long as he didn't forget himself again.

" I can't accept things the way they are. "

Syaoran let the words fall into his mind and settle there.

This voice... It belongs to someone.

That was a revelation in itself. It was the voice of someone who wasn't in the Void. People existed outside this place. They lived in a world of light and life- a place that was the complete opposite of the Void's darkness and death.

" I promised you that I'd be happy."

Promises.

Yes, Syaoran thought desperately. *Be happy. That's all I want. Don't let it all be for nothing.*

" But I can't be happy when I know you're suffering. "

No...

No.

No!

"Sakura!"

Syaoran pushed against the darkness and, to his surprise, felt it give. All around him a light was flaring. But it wasn't the dark light of the Void. It was an actual light that was coming from within his own soul. He reached inside and grabbed onto it. A sensation like white-hot pain flared through every fiber of his being, but he didn't let go.

"No more promises," he said in a gritted tone. "Do you hear that! No more! I'm through with promises!"

And - suddenly - he felt himself falling. Falling away from the dark light below him. It was as if the Void had been turned upside-down just for him and now he was tumbling through a long, dark tunnel.

Sakura...

Disclaimer : CSS is the property of CLAMP and all related companies.

A/N : The next chapter will be the end, everyone! See my profile for ramblings.

No Promises

Chapter 22 (Final)

No Promises

Sakura woke to a sound like static pulsing in her ears. She sat up quickly to find sunshine pouring into her bedroom, but the noise continued. As the fog of confusion lifted from her groggy senses, she realized that the abrasive sound was coming from her TV. She stared at it for a few moments, watching the snow dance over the screen.

I fell asleep watching Tomoyo-chan's tape, Sakura thought as she rolled out of bed and shut off the TV. She ejected the tape from the VCR. I have to give it back to her today.

She paused with the tape in her hands. The sleek, black surface looked so innocent and mundane on the outside, but it contained something very precious.

"And I've got to tell her 'thank you'," Sakura said.

She yawned hugely and stretched, trying to squeeze all the grogginess from her sleepy muscles. For a few moments, she felt like she had actually *lost* energy while she slept, rather than gained it.

A few quick, loud knocks on Sakura's door startled her out of her stretch and made her swallow her yawn. She grimaced and rubbed her jaw. Yawns should never be interrupted.

"Hey, Kaijuu! What's wrong with you?"

"Onii-chan!" Sakura yelled at her closed door. "I'm not a kaijuu!"

"Could have fooled me," came Touya's muffled reply from behind the door. "Kaijuus have to tendency to sleep very late, you know."

"Huh?" Sakura said, and in the same breath, turned to her alarm clock. She simply stared at it for a few frozen moments as her shocked mind tried to comprehend the numbers on the face.

"HOE! I forgot to set my alarm last night!"

Touya stood on the other side of the closed door and listened to the panicked crashing noises Sakura made as she dressed at light speed. "I'm going to be so *late* ! It's my day for chores with Tomoyo-chan, too!"

Despite the fact that it sounded as if Sakura was setting off a series of small nuclear devices inside her room, Touya smiled softly to himself. He hadn't heard this noise in ages and was surprised to find how much he had missed it.

"I'll have breakfast on the table by the time you get down," Touya said and turned to head back downstairs.

But he hadn't taken so much as a step forward before Sakura's bedroom door burst open and a blur dressed in a slightly wrinkled school uniform rolled past Touya like a shock wave.

"I don't have time for breakfast!" the blur said as it raced down the stairwell. "Thanks, though! I'll see you after school, onii-chan! Bye!"

Touya watched Sakura open the front door and head outside. Just before she disappeared behind the frame, she flashed a genuine Sakura grin and waved goodbye.

"That's more like it," Touya said to himself as the door slammed shut. "I know that girl."

Sakura swept down the small flight of stairs in front of the house and headed for the gate. Cherry blossom petals were everywhere,

turning the front yard into a sea of pink. And yet, some still managed to hang onto their branches in the trees, making the street look like it was lined with giant bouquets of flowers wrapped in pale gray wax paper. All the pink looked especially vivid against the bright blue, cloudless sky and the air was saturated with the flower's clean, sweet scent. The morning air was soft with only a weak chill still lingering from the night's cooling grip.

"It's a beautiful day," Sakura said between strides as she raced for the opening in the fence where she could see the sidewalk beyond.

She rounded the corner like a flash of light, keeping one hand on the fence post and using her momentum to swing herself onto the sidewalk. It was such a fluid motion that the landscape became a blur and she was moving so quickly that she didn't see the shadow leaning against the fence until her back was to it.

As soon as her mind had time to process what she thought she had seen, she stopped like she had hit an invisible wall. Her heart was racing and her breath caught in her lungs. The wind picked up slightly, stirring Sakura's hair and scattering cherry blossom petals across her path. Her hand began to tingle madly and she brought it up to her chest.

She stood there, frozen, for several moments as if any slight movement would shatter her world. She felt like each breath she took was a fraying piece of cloth.

I didn't check, Sakura thought wildly as she tried in vain to calm her heart. I always check, but today I didn't even think about it.

Am I dreaming?

Slowly, as if she were made of glass, she turned around. She was staring at the ground at first, but she eventually lifted her head to the spot on the fence that had been empty for three long, long months.

He was standing there, one hand pressed up against the fence post while the other grabbed at his chest as if trying to keep his heart from jumping out of his skin. He was breathing heavily and his hair was tousled as if he'd just now stopped for a rest after running for miles.

He looked just as confused and shocked at finding himself standing there as Sakura felt looking at him. As he caught his breath, he took his hand off the fence and stood there with his arms at his sides as if ready to reach out and grab Sakura if the world suddenly began to fall apart.

They stood like that for a while and time seemed to slow sluggishly to a stop.

"Is that really you?" Sakura managed to get out. She tensed, ready for the dream to end.

She watched as he gently clenched his fists and looked down at his hands.

"I think so," Syaoran finally said. He sounded so unsure.

"Prove it," Sakura said, as if daring the sky to fall.

Then, suddenly, she was in his arms. And the world didn't shatter, the sky didn't fall, and the dream didn't end. They just stood there, holding each other so tightly that not even single cell could pass between them. Sakura rested softly against him as she breathed in his weight and his heat. She let all the tension out of her body until Syaoran's strong arms wrapped around her shoulders were the only things keeping her standing upright. He smelled heavily of sweat and blood, but that only meant that this couldn't possibly be a dream.

He's real and he's really here, Sakura thought as she squeezed him closer.

"How? Why?" she whispered into his chest. So much confusion was packed into those two little words, but she didn't know how to phrase it properly.

He shrugged his shoulders and Sakura could feel him grinning.

"I don't know!" he said, flinging his arms out.

Sakura pulled herself back into his arms and rested her head against his chest. She felt so right here- feeling the gentle rising and falling in Syaoran's lungs as he breathed.

"It doesn't matter, though," he said quietly as cherry blossom petals flitted to the ground. "I'm here now and I will never leave again."

"Promise?" Sakura asked, using only the force in her breath to voice the word.

But Syaoran shook his head firmly the second she opened her mouth. He took her shoulders and held her out, looking deep into her eyes.

"No more promises," Syaoran said, the shadow of a smile appearing on his lips. "Promises imply that something is so hard that it's almost impossible, remember? You're just going to have to trust me when I say that I will never leave again. It's not a promise, it's a certainty."

"You heard me..." Sakura said, her eyes searching his. "How did you hear what I said last night?"

"I'm not sure," Syaoran said quietly, his voice serious and contemplative. "But your words were the only thing that reached me through the darkness. I heard your voice and it followed it out. That's all I know."

Sakura had no idea what to make of this, but she gleaned enough to know that Syaoran hadn't left her for just any reason.

But it didn't matter where he had come from or what brought him here.

Really, it didn't.

And it never would.

After a few moments of just sanding in each other's arms, Syaoran began to squirm a little as he patted down one side of his jacket.

"What's wrong?" Sakura asked.

"There's something in my pocket," Syaoran said, confusion in his voice.

"Like what?" Sakura asked, stepping away from Syaoran and letting him reach into his jacket.

"I have no idea," he said as he struggled awkwardly with the flap. "I don't remember putting anything in there. In fact, I didn't even know this jacket had pockets."

Sakura leaned in, curious, as Syaoran removed something long and paper thin from the inside pocket of his jacket. It glinted in the sunlight, making it difficult for Sakura to get a clear view.

"What is it?" Sakura asked. She tried to get a look herself, but the sunshine was making it difficult. She wouldn't be able to see it until Syaoran handed it over. He stared at the object in his hand for a moment before a soft smile slipped onto his face. He choked out a short laugh before finally holding the object out to Sakura.

"You've been looking for this, haven't you?" Syaoran asked as Sakura plucked the card from his hand.

It was The Return card- the one that had been missing from her deck all this time. The young man in the image smiled serenely toward his frozen hourglass like a master prophet whose predictions had just now become reality.

"Yeah," Sakura said, looking back to Syaoran. Her smile forced tears out of her eyes, but she quickly wiped them away. "I guess I have."

But it was only when I stopped looking for it that I finally found it.

Syaoran stood in front of the apartment door for a few moments, just staring at the wood. He raised his arm to knock a few times, but as soon as his knuckles brushed the grain, he yanked his hand back as if the door were a heated stove.

A couple more false starts convinced Syaoran to turn around and head for a bench in the park. After all, it wasn't *too* cold out. He'd survive until the morning, at least...

Just as he was about to reach the stairwell, the door behind him clicked open. Syaoran froze, suddenly feeling embarrassed.

"I thought you might come back," Wei's kind voice said, echoing in the quiet hallway.

Syaoran turned around, trying to find all the words he'd been carefully rehearsing since he decided to come back here. But they just didn't seem right now.

"I'm back," Syaoran said weakly. It was all the explanation he could offer.

"No, no," the old man said seriously. "That won't do at all. Let's try this again, shall we?"

Wei stepped back inside and shut the door firmly. Syaoran could hear his footsteps move away, probably into the kitchen.

Syaoran stood there for a few uncertain seconds before taking a deep, steady breath and reaching for the door's handle. He hesitated for just a moment before turning it confidently and stepping over the

frame and into the apartment. He closed the door behind him, but couldn't bring himself to step further than the entryway.

"I'm home," Syaoran said, a bit quieter than he meant to say it.

"Welcome back," Wei said, his back to Syaoran as he bustled around in the kitchen. He acted as if Syaoran's presence there was nothing less than expected. "Dinner will be ready in a moment."

Something was cooking on the stove and the fumes reminded Syaoran just how badly he needed food. His stomach growled softly and he put his hand on his gut subconsciously.

"I still don't have anything to give you..." Syaoran said quietly, staring sullenly to the floor. "I'll never be able to repay you for the kindness you've shown me here."

"Payment comes in many guises, Syaoran," Wei said, waving off his words. "Perhaps you have given me more than you think."

"I don't understand," Syaoran said, his eyebrows scrunching up. "I haven't given anyone anything."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Wei said, smiling through his mustache. He turned around and opened the cabinets behind him. "Would you like to set the table?"

"What's the hurry?" Syaoran asked as he trailed a few feet behind Sakura. He pulled his arms up behind his head. "No one's going to be at the park yet. Everyone said to meet at six and it's not even five."

Sakura turned around and shrugged. "I just want to show everyone that I can be on time for something! And besides..."

She reached out and grabbed Syaoran's arm to tug him along.

"It's an excuse to spend more time with you," Sakura said.

"Well, when you put it that way..."

They stopped and shared a little moment among the cherry blossom petals that floated gently on the light breeze to the ground. The sun was low in the bright blue sky, its warmth cutting through the ambient chill in the mid-afternoon air. From the hill they were on, the whole town spread out below them, bathed in waning orange-red sunlight.

"We *will* be late if we just stand here," Syaoran said after several minutes.

Sakura shrugged in his arms. "I don't want to go."

"It's okay," Syaoran said softly. "We have all the time in the world now, you know."

It was only as Sakura broke out of his arms and started leading him back up the sidewalk that a feeling of familiarity began to dawn on him. He'd been at this place before. Not quite like this - nothing had ever felt quite like this - but he knew where he was.

And annoyance began to tighten in his stomach with every step forward.

"Wow, what a pretty house," Sakura said as the trees moved out of the way to reveal a mansion perched atop the hill. "It's so big. Must be old."

"I know the person who lives there," Syaoran grumbled.

Sakura perked at this. "You do?"

"Yeah," Syaoran said, his gaze darkening. "He's the most annoying person in the world."

After pausing for a few moments, he added, "But... I wouldn't mind talking to him again. One more time."

"Well, let's go say hello then," Sakura said, pulling Syaoran gently toward the gate.

"I don't think so," Syaoran said, shaking his head stiffly and staring straight ahead. "He's not the kind of guy who likes to be disturbed. I don't think he'd appreciate a sudden arrival, especially from me."

But as they passed the gate, it quietly and mysteriously clicked open like a welcoming arm beckoning them to enter.

"It looks like you've been invited in after all," Sakura said. She turned and looked toward the mansion. "He saw you from the window and opened the gate. It must be one of those gates you can open from a switch inside the house."

Syaoran eyed the gate suspiciously, but it only swung open wider.

"This is just like him," Syaoran said, a distinct rumble in his voice. "He can't even come out to greet me himself."

"Well, let's go inside," Sakura said, grabbing Syaoran's arm and leading him through the gate. "You can't refuse an invitation. It would be rude."

Syaoran sighed. "We'll be late to the park, though."

Sakura turned around and grinned. "We have all the time in the world, remember?"

The gate clicked shut behind them as they ascended the small staircase in front of the house and walked up to the door. Sakura pushed Syaoran in front and gave him a few whispered words of encouragement.

Syaoran reluctantly raised his arm to knock, but the door swung open by itself before his knuckles even brushed the wood.

"He can't even come to the front door when people call," Syaoran grumbled.

"Come on, let's go in," Sakura said, giving Syaoran a push from behind.

"Why are you so eager?" Syaoran asked, looking over his shoulder as he stepped over the door frame and into the house.

"I'm being eager for the both of us. You're trying to hide it, but I can tell this is important to you," Sakura said, a light blush appearing in her cheeks despite her jubilantly serious expression. "So it's important to me too."

"Sakura..." Syaoran said dumbly, unable to find the words that matched his thoughts.

As soon as Syaoran and Sakura cleared the door, it shut with a hollow thud and swallowed the sunshine. The dark, empty foyer stretched ahead of them and faded to black down the long tunnel-like hallway.

"It's just as dark in here as it was before," Syaoran said, a bit of grim amusement in his voice. "And I thought it would look brighter in the daytime."

"Hello?" Sakura called, her voice bouncing off the empty walls. "Is anyone home?"

"Welcome," a voice said from the darkness.

A figure appeared outlined in black against the dark hallway. Instantly, Syaoran knew it wasn't Clow, but he felt just as annoyed by the presence. Maybe even a bit more annoyed, if that was possible.

Suddenly, light flooded the room as a few lamps in the corners of the foyer and a small chandelier hanging from the ceiling came to life. Color filled the dark figure in the hallway.

"Eriol-kun?" Sakura said, the confusion on her face leaking into her voice.

The blue-haired boy was indeed standing before them, his usual soft smile warming his face. He didn't seem the least bit surprised to see them, but at the same time gave the air that he hadn't been expecting company.

"What are you doing here?" Syaoran managed to say through his glare.

"I hardly need a reason to be in my own house, do I?" Eriol said, chuckling. "Really, I should be asking you."

"This is your house, Eriol-kun?" Sakura asked. She glanced at Syaoran for a moment as if to make sure that he didn't know Eriol would be here.

"Well, it's my- father's," Eriol said, his grin pressing wider. For a little more than a moment, he gave a glance to Syaoran as if they were sharing some private joke.

But it was a joke Syaoran didn't get. Eriol had faltered on the word "father" like an actor who, for just a moment, had forgotten his lines.

"Your father?" Syaoran said darkly with a touch of cynical skepticism in his voice.

"That's right," Eriol said, nodding. "In fact, he'd like to meet you Sakura-san."

"Me? Why?" Sakura said, a little taken aback.

"I've told him all about you," Eriol said. "And, being a friend of Li-san's, he is very interested in meeting you. Do you have the time?"

"Yes!" Sakura said enthusiastically, surprising Syaoran. She seemed to sense Syaoran's feelings and turned to him. "He knows you, Syaoran. So I want to know him too. And besides, Eriol-kun is my friend and I would like to meet his family."

"Wonderful," Eriol said jubilantly. He turned and beckoned them forward. "This way."

Sakura followed eagerly after Eriol as he proceeded down the hallway, which forced Syaoran to hurry after her. He wished he could've had a few moments to try and digest the new information he'd just suddenly received. His mind was having trouble wrapping around the horror of Eriol and Clow having a connection, let alone being related.

Syaoran jogged up to walk beside Sakura. Despite himself, he found he was tense and ready for danger. But that was silly, seeing as how Clow, although a pompous jerk and an insufferable know-it-all, would probably never actually hurt anyone. At least he wouldn't unless it was part of some brilliant scheme. And Syaoran was done with brilliant schemes.

So it was something else that was making him nervous, but he had no idea what.

"Syaoran," Sakura said after a few moments of silence. Eriol was walking several paces ahead of them, leading them down the long hallway. "Why did Eriol-kun call you 'Li'? I'm pretty sure he was talking about you, anyway. Is that a nickname?"

Syaoran felt his stomach twist. So this was the source of his anxiety: telling Sakura the truth about himself. What would she think? What would she do? And even after he tells her everything, would she still love him in the same way?

"No, it's not a nickname," Syaoran said without thinking of the words before he said them. "It's my real name."

"Hoe? Your real name?" Sakura said, unable to keep her eyes from going big.

"Yeah. My real name - the name I was born with, anyway - is Syaoran Li," he said. "The man who lives here is called Clow Reed."

He gave me the life I have now, so I took on his last name. Not that I really had much choice."

"So... you're adopted?" Sakura asked.

"I guess," Syaoran said, shrugging like he was trying to shrug off his nervousness. "But this man's never been much of a father to me. I barely know him- I didn't even know Hiiragizawa knew him. Still... I owe him a lot. He's the reason I met you, Sakura."

She was quiet for several nerve-racking moments. Syaoran suddenly ran lies through his head, trying to find one that would reverse the damage. He wanted to say "Just kidding," or "Not really." But he also desperately wanted Sakura to know the truth. She deserved to know the truth.

Syaoran was just about to open his mouth to say something, anything, when Sakura threw her arms around him and hugged him close.

"I'm so lucky I get to meet him, then," she said. "Maybe, somehow, I can thank him too."

"You're not upset?" Syaoran asked, blinking. "Even though you found out that I'm not the person who I claimed to be when we met?"

Sakura looked up at him and grabbed his arm. "To me, you're Syaoran. And that would be true no matter *what* your name is."

That made Syaoran's thoughts grind to a halt and the knot in his stomach loosen just a bit, but he couldn't bring himself to say anything.

Are Syaoran Reed and Syaoran Li really the same person? Are they both... even people?

It was a question he couldn't answer.

As they neared the end of the hallway, the room beyond the double doors there opened up to them. Eriol barreled on ahead, but Syaoran stopped right before the door frame. Sakura plodded on for a few paces, but slowed when she found that Syaoran wasn't moving forward anymore.

The giant room spread out wide through the doorway, the huge window on the north wall letting in the sunshine. Clow's robed figure stood outlined in white light against the window, his hands clasped behind his back. To Syaoran, he looked regal and unapproachable.

"Is that him?" Sakura asked, whispering now.

Syaoran nodded, suddenly wondering why he was here and what he'd possibly want to say.

Eriol approached Clow and said something in a normal voice, but oddly, Syaoran couldn't make it out. Then Clow turned around, smiling- the same exact smile that Eriol used. Syaoran glared at this as a wave of the creeps washed over him, raising goosebumps on his arms.

"Syaoran," Clow said, seeming to cross the huge room in a single stride. "It would be so good to see you if only I could make you out through all the gloom in the hallway."

Syaoran rolled his eyes, but finally ventured into the room. Sakura followed.

"And Sakura-san," Clow said, sweeping his robes aside and grabbing Sakura's hand. He cupped it warmly between his own thin, gentle hands. "It's so good to finally meet you. Hiiragizawa-san has told me all about you. Syaoran has even mentioned you once or twice, which is quite an honor, given how he seems to have so few words to spare."

Sakura blushed. "I wish I could say I've heard all about you too, but..."

Clow's smile deepened at this. "It's quite alright and expected under the circumstances. I try to remain elusive if at all possible and my charges certainly seem willing to oblige."

"Sorry to disturb you then," Sakura said politely.

"That's not to say I don't enjoy company once in a while," Clow said, winking discretely.

"I'll be right back," Eriol said shortly, sliding out of the room through a door Syaoran hadn't even noticed until just then.

Clow led them both over to a large dining table near the west wall. He pulled a chair out for Sakura while Syaoran sat heavily in the seat next to hers. After making sure Sakura was comfortable, Clow sat in the huge red armchair at the head of the table.

"It's a bit of a surprise to see you here, Syaoran," Clow said when everyone was seated. "Not that you've come to visit, but that you are here at all."

Syaoran shrugged, wary and extremely aware of Sakura's presence.

Just how much was Clow going to tell her? And how horrible could he make the truth sound?

"So Reed-san," Sakura said, filling up the silence. "What do you do for a living?"

"Certainly nothing that warrants a stiff title like 'Reed-san'," Clow said.

Sakura laughed a little. "Then, Clow-san, what do you do for a living?"

Syaoran looked at her with a raised eyebrow while attempting to glare at the same time. Was she... enjoying this?

"I'm an inventor, if you want to know the truth," Clow said, winking at Syaoran. "I dabble in the unknown, striving to improve what little we have on this tiny plane of existence." He chuckled at Sakura's eagerly reverent expression. "Oh, it's not all as glamorous as those big eyes make it out to be, Sakura-san. Inventions and experiments don't take one very far in our world. But I enjoy it and I like to think it helps people from time to time."

Sakura opened her mouth, but it was then that Eriol swept back into the room, carrying what looked like a big golden lump in his arms.

"This was making a horrible racket just inside the foyer," Eriol said, coming closer and handing the lump over to Clow.

Sakura peered over the edge of the table, trying to get a closer look. Syaoran raised an eyebrow at the thing, getting the strange sensation that he'd seen something like it before. A long, long time ago.

"What is it?" Sakura asked, still struggling for a good look. "A toy?"

"I'm not a toy!"

For a few fleeting seconds, Sakura thought that Clow had just done a particularly flawless ventriloquist trick by making the doll sit up and spit the words out indignantly. But Clow's hands were still folded in his lap and he hadn't so much as swallowed.

"Sakura-san, this is Keroberos," Clow said, his soft smile unwavering. "I believe you've already had the pleasure, Syaoran."

"How are ya kid?" Kero said, rising into the air and floating over to Syaoran, his little cream-colored wings flapping needlessly. Kero reached out a stubby paw and patted Syaoran on the head a few times. "You did alright, didn't ya?"

"No thanks to you," Syaoran grumbled, flinching a little with each pat and staring straight ahead.

The thing grinned. "But that was the point."

Kero turned to Sakura then, floating over within arm's reach. "Sakura, Sakura! Isn't this great? You get to meet me! That's interesting, ain't it?"

Sakura sat staring, a little bewildered. She reached up a hand to touch Kero- as if making sure he was really there. "Is it... alive?"

"Well, no," Clow said. "He's certainly not alive."

"Then... is he one of your inventions, Clow-san?" Sakura asked as Kero sat looking annoyed at being ignored.

"Yes, I suppose you could say that," Clow said, smiling mysteriously. "Actually, he's the by-product of an experiment conducted a very long time ago. But he's come to be a dear friend of mine nonetheless."

"Well, it's nice to meet you... Kero-chan," Sakura said, surprised at the way the name slipped off her tongue. Keroberos-san just didn't seem appropriate, somehow.

"Isn't it, though?" Kero said jubilantly.

"Sakura-san," Eriol's voice sounded behind Sakura. She turned around in her seat. "Would you like to see the garden? It's so beautiful in the Spring; everything is in bloom. And you can see the entire town spread out under the sunset."

"I'd like that," Sakura said.

"I knew you would," Eriol said. He pulled Sakura's seat out and offered a gentlemanly hand. "I'd be happy to give you a tour. Reed-san and Li-san probably have a lot to discuss, so we can leave them behind."

Sakura gave a pained glance to Syaoran as Eriol pulled her out of her seat.

"It's okay," Syaoran said. "Go see the garden."

Sakura nodded and smiled. "Okay. You'll tell me all about it later, right?"

Syaoran hesitated for a moment before nodding, but by then Eriol had guided Sakura to yet another door in the wall that hadn't been there before. Sakura waved before Eriol gently swept her through.

"Forget the boring garden," Kero was saying as the door shut. "Let's tour the kitchen!"

The silence was almost overwhelming in the echoing noise the door made when it clicked closed. Syaoran stared at the wood grain in the table, trying desperately to gather his thoughts and to keep his hands from fidgeting.

"You seem to have given up being a bodyguard," Clow said eventually, amusement in his voice. "I'm surprised that you let her go like that- out of your sight and, supposedly, into danger."

Syaoran turned his head and glared searingly. "What the hell do you mean by that? *Should* I be nervous?"

Clow chuckled, making the hair on the back of Syaoran's neck stand on end out of sheer annoyance. "I only mean to say that you don't seem as protective or distrusting. The Syaoran I knew before would have run after Sakura-san, worried about her to the point of anxiety."

"She... can take care of herself," Syaoran said after a few beats of silence. "She's not stupid. She knows what will put her in danger and what won't. And so if she's not afraid of Hiiragizawa's company, I shouldn't be either."

"And Chaos?" Clow asked, raising an eyebrow in fake interest. "You have no fear that supernatural forces are still out there, waiting for you to lower your guard?"

Syaoran sat silent for a long moment before answering.

"I... don't think Chaos is a threat anymore," he said. "When I came back, I felt like the world had changed. It's just a feeling, but it's like all the tension that was there before is gone now. I don't know what it means exactly, but I'm pretty sure that it has something to do with why I was thrown into the Void. And that's why Sakura isn't important to Chaos anymore."

"You have good instincts, Syaoran. In another life they may have gone to waste," Clow said. "It's true that the world has changed. That tension you feel is gone now was the mounting struggle between Chaos and Order. When you gave up your energy to Sakura-san, you simultaneously achieved two tasks: you nullified Chaos' precious virus and saved a soul that should have died. This tipped the scale in favor of Order and the tension instantly went slack like the chains on the Cosmic Scale had broken. It sounds grandiose, but the truth is that little has changed for us human beings. That is because we still have the ability to create chaos ourselves. Having a balance in favor of Order simply means that things are generally more orderly on a cosmic level. And Chaos, having had her fun here, is most likely off somewhere else having fun, lest she get too bored by staying in one place."

Syaoran nodded sullenly, feigning understanding. "That's why I'm not worried anymore."

"Oh, that's certainly not the truth, now is it?" Clow said, leaning forward just a bit.

Syaoran opened his mouth to spit out a protest, but paused before he said anything. His mouth gaped open for a few moments before his body sagged and he stared back at the table.

"It's not worry, exactly," Syaoran said quietly as if admitting to a crime. "I'm more like... confused."

He looked up to Clow, meeting his eyes for the first time.

"I don't understand," Syaoran said. "Why am I here?"

Clow sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. "Well, that's the question, isn't it?"

"I remember being in the Void," Syaoran said. His eyes had turned back to the side, looking inward and panning his sockets unfocused as he searched his memories. "I was in that place and... then... I lost myself."

Syaoran's eyes went wide and he stared at the table, looking beyond it. "There's no way I should be here. I went too far- I shouldn't have been able to come back."

"No one has ever come back from the Void, Syaoran," Clow said serenely. "You are the very first. The fact that you came back after being assimilated into the universal consciousness is largely irrelevant."

"But *why*?" Syaoran asked, the skin on his forehead bunching up in frustration. "What made me so special?"

"I remember the night the ghost of you came to me so clearly," Clow said in a way that made it seem like he was changing the subject. "Do you remember it, Syaoran? It was the night before a new moon- a night on the cusp of new beginnings and also the the last bit of light before of a long period of darkness. When you came to me, I wanted to refuse your request. The look in your eyes was the look of someone who was ready to sacrifice *everything* . You said that you had made a promise, remember? That was enough to make me hesitate, even if I was in the position to grant your wish."

"It was a sense of obligation that led you to this house, Syaoran. When Keroberos told you about Sakura-san's imminent death, you were instantly weighted down with a heavy burden: the knowledge of the fate of a human soul. You made a promise, then, don't you remember? 'I'll make sure nothing happens to her,' you said. Then, suddenly, the duty to keep her safe fell on you."

"You must understand that duty is one of the heaviest things in the world. It is the overwhelming omnipresence of tremendous obligation. And it requires tremendous sacrifice. Soldiers go to war and die for it, priests give up their souls for it, and police officers are even prepared to kill for it. But, wherever duty is born, it always born from an oath... from a promise. What you said that day in Sakura-san's room was your oath, Syaoran. Even though Keroberos never expressibly held you responsible for Sakura-san's well-being, you felt responsible anyway- and that's all that mattered. That's all it takes for someone to become bound by their own words."

"That still doesn't explain how I was able to come back," Syaoran said. "I had to pay for disrupting the cycle, right? My payment was leaving this world and leaving Sakura. So... why am I here?"

"Like I said before, *duty* demands sacrifice," Clow said, his voice rising like he was getting to the punchline of an absolutely hilarious joke. "Obligation requires compensation. But duty was not the only motivation you had, Syaoran. There was something else there; something you succeeded in suppressing through the end."

Syaoran's face twisted up in confusion. His eyebrows lowered as he thought hard.

"What was the last thing you remember while being in the Void?" Clow asked, prodding.

"Hearing Sakura's voice," Syaoran said without hesitation. "I... well, 'we' heard Sakura. At first, though, it didn't seem important. And then she said 'I miss you.' That's when everything came back to me, almost all at once. Sakura said my name and I was able to separate myself from whatever that thing was. I got upset... I started wondering why I was where I was and... I yelled out, with my own voice, that I would never make another promise. The next thing I knew, I was on my back in the sandbox next to the penguin slide."

All the while, Clow had been nodding along to Syaoran's story. "When you called out in the Void, you were acting upon a single,

very strong emotion. And this emotion, in its purest form, is absolutely unconditional. The bond it creates between two souls is so powerful that it can span worlds, essentially linking those people's energies together. Even when you were assimilated into the Void, your bond with Sakura-san still existed because the energy that made up your being never actually disappeared. It had been scattered and mixed with the universal consciousness, but the link remained. That's how Sakura-san's voice was able to call you back to yourself. Then you only followed the link out of the Void and back to our world."

"But why am I like this?" Syaoran asked, flexing his hands. "How is this body possible when I shouldn't have any energy left to keep it?"

Clow shrugged. "Because you wanted it. I told you, Syaoran. Unlike the initial *obligation* that took you when you did not want to go, the force that brought you back here from the Void doesn't demand anything of you. It is unconditional and requires no sacrifices, makes no promises, and enforces no restrictions. The energy that you needed to sustain the body I created for you all those months ago is now obsolete."

"But there's no way I'm going to get off without any retribution, is there?" Syaoran said. "What about my punishment? I mean, why doesn't Spinel Sun just sentence me back to the Void?"

"Because you don't belong there."

The soft, cool voice sounded directly behind Syaoran. No sooner had the voice spoken a single syllable then Syaoran was out of his seat and turned around.

Yue was standing there, arms crossed heavily over his chest. His face was as stoic as always, but his ice-blue eyes looked all around Syaoran except directly at him. And, for the first time that Syaoran could recall, Yue's wings were gone from his back. It made him seem smaller than Syaoran remembered.

"Spinel's angry, of course," Yue continued. "But you've made new rules, so the Void can't hold you any longer."

"I made new rules?" Syaoran said skeptically. "I changed the rules of the universe?"

Yue nodded. "It's not unheard of, really. Actually, it happens more often than you'd think. It makes us wonder sometimes who *really* controls the universe. Is it us, or is it you people? The line tends to blur."

"Maybe it's a combination," Syaoran said slowly. "Like we're in control of some things and you're in control of others."

But Yue just shook his head. "No. It's only that you people don't really know what you're capable of. When you finally do come to realize it, you won't need us anymore... Just like you didn't need me to find your way out of the Void."

"That's what I don't understand," Syaoran said, talking to the floor. His shoulders slumped. "Why didn't you help me? Why did you leave me with Spinel and Chaos without an escape?"

"Because I am bound to rules that don't exist for you," Yue said. "You must understand that you had to figure out how to get out of the Void all on your own. I *couldn't* do anything for you once you willingly crossed the veil with Spinel that night in the girl's room. That's the difference between us: I am bound by all these regulations that I clearly see and understand, while you are liberated by a universe that is practically beyond your comprehension."

"Is that why you killed me fifty years ago, then?" Syaoran asked, his words coming out more bitter than he meant them to sound. "To teach me some kind of universal lesson?"

Yue was quiet for a few minutes. "We... don't really *teach* lessons, Syaoran. We do what we have to do and then you people try to make sense of it. And if in all that contemplating and pondering you

come to understand more about the universe, that can hardly be considered a lesson. If you learn that birds fly by watching them flit amongst the trees, can the birds really say that they taught you something? And, furthermore, that they meant to teach you that *particular* thing about them?"

"So, basically, you're saying that my death was just something that *had* to be done," Syaoran said quietly. "And it wasn't part of some intricate plan created especially for me?"

"No, it wasn't," Yue said. "You were just what we needed. It could have been anyone, but you happened to be there with the attributes that we were looking for. In other words, you weren't born just so I could kill you. You lived your life separately from me until that moment."

"That's really disturbing, though," Syaoran said. "So Order and Chaos can just sweep our lives away whenever it's convenient or serves a purpose for them?"

"Yes," Yue said simply. "In fact, it's happening all over the world at this very moment. But our power over your lives is based on one assumption that you people have somehow engraved into your conscious: that there are some things beyond your control. And, as you showed me when you climbed out of the Void, it is an ungrounded and ultimately incorrect assumption."

Syaoran was quiet, not speaking for several long moments. He continued to stare toward the floor, but held his hands up in front of his face and balled them into fists.

"You have every right to be angry," Yue said, watching Syaoran's clenched hands. "And if you think it will help, you can hit me. I won't feel anything, but you can hit me all you want. I won't stop you."

"No... I'm not angry. Not really," Syaoran said, flexing his hands once more before lifting his head to look directly into Yue's eyes for what seemed like the first time in an eternity. "I was just thinking that... I

only met Sakura because I existed in that house when she came there. And I guess, despite everything else, I can't thank you enough for that."

He was surprised when Yue's shoulders dropped sharply like a huge weight had been removed. Syaoran couldn't be sure, but for a few moments Yue's serious, ice-blue eyes seemed to become glassy and soft. As soon as Syaoran could blink, however, the strange expression was gone.

And Yue's wings were back.

"You would have met another girl, you know," Yue said in his usual matter-of-fact tone. He crossed his arms over his chest like he would in the old days when giving Syaoran a lecture about the world. His wings flared slightly. "If you would have lived a normal life fifty years ago."

"But that girl wouldn't have been Sakura," Syaoran said simply.

"No, that's true," Yue said. He shifted his position, pulling his arms tighter inward. "It's amazing how soulmates - even those displaced in time and against all odds - can still find each other with a happy ending. It makes me wonder if there isn't someone else out there; someone higher than any of us who can see all this and make it work."

"If you don't know," Syaoran said, slumping. "What hope do I have in finding out?"

"The odds are better than you think," Yue said. His shadow-smile appeared on his face for a little more than a moment. "Goodbye, Syaoran. And thank you."

"Huh?" Syaoran asked, taken a bit off guard. "What are you thanking *me* for?"

"That," Yue said as his form faded away. "Is probably the one thing you will never fully understand."

Yue was gone a moment later, leaving the room feeling somehow cooler. But Syaoran felt that Yue wasn't really gone. Not really.

"Goodbye, Yue," Syaoran said to the empty room. He felt a bit awkward, but said the words clearly as if Yue were still standing in front of him. "I'm glad I knew you."

Syaoran turned back around and jumped a little. Clow was still sitting there, holding a cup of tea. The man turned and smiled warmly.

"So nice of him to stop by," he said, taking a long, careful sip of his tea.

"You were listening?" Syaoran asked, glaring harshly.

"Oh, yes," Clow said, amused. "But it wasn't anything I hadn't heard before."

"Then... do you believe what Yue said?" Syaoran asked, drifting back into the seat he'd been sitting in before. A cup of tea was on the table in front of him, but he just stared at it. "Is *nothing* beyond our control? Can a person really find their own way through life, even with Chaos and Order there to set up cosmic road blocks that we can't even see, let alone predict?"

"I think that's a silly question," Clow said, setting his cup down. "Don't you have enough evidence for yourself to decide one way or the other? You came back from a place that Order and Chaos thought you could never escape from. That alone should be testament enough to the power of the human spirit."

"But I didn't do it on my own," Syaoran said sullenly. "I had Sakura to help me. And I had this."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out The Return card, and set it on the table in front of Clow.

"Now this," Clow said, picking up the card from the table and staring at it as if it were a long lost friend. "This is something that I haven't seen in a while."

"That's how I got out of the Void, isn't it?" Syaoran said, hanging his head. "I don't know what kind of power it has, but it was able to get me out."

"Syaoran," Clow said, chuckling. "This card has as much mystical energy attached to it as a candy wrapper. It's no special object and carries no special attributes." He slid the card back over to Syaoran. "I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"The energy must be gone now," Syaoran said desperately, picking up the card again. "I know it had *something* to do with why I was able to come back because it was in my pocket when I woke up in the park. I've had for a very long time and I didn't even know until now."

"I know for a fact," Clow said gently. "that there is nothing special about that card because I designed it. And trust me when I say that I didn't put any special energy into it at all."

"Wait," Syaoran said shortly. " *You* made this card and you're telling me that there's no magic in it? Just who are you trying to fool?"

"I never said I *made* the card, Syaoran; I only designed it," Clow said. He took a long sip of his tea before continuing. "It is part of a game I created during the 70s to profit off the generation's craving for mysticism. It was quite fun, actually- especially making up all the silly rules and incantations from off the top of my head. A major toy company in the area bought the rights to the game from me two days after I put them up for sale and mass-produced thousands of units for shipment to stores all over the world."

Clow reached over and turned the card face down in front of Syaoran.

"See, now?" Clow said, pointing at the tiny print near the bottom of the card: *for entertainment use only* . "This isn't even the original card that I made as a prototype. It was produced in a factory and only one of two-hundred-thousand exactly like it. And I haven't so much as touched it until just now.

"So that should settle this debate once and for all. If there is truly magic in the world, Syaoran, it certainly doesn't come from the cards. Understand?"

Syaoran started at the tiny print, reading it a few times over. "The power of the human spirit, huh?" He clenched his hands unconsciously, digging his nails lightly into the wood grain of the table.

Clow glanced sideways at Syaoran and they sat in silence for several long minutes. All the while, Syaoran kept his head down and stared into nothing.

Finally, he said, "But am I really... human?"

"And what do you mean by that?" Clow asked, grinning madly.

"You know, human!" Syaoran said, jumping out of his chair and pacing shortly back and forth. "Am I like everyone else? Am I human the way... Sakura is human?"

"I don't think I understand," Clow said seriously. "What does it mean to be human?"

Syaoran opened his mouth, but quickly closed it again. He paced a couple of times then said, "I don't know! That's why I need you to tell me."

"Syaoran, please sit back down," Clow said, gesturing to the empty seat. "Have some tea."

Syaoran paced a couple more times just out of protest, but eventually sat heavily in his seat. He picked up his tea and sniffed it briefly, then took a careful sip.

"Ug," he said, swallowing the liquid with a grimace. "Bitter."

"To answer your question," Clow said, grinning as he watched Syaoran dump several spoonfuls of sugar into his cup. "I don't think there's a person on the planet that can tell you exactly what it is to be human. Ask a million different people and you'll get a million different answers- right after they have all said 'I don't know.'"

"But if being human means that you have strong emotions and have enough senses to tell that the tea you're drinking needs more sugar..." Clow trailed off as Syaoran froze in the middle of stirring a fourth spoonful of sugar into his tea. "Well, I would say that's all there is to it, really."

"I just have to wonder..." Syaoran said, placing his spoon on the table with a little *clank*. "Even if I can feel things and eat and drink and sleep, is this body just faking everything? Am I really doing all these things because I actually need them, or am I playing a part? Is it possible that I'm just... pretending to be human?"

"The human body is an amazing organism," Clow said coyly. "It functions by a complex network of interdependent systems that are constantly beating, processing, and churning. There are countless parts to the human body, from the most essential vital organs down to the smallest molecule whirling around at the very end of a single strand of hair.

"However, there are basically three components to a human body: bone, fluid, and flesh. And even these most basic parts can be further be lumped into the single category of 'matter'. And can you

tell me, Syaoran, what the most general definition of matter happens to be?"

"Matter is energy," Syaoran said after thinking for a few moments. "Energy that's been focused to form any material that occupies space and has mass."

"So it's agreed," Clow said, waving his hand with a flourish. "A human body is simply focused energy. Thus, Syaoran, you are human. As human as any of us, that is."

Syaoran shifted in his seat and, after several long moments, reached out and took a sip of tea. He gulped it uncertainly, then set it back down. He added a few more spoonfuls of sugar to the cup and stirred it slowly.

"The truth is," Clow said, following Syaoran's movements with his eyes. "that we are *all* only pretending to be human. We have all come from focused energy and, someday, we will all return to that energy. These bodies are so ephemeral; so very temporary that we never actually get enough time to become used to them. If you feel awkward and strange in that body, Syaoran, it's completely normal. There's not a person in the world who feels completely at home even in their own skin one hundred percent of the time."

"Even you?" Syaoran asked curiously.

"Well," Clow said, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands neatly over his stomach amongst the folds in his robes. "Perhaps I am a bad example. However, I think that's only because... I've had time to adjust."

He winked, sending chills down Syaoran's spine.

"We should sit down here, next to this tree," Rika said, indicating a nice little patch of grass that overlooked a rolling field.

"Yeah, that's perfect. The cherry blossoms will look so pretty in the moonlight here," Chiharu agreed.

"Would someone grab the other end of this?" Naoko asked, unfolding the huge checkered blanket and fluffing it out in the breeze.

"I've got it!" Sakura exclaimed, grabbing at one billowing end. She missed it the first time, but got it on the second try.

"Li-san, would you please put this ice in the cooler?" Eriol asked Syaoran, holding out the damp bag.

"Yeah, sure," Syaoran grumbled, snatching the bag away and heading for the small cooler propped against the tree trunk.

"Shall I start unloading the food?" Tomoyo asked, setting down the giant picnic basket on the grass.

"I'm starving," Chiharu admitted. She helped Tomoyo set the covered dishes onto the blanket. "Why don't we start with the rice balls I made? It's a new recipe and I want to know what you guys think."

"Hopefully we'll live to tell you," Yamazaki was able to say before Chiharu knocked the wind out of him with a sharp elbow to the ribs.

Syaoran wandered back to the blanket and took the last empty seat next to Sakura. The food got passed around and, at Yamazaki's instigation, everyone began telling jokes and stories. Eventually, all the jubilation culminated into an enthusiastic food-fight that had the group using their plates as shields and corners of the blanket for cover.

As the sun neared the horizon and the laughter began to subside, Syaoran quietly slipped away and wandered over to the little bridge that ran over a creek in the middle of the park. He leaned against the railing, feeling the cool evening air against his sleeveless arms and

savoring the taste of dinner still on his tongue. He shut his eyes and let all his other senses take over.

"Hey," Sakura said, come up behind him. "What are you doing over here?"

"I was just wondering..." Syaoran said over a swell of laughter in the distance. "What I did to deserve all this."

Sakura slid up next to him and draped her arms over the railing. She watched her dark, wavy reflection in the water below. "Actually, I was just wondering the same thing."

"You're you," Syaoran said softly. "That's more than enough reason."

Sakura grabbed Syaoran's hand suddenly, sending a wave of pleasure from the top of his spine into his toes. Sakura slid close and rested her head on his chest.

"Ditto," she said, her voice rumbling his ribcage.

They stood wrapped up in each other as the sun slipped behind the line of the world. Syaoran squeezed Sakura tightly then, as if reassuring himself that they were both solid and real.

"So what did you and Clow-san talk about?" Sakura asked as the horizon enveloped the last bit of sunshine. "It must have been something very interesting to keep a conversation going for over an hour like that."

The knot in Syaoran's stomach tightened again.

"Sakura, I can't..." he began, lowering his head.

But Sakura cut him off right away and grabbed his hands, taking one into each of hers.

"No, it's okay," Sakura said. She looked him right in his eyes. "I don't think I want you to just tell me. It feels like cheating."

She squeezed Syaoran's hands and then let them go. She leaned back against the railing and watched the huge full moon creep up into the sky beyond the cherry blossom trees.

"I want to know everything about you," Sakura said. "But I think I want to do it on my own. I want to figure you out and piece you together."

She turned to him. "Because I know there's a lot of things that you just can't put into words."

Syaoran nodded slowly, ignoring the panging in his chest as best he could. "It must be the same thing with you. You've told me all about yourself, but... I know there's more to you. And I'll find that out too. We can piece ourselves together."

"Yeah," Sakura said, a small, content smile creeping into her voice. "I like the sound of that."

The water trickled softly below them and the trees rustled in the breeze overhead. Sakura slipped one arm around Syaoran's waist and pulled him close. The cherry blossom leaves sifted the moonlight, scattering mottled blue light on Syaoran's arms as he lifted Sakura's chin to look into her eyes. He gently brushed a few strands of hair out of her face and then slid his hand behind her neck to draw her closer. His warm breath beat softly on her cheeks just before their lips met.

It was then that the pang in Syaoran's chest exploded and, for that one fleeting moment, he felt like maybe...

Maybe he did know what it meant to be human after all.

When they finally broke apart, Sakura backed away and studied Syaoran's face seriously in the moonlight. She squinted at him as if she were trying to recognize him from very far away.

"What?" Syaoran said, laughing a little at Sakura's expression.

"Nothing," Sakura said after a moment. She grabbed his hand and they started walking back to the blanket where everyone scrambled to look like they hadn't been watching.

"It's just..." Sakura began, a blush creeping into her voice.

"Yeah?"

"A long time ago, I had this crazy dream about a maze..."

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Wow, so it's over finally- emphasis on finally. I'm so sorry to make you all wait forever, but I hope this last chapter was worth it. I hardly consider this work a masterpiece, but I'm proud of it nonetheless. It's not everyday that I finish a near-novel-length story, you know. I should give myself kudos at least for that.

I'll spare you all the end-of-story rant (this chapter was long enough as it is). If you feel your life just won't be complete without my unbiased concluding thoughts, visit my writing journal which is linked in my profile. I promise that I will rant there enough for four stories.
;P

Before I go, I want to extend my thanks to everyone who reviewed for me. I appreciate all your kind words and have seriously taken your criticisms to heart. I'm very happy that my story has entertained you enough to take the time out of your day to tell me so. Thanks again, everyone.

I'll be posting a few new stories soon, so please keep a lookout for me!

- Ann