At What Price Love?

by Storz

Summary

When Tamaki's grandmother forces him to end his relationship with Haruhi, Kyoya makes his move.

Notes

This story is a sequel to the anime, although it does reference many things that happen in the manga and so could be viewed as an alternate ending to the books. It begins about eight weeks before Tamaki and Kyoya graduate.

Chapter 1

"I hate that woman." Honey's voice was low and soft, barely audible, but all the guys heard it clear as day.

"Well anyway," Tamaki shrugged, "it's over and done with now. I'd appreciate it if you don't tell Haruhi."

The blond boy didn't wait for an answer before leaving; he didn't have to. Haruhi was dear to all of them and none of them would hurt her by choice.

Silence followed.

"Could she really do it?" Hikaru asked Kyoya. "Could Madam Suoh destroy Haruhi's life if Tamaki doesn't end his relationship with her?"

"Well," Kyoya considered, "the Chairman is quite fond of Haruhi and is unlikely to withdraw her scholarship regardless of his mother's wishes. But she could cost Haruhi's father his job and make it difficult for him to find another here in Tokyo. And if they have to leave Tokyo, Haruhi will have to withdraw from Ouran, which will limit her law school choices and scholarship opportunities."

"Even if her dad had to leave Tokyo, that doesn't mean she'd have to leave Ouran. She could live with us," Hikaru volunteered.

"You really think she'd leave her dad for a school?" Kaoru answered back.

"Hmm."

"I'm surprised that bitter old woman didn't go after Haruhi without warning," Honey said.

"No," Mori replied. "Haruhi is not without friends and there is no reason to make enemies of the next head of the Haninozuka family or the owner of the Ootori Group." The others all turned to look at Mori in surprise. "What? All of us have money, but only Honey and Kyoya's families have enough social standing to challenge her."

Kyoya arched an eyebrow. "Interesting observation," he murmured to himself and filed away the comment for future reference.

~oOo~

It had been over a week and Haruhi's misery hadn't abated. Neither had Tamaki's, truth be told. At the Host Club meetings, Tamaki's charm was excessive, even for him. And for those who know him well, painfully forced. He stayed away from Haruhi and never met her eyes. For her part, Haruhi stayed on her side of the room, surreptitiously glancing over to try to figure out which of those well-moneyed beauties had taken Tamaki's heart.

Watching them from his vantage point midway between, it was hard to believe that only a month before, Tamaki had been dragging Kyoya around Tokyo's most exclusive jewelry stores looking at rings.

"What about this one?" Tamaki enthused holding up what looked like a piece of gilded lace.
"The filigree work is exquisite," Kyoya answered.

"Yes it is. Put it with the others please," he instructed the jeweler. The girl placed it on a velvet tray next to a half dozen other rings, variously carved, inlaid or set with colorful stones set in intricate patterns.

Kyoya glanced back at the case. "That one," he said.

The jeweler removed the ring from the case and handed it to him. Slightly over one carat, grade D white diamond solitaire set in white gold. "Flawless?" Kyoya inquired.

"Of course, sir," the jeweler replied.

"What have you found?" Tamaki bounced over. Kyoya showed him the ring. "Oh no! That's far too plain for my Haruhi!" Tamaki breezed back over to the other case.

Kyoya looked at the ring. Yes, he thought. Far too plain for your Haruhi. It would, however, have been perfect for my Haruhi. Simple. Elegant. Not so big it would encumber her tiny hands. Its true worth only apparent to those who knew what they were looking at. My Haruhi. He handed the ring back to the jeweler. He had to stop thinking this way. She was going to marry his best friend. Or at least, his best friend was going to ask her and she'd be a fool ten times over not to accept.

In hindsight, the choice of jewelers had been a mistake. When word got around that the Suoh heir had been shopping for engagement rings, Shizue intervened. Perhaps had they patronized a less prestigious store, the old woman would not have found out in time to react.

"Is something wrong?" asked one of Haruhi's regulars.

Haruhi smiled. "No. I just got some hard news. It's part of life. It will pass."

Before they could quiz her further, Kyoya intervened. "Haruhi? Would you mind staying after club tonight? I wanted to speak with you."

"Of course, Senpai."

Tamaki disappeared as soon as the session was over, not even staying for clean up. No one faulted him; he was dying inside and being in the same room with Haruhi was only making the pain worse. The lie that he had found another was holding for now, but it would crumble if he spent any appreciable time with her. The twins loitered a bit longer, hoping to find out what Kyoya was up to, but eventually gave up and left. And as Honey and Mori, now in college, only stopped by once or twice a week and this was not one of those days, the twins' departure left Kyoya and Haruhi alone.

"Senpai?"

Kyoya regarded her for a moment. "This is the night your father works late, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"My parents are out of the country, so I am on my own tonight as well. Would you care to join me for dinner?"

"No, she thought. But it was hard to say no to Kyoya, especially when he seemed straightforward and sincere. "Sure. I guess." She reconsidered when they got to the car. "Actually, I'm probably not very good company tonight."
"Well, given that nobody besides Tamaki ever truly thinks I am good company, that makes us a pair." He opened the door and handed her in.

"That's not true. You can be quite nice when, you know, there's something to be gained."

Kyoya wasn't sure if he was amused or annoyed at her teasing. "Among those who are his equals in consequence, he is a very different man from what he is to the less prosperous?" We had to read *Pride and Prejudice* in world literature. A waste of time. Mr. Darcy is the only character in the story who is sensible and therefore likable."

Haruhi stifled a giggle.

The waiting area of the restaurant was packed, even on a weeknight and for a brief moment Haruhi thought she might escape dinner after all. No such luck. The Maître d' bowed as soon as he saw them. "Welcome, Mr. Ootori. Your table is waiting."

The waiter placed menus before them and Kyoya politely picked his up although his eyes never moved. *He probably has it memorized,* she thought.

"See anything of interest?" he asked after a few minutes.

"Several things. I just couldn't help noticing there are no prices on this menu."

"I invited you to dinner. I'm paying."

"I'm sorry. I'm still expecting to be billed for every possible expense."

"Your debt to the Host Club was joke, Haruhi. Perhaps we let it go on too long, but it was easier than admitting how much we all wanted you to stay."

"Yeah, I realized early on it was a joke. You were never going to let me out of debt."

"And yet you went along with it."

"It was easier than admitting how much I wanted to stay."

Their eyes met and they each suppressed a slight smile, then Haruhi burst out laughing. She answered Kyoya's raised eyebrow, "I'm sorry, I just … do you remember when Kasanoda came to us to make him less scary and they gave him a 'lovely object' and that made it even worse?"

Kyoya shook his head. "Then they put him in that maid's outfit. It's a wonder he didn't have us all killed." That single reminiscence opened a floodgate of memories and for the first time in his life, Kyoya found himself laughing all the way through dinner. They carefully skirted certain memories, especially ones too close to Tamaki or anything to do with the beach on Okinawa. Even so, they had plenty of fodder. The school physical her first year. Her accidental first kiss. The Zuka Club's attempts to woo her from the Host Club. She even found humor in the memory of a sleep-deprived, starving and irritated Shadow King being led around a commoner's mall. Her eyes sparkled with mirth and her comments were clever without malice. God, she was beautiful.

In the car on the way home, Kyoya stared out the window. "I want you to know I really am sorry about you and Tamaki. I truly thought you two made an exceptionally well matched couple."

Haruhi bit her lip. "It's ok. It wouldn't have worked long term anyway…. I'm from a different world than you guys…"
"Nonsense. You're highly intelligent. Anything we know, you could learn."

She shook her head. "I could never take money for granted the way you guys do."

"Haruhi, I haven't taken money for granted since I was eight years old and found out I was to be disinherited for the sin of being born a third son." She looked at him sharply, but he went on almost oblivious to her presence. "I remember, I had my driver take me around the poorer neighborhoods of Tokyo and I wondered how people lived like that. And I promised myself that was never going to happen to me. So while my peers spent their money on games and fancy trips, I saved mine. While they read adventure stories, I read financial journals. While they played sports, I learned to do research. By the time I was ten, I saved enough to open an investment account. I lost half of it in the first six months. But I learned something. I learned a lot of things. About money. And companies. And the people who run them. And by the time I was fourteen, I had made a hundred million yen. But until tonight, I never told anyone. Because what if the market turned and I lost it all? Then I'd be an even bigger failure than a penniless third son."

"Kyoya, I had no idea…"

"I'm not interested in your sympathy, Haruhi. I'm pointing out that you have no idea what our lives are like. You think you know, just as Tamaki thinks he knows what your life is like, and I suspect the two are equally accurate. I don't need my family's money anymore. They could cut me off tomorrow and I could still finish Ouran and put myself through any university in the world. However, despite that my family is a laboratory for social Darwinism, they are still my family. I have no desire to walk away from them. And despite that they are my family and I will maintain ties to them always, I want my brothers to know – down to the darkest recesses of their souls, that I am a better man than they. But they don't control me. I may hope for my father's blessing when I choose a wife; but I will choose her, not him."

"The Hitachiins are both self-made. They wouldn't care if their daughter-in-law came from nothing as long as she is a good person who makes their son happy. Of course which son…"

"For that matter, I suspect that Mori still has a soft spot for you. And Kasanoda, though I really don't recommend…"

"Stop pushing your friends at me!" She interrupted. "I don't need a man to make me whole!"

"Not whole," Kyoya said reasonably. "But do you really want to go back to being lonely? Ah, we've arrived at your home." Kyoya got out and walked around the car to open her door and help her out. "You really don't have to…" she started but he cut her off.

"Nonsense. A gentleman always sees a lady to her door, else what sort of Host would I be?" And he did, up the narrow stairwell to her door. As she fumbled for her keys, a thought occurred to her. Had this been a date? He'd asked her out, paid for dinner, walked her to her door. Well, there was one way to tell she thought as she slid the key into the lock.

"Kyoya," she said as she turned the key.

"Yes?"

She turned around and gave him a quick kiss. His eyes went wide and he tensed up in surprise. _Nope_, she thought, _not a date_. She started to turn back when she felt one arm slip around her waist while the other slid across her shoulders, cradling her head. He bent to give her a long,
slow kiss. Time slipped away from her, only resuming with a sharp pain when their lips parted. They gazed into each other's eyes for a moment or forever while he fought the temptation to kiss her again. It wasn't fair to her, he told himself. She'd just broken up with Tamaki. She needed more time. He gave her a chaste kiss on the forehead and reluctantly released her. "Goodnight Haruhi."

She stood there in the open doorway until she heard the limo pull away. She turned and walked into the darkened apartment to find her father standing in the doorway to his bedroom. "It's late," he said. "I was starting to worry."

"I'm fine," she replied. Overwhelming, swirling, confused emotions still counted as fine, right? She already wanted to cry over Tamaki and rage at him for breaking up without really giving her a reason. She was angry at Kyoya for giving her a truly enjoyable evening, then offering to pass her down the table like it all meant nothing. She was angry at Kyoya because she wanted him. She wanted him because it would hurt Tamaki and she wanted him because ... because she wanted him. She didn't understand it. She'd never thought of him in that light before. She still loved Tamaki. Surely it wasn't possible to love two men at once. She drew a deep breath before looking at her father again and answered his unspoken question with a nonchalant "I just went out to dinner with one of the guys." She disappeared into her room too quickly and closed the door.

Ranka looked after her and wondered. He could have sworn it was Tamaki his daughter had been dating, but that was Kyoya's voice outside the door. And judging from the shadows cast through the window, it hadn't been just dinner. He was saddened that Haruhi was keeping a secret from him, but then again, he wasn't being completely honest with her either he thought, as he reached for the medicine bottle.
Kyoya really wasn't looking forward to this morning. He located Tamaki sitting by the window in Music Room 3 before the start of class. "How are you doing?" Kyoya asked.

"I'm fine," Tamaki lied, giving Kyoya a smile that almost made him believe it.

"I took Haruhi to dinner last night."

"Oh? Thank you. I know her father works late and eating by yourself is almost like having no family at all." Kyoya would bet anything Tamaki ate alone last night.

"No Tamaki. I took Haruhi to dinner last night."

"Oh," Tamaki looked away. "How did it go?"

"Better than I expected," Kyoya paused. "She still cares about you, you know. And she doesn't understand why you ended things."

Tamaki looked up sharply. "She can't know. She'd go straight to my grandmother and tell her off. Then my grandmother would have no reason not to destroy Haruhi's life. This is not some quaint movie where the old lady wants a good fight and will respect and admire the one who stands up to her. That woman has destroyed my father's life twice over, my mother's life twice and now mine. We need to keep Haruhi clear of her."

"Mori suggested we should find Haruhi a patron, someone your grandmother would think twice about challenging. Maybe a Haninozuka or an Ootori."

Tamaki nodded. "That … that would make sense…but…not you. You're my best friend and I still love her. I don't think I could bear to watch…"

Kyoya looked out the window. "Yes, I can imagine how hard it would be to watch the woman you love end up with your best friend."

Kyoya avoided Haruhi the entire day, which wasn't hard. As they were different years, they had different classes and Haruhi usually found a quiet place to study during lunch. Even so, Tamaki was looking around the cafeteria for her.

"She's not here," Kyoya said with a touch of exasperation. "So stop looking for her."

"You know, you guys want to be more discrete in your choice of pronouns," Hikaru said as he sat down.

"Why?" Kyoya responded in a conversational tone. "If the rumor goes around that our prince may
actually have fallen for one of the girls, it can only improve our end of year sales."

And it did. Website traffic was up even before the end of the school day and the flock of twitting
girls around Tamaki was almost unmanageable. The whole thing would have been amusing if not
for the pain it caused Haruhi. "Would you mind if I leave early?" she asked.

*Yes, by all means, let's get you out of here. Bad enough that you have to endure all this without it
playing out right in front of your eyes. Of course not," Kyoya looked thoughtful. "You seemed
disappointed that we went to a restaurant last night. Would you like to come to my house for dinner
tonight?"

Her head shake was more of a denial of the question than a refusing answer. "I have a French test
tomorrow."

"Then you won't have to interrupt your studies to make dinner." Seeing her skeptical look, he added
"I have a literature paper due tomorrow. I promise studying will get done."

They quickly tidied up after their guests and slipped out of the room unseen by Tamaki, who
remained surrounded by girls reluctant to leave, his sorrowful goodbyes convincing each of them
that she was the one he had secretly fallen for. When the last one finally departed, his princely
demeanor held up for about five seconds before dropping away completely. He scanned the room
taking note of who was there and who was not. "Haruhi is gone?"

"Yeah," Hikaru answered. "She and Kyoya left almost as soon as their guests did."

"She… and Kyoya?" Tamaki sounded forlorn.

"You idiot!" Kaoru slapped his brother upside the head. "Why did you tell him that?"

"What? I didn't say they were going anywhere together, I just said they left together."

"Left… together?" Tamaki rushed to the window, but if they had passed that way, they were long
gone.

~oOo~

As the car pulled up, it dawned on Haruhi that she'd never been to Kyoya's house. Sleek, clean,
modern lines. It suited him. She wondered briefly if the house you grew up in shaped your
personality.

Kyoya blithely informed the housekeeper there would be one more for dinner and that they would
be in his room until it was done. Haruhi's steps slowed a bit at being told they would be in his room
rather than in a common area. She tried to think of a way to suggest, without being rude or making
demands, that maybe his bedroom wasn't entirely appropriate and if his family wasn't around to
inconvenience…

He led her to a medium sized living room, negligently dropped his book bag and gestured at one of
the couches. It took a second before it clicked. *This was* his bedroom. It was the size of her whole
apartment. Or slightly larger. Trying not to gawk, she glanced around at the split level room. The
downstairs held a conversation pit with white couches around a low coffee table; a large writing
desk sat to one side and there was a row of dressers along one wall. A picture of the Host Club sat
on a shelf, partially obscured by books, belying its importance to its owner. Upstairs was the
sleeping loft. She averted her eye so as not to seem inappropriately curious. Somewhat to her
surprise, he sat on the floor in front of the coffee table, popped open his laptop, and immediately
started working. After a brief hesitation, she sat on the indicated couch, pulled out her French notes
and began studying. For the next 45 minutes or more, the only sounds in the room were the keyboard, the flipping of papers and the occasional soft whisper as Haruhi tried to teach her mouth to form strange words. "Juge d'un homme par ses questions plutôt que par ses reposes."

"Réponses," Kyoya absentmindedly corrected her pronunciation.

"What?" she said.

"'Réponses.' Kyoya repeated. "'Judge of a man by his questions rather than by his answers.'"

"What did I say?"

"By the way he lies down. Which, I suppose is also a way to judge men, but not the one Voltaire intended."

"Réponses," she said, giving him a mock glare before returning to her homework.

He continued to watch her. No idle conversation, no snooping around his room, just sharp focus on her studies. God, even in this setting, she was perfect. She read for a few more minutes before she closed the book, set it to one side and arched her back in a long, sensuous stretch. She opened her eyes to find him staring at her. "What now?"

Unwilling to admit the true direction of his thoughts, he glanced meaningfully at the book. "Know everything?" he teased.

"It's hard to be the top student in your French class when you're the only one who hasn't been to France." Her answer came out a little more tartly than she had intended.

Kyoya smiled at her tone. "We can speak French during dinner, if it would help."

"How many languages do you speak?"

"Four. Mandarin, English and French."

"That's three."

"Japanese, Haruhi."

"Oh." She craned her neck over to look at his computer hoping to find something to tease him back. "How's your paper com… that is not a literature paper."

"No, I finished the paper last night."

"You said it was due tomorrow."

"It is. But I finished it last night. Those are financials for a British biotech I'm thinking about buying."

"Wait… you're buying a biotech company?"

"Well," Kyoya admitted reluctantly, "most of my personal capital is still tied up in the Ootori Group so I'll have to put together an investment pool to do it. And possibly leverage the buyout, though I'd rather avoid that…"

"Kyoya, you're 18."
He looked at her like that was irrelevant. "This will not be the biggest buyout I've done."

They may have been sitting only inches away from each other, but "You and I do not live in the same world," she said.

"Nobody lives in my world," he said softly. "Nobody but you even knows it exists."

"Come on. Surely you father knows…"

"My father?" Kyoya snorted in derision. "He slapped me in public for making a success of the Host Club. How would he react if he thought I failed at something?" His voice turned bitter. "Tamaki's family is obsessed with his existence, however warped a way they have of showing it. In my family, nobody pays attention to what I do. I'm not even the extra son. I don't even matter."

"Kyoya." She reached out and lightly touched his arm. As soon as she did, the tension in his shoulders disappeared and his voice took on a light, almost conversational tone. "Not that it matters to me," he said. "It's not about acknowledgement. It's about being able to win the game in a way they don't even see coming."

She kissed him softly on the cheek. "Don't lie to me Kyoya. Lie to the rest of the world if you have to, but don't lie to me."

He turned his head and his lips brushed up against hers so lightly she barely felt it. He placed on hand on her waist and the other on her shoulder and kissed her again. His arms slid around her and with each subsequent repeat he held her a little more tightly and his kisses deepened until she wondered if he was going to crush her under his passion. But abruptly, he stopped. One arm was still firmly around her waist, but the other hand was touching her face as if she was made of the finest porcelain. "Be with me," he said.

She wasn't sure what he meant and she waited a moment too long to answer. She could feel the walls coming up between them. "I'm sorry," he said. "It's too soon…. I know you need time… time to recover…"

"Recover from what? I don't even know what happened! One minute we were together and the next he'd moved on." In a small voice, she added "I don't even know what I did."

"You didn't do anything, Haruhi. Tamaki's life is… complicated. If it helps, he's in as much pain as you are."

Tears started to slip down her face. "You know, don't you?"

"Yes," he said. "But I promised I wouldn't tell you. All I can say is that he truly believes he made the right decision and he will never go back on it."

~oOo~

A cluster of girls hovered just inside the door of Music Room 3 admiring Tamaki's Byronesque suffering as he stared out the window, wispy bangs shading his violet-blue eyes. The twins loitered near the door acting as perimeter guards to keep them from disrupting the scene and to make sure they had a premium vantage point for whatever came next. They didn't have long to wait.

Kyoya was not halfway across the room when Tamaki rounded on him. "YOU BASTARD! How could you do this?!"

"Ooop! Club meeting. Members only," the twins said as they shoved the girls out of the room and
closed the door behind them. They turned back to watch the train wreck unfold.

"I asked you to stay away from her!" Tamaki shouted.

"But I never agreed," Kyoya answered coldly.

"This room is sound proofed, right?" Hikaru asked.

"Should be," Kaoru answered. "It is a music room after all."

"Was that really too much to ask?" torment laced Tamaki’s voice.

"You mean leave her shattered and in tears wondering what she did wrong? Yes, that was too much. Do you have any idea how long she cried last night?"

"She… cried?"

"You not the only one suffering, Tamaki. And because you're making such a spectacle of your misery, she can't openly show hers."

~oOo~

Haruhi intended to drop her books off before running down to the school office but found a crowd gathered around the door. As soon as they saw her, the sea of girls parted allowing her passage, while watching her in morbid anticipation. O-Kaaayyy she thought, cautiously opening the door. Hikaru grabbed her and pulled her in, slamming the door behind her.

"What's going on?" she said, her eyes flicking from Tamaki to Kyoya, glaring at each other. "Are you guys fighting?"


"Haruhi, don't go with him!" Tamaki voice cracked in anguish.

All the anger and hurt from the last few days boiled over all at once. "You're the one who broke up with me, senpai."

Silence filled the room in the wake of their departure. Tamaki turned back to the window and leaned against the glass.

Kaoru pulled out his cell phone. "Honey-san? Were you and Mori-san planning on coming by this afternoon? Because the boss and Kyoya just had a fight. Like, a real fight. Like, a friendship ending kind of fight. And we don't know what to do."

The twins looked at each other and drew a deep breath. By unspoken agreement, Hikaru went to Tamaki while Kaoru went to find Kyoya.

~oOo~

Kyoya and Haruhi had stopped at the railing that overlooked the school’s entry foyer. "Are you going to be ok?" Haruhi asked.

"Yeah…"

"'Cause I kinda need to go see the counselors this morning."
"Why?" Kyoya asked alarmed. "Your scholarship is not in danger, is it?"

"… I don't think so…" she was surprised. "No, I just need to add my aunt to my emergency contacts. She kinda disowned my dad when he started… um … dressing. Anyway, they started talking again recently so this is kind of a peace offering I guess. It was weirdly important to him that I do this."

"Oh, then you'd better do it." Kyoya watched her descend the stairs and cross the foyer to the office. Kaoru walked up and leaned on the rail beside him. "Going to push me off?" Kyoya asked conversationally.

"Nah," Kaoru answered. "I mean I totally would if I thought I would get Haruhi out of the deal, but she'd probably just wind up with Hikaru or milord anyway so there's no profit in it."

Kyoya gave a short laugh.

"So how long have you been in love with her?" Kaoru asked.

Kyoya was silent for as moment. "Since the beach at Okinawa."

"That was almost two years ago."

"I can count." Kyoya took a deep breath. "I was thinking about it that night … and I realized that I felt a deep, visceral pleasure watching you two beat up those punks. And when Tamaki pulled Haruhi from the sea, I realized that I wanted to be the one to carry her into the house, to make sure she was alright … I thought … I thought if I could just distance myself from her, the feelings would fade … so I was rude to her. Cold. Even cruel. But she saw through it every time … And every time she saw through it, I fell a little more in love with her."

"You love her that much?"

"I love her that much."

"Well," Kaoru slapped Kyoya's arm twice in rapid succession, "if you and the boss don't manage to make it up, I'll be your best man."

~oOo~

Apart from Kyoya's absence, the room looked much as it did when Tamaki explained to the Hosts the real reason he was ending things with Haruhi. Honey leaned over sympathetically. "Tama-chan, you are right. Kyo-chan should have told you what he was going to do. And you have a right to be mad. But try to give him a break. She's not only his first love, she's his first girlfriend."

"His…first…love?" Tamaki repeated, dazed.

"His first girlfriend?" Hikaru said a little taken aback.

"He's been in the Host Club all the way through high school," Honey pointed out. "Hard to have a real girlfriend when you spend every afternoon flirting with between two and five other girls."

"His first love," Tamaki said again, still trying to grasp it.

"You're not the only one to notice she was special," Hikaru put in.

"He loves her," Tamaki said.
"He's loved her for a long time," Kaoru confirmed.

"And the thing is," Honey said, "men like you who are charming and funny and outgoing, you can have a dozen loves. But men like Kyo-chan, they only get one or two in a lifetime."

"He loves her … If he loves her … Men, if he truly loves her, we must get them together!" Tamaki said, raising his arm in command.

"Uh boss? They're already together," Hikaru said.

"Yeah, that's kind of what caused this problem to begin with," Kaoru added.

"We must plan the perfect romantic getaway for them." Tamaki began pacing the floor. "But where? Rome? Venice?"

"Still no passport, Boss," Hikaru said.

"Then we must take care of that too."

"I'm pretty sure it's illegal for us to get her a passport," Hikaru said.

"Yeah, she's gotta do that one for herself," Kaoru added.

"Hmm. That makes it trickier. Honey-san: find the most romantic spot in Japan."

"Yes sir!"

"Mori-san: she will never accept this as a gift from us. Therefore we must convince her that she won it as a free giveaway from the supermarket."

"Got it."

"Hikaru, Kaoru: Kyoya is terrible at romance. You must order her flowers and candy and write romantic notes that we can sign Kyoya's name to and give her."

"On it."

"And I," he said quietly as they scattered to do their jobs, "I will wish my best friend luck in winning the heart of the woman he loves."

Chapter End Notes

Just a heads up: I have several chapters already written so the story will be updated fairly frequently until I get caught up to where I'm actively writing. Basically as I can eke out time to proofread, edit and upload. Thanks for giving the story a read!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Spoiler - Teen material ahead. This chapter (and to some degree the whole story arc) is inspired by the flirtatious drawings of Haruhi and Kyoya in the back of volume 3 and especially volume 16 of the manga, which means the last section of this chapter is somewhat descriptive. Not explicit, but if you don't like reading that stuff, just mentally substitute in "and they kissed a lot" then go on to the next chapter.

~oOo~

"OK, that was weird," Haruhi said.

"What?" Kyoya said.

"I stopped by the market to pick up some coffee on my way to school and this guy walked up and said I was the 1000th person through the door, handed me a bunch of balloons and a gift certificate for a weekend at a spa resort."

"Balloons?" he asked, noting the lack of the same in her hands.

"I gave them to a couple of my regulars on the way in." She flipped the gift certificate from front to back a couple of times. "I'm not even sure if it's real."

"Did they ask you to go to a timeshare presentation?"

"No."

"Hmm." Kyoya considered. "Well, there's an easy way to find out." He took the paper out of her hands and pulled out his cell phone. "Yes, I would like to confirm a reservation for next weekend, under the name of Haruhi Fujioka, although it could be under 'contest winner' I suppose… yes… two rooms for two nights with a fine dining and spa package, paid in advance. Thank you." He ended the call and handed back the gift certificate. "The package is real, anyway."

"It's also a set up. One: they don't reserve two rooms for a romantic getaway package and two: they don't give those packages to 17 year old girls," she pointed out suspiciously.

Kyoya looked at her sideways. "One: if I wanted to take you to a resort, I would have simply asked you; and two: I would have chosen resort owned by the Ootori Group. That one is owned by Easton Hotels."

"Oh. So this whole absurd set up is probably Tamaki."

"I'm sure he had help, but yes."

"Which I guess makes this an apology of sorts. I guess I should go thank him. It's a shame my dad won't let me go."

"Why not? We've taken you on trips before."
"In groups. Alone with one guy is a different story."

Kyoya adjusted his glasses in disbelief. "Haruhi, in the two years since you've joined the Host Club, have you gone on a single date where at least half the club wasn't spying on you?"

"Wait … you guys have been stalking me?" She added in a mumbled aside "That's really creepy."

"In fairness, it wasn't so much you. We were watching to see how badly Tamaki, Hikaru or Kaoru were going to screw up their dates with you and I have to say, they seldom disappointed. Still, if you think it would be too problematic, you could ask your father to go with you instead. A spa weekend would be a rare treat for him…. Of course, that will be seen as declining Tamaki's apology, but by now you're immune to his sitting in a corner, pouting and turning your homework into hamster bedding."

"Why my homework?" she said.

"Well I'm certainly not going to let him do it to mine," Kyoya replied.

Thus, come Friday, Haruhi found herself standing next to Kyoya checking into the hotel. As the clerk handed them their room keys, Kyoya casually asked "Can you tell me if Tamaki Suoh or the Hitachiins have arrived yet?"

The clerk checked the computer. "Yes sir. They checked in about an hour ago."

"Thank you." Kyoya had an ever-so-slightly smug look on his face.

Kyoya went to his room while Haruhi went to hers. So this is what passes for a 5-star resort in this part of the world, he thought. The lobby had been plain, but he supposed anyone could put in marble; and the woodwork – hand crafted by local artisans – had been pleasant enough. The art on the walls of his room were lithographs, a step up from prints but well below originals. Kyoya's eyes slid over them disdainfully. The bellboy set Kyoya's suitcase on the luggage rack and moved towards the window to open the blinds. The entire outside facing wall was glass giving the room the feeling of being open to the forest. A glass door in the glass wall led out onto a small private patio. Vertical blinds functioned as curtains and would block out most of the light while still allowing airflow should the guest wish to leave the doors open. His fingers trailed lightly across the top of the bed as he moved to the doors. 300-thread count Egyptian cotton, the minimum required to achieve that truly luxurious feel. 600-thread count was standard at Ootori 5-stars, though Kyoya privately conceded that most people couldn't tell the difference. He moved to the door. Straight before him was a thick forest, no doubt carefully groomed to give the guests privacy while maintaining the illusion of free-form nature. The patio had been sculpted to look like a zen garden, the stones leading into an open air bath designed to look like a natural hot spring. On the right was a high privacy fence draped with wisteria for beauty and jasmine for scent. On the left, ornate lead planters split the patio, serving as a divider between his private patio and that of the room next door. Haruhi's room. "Have the divider between the two rooms removed by tonight."

"Yes sir," the bellboy answered. "Would you like me to hang your clothes, sir?"

"Yes do," he answered and went next door in search of Haruhi. He found her in her room staring at an enormous spray of flowers, predominantly sterling and wine red roses. This must be what those ¥50,000 bouquets that Kyoya sent to the Host Club clients looked like, she thought.

"Who sent flowers?" Kyoya asked.

"You did, apparently," she said handing him the card.
"That's a stupid statement," Kyoya said reading the card. "Whether you want the market to rise or fall depends on whether you're selling or buying."

"You know, I originally thought there's no way you could write something that bad, but now I'm not so sure."

He gave her a wry smile. "Then we'll split the difference. I'll take credit for the flowers, but not the note."

"And the chocolate dipped strawberries on the bed?"

"Do you like chocolate dipped strawberries?"

" Quite a bit."

"Then I sent those too," he teased her, making a mental note of them and wondering how those twits had known something about her that he had not.

"Anything in your room?"

"An itinerary. It appears there's an arts festival this weekend. Preliminary viewing begins this afternoon and concludes tomorrow night with awards presentations and fireworks. In between is your spa package. By the way, I feel no obligation to follow this itinerary."

"Well," Haruhi considered, "they may be insane, but they do know how to have a good time. Let's give it a try."

~oOo~

Five pairs of eyes peered around the corner. "How's it going?" asked Mori.

"Kyo-chan doesn't seem to like much of the artwork…" said Honey.

"That's because most of it isn't very good," Hikaru muttered under his breath.

"… but Haru-chan seems to be having a good time."

"Oh hey! An ice cream stand," they overheard Haruhi say.

"You'll spoil your dinner," Kyoya replied.

"What is he, her father?" Hikaru said.

"Mother," corrected Tamaki in a low voice.

The twins turned around and gave him a withering look. "You gotta get over that, boss."

"I want to try as much of the cuisine as we can at the resort so I can compare it to what we serve at our resorts," Kyoya said.

"They serve this kind of ice cream at the hotel, I saw it on the room service menu." Seeing his look, she added "Fine, we'll split one." She ordered a single cone and held it out to him for the first taste. He wrapped his hand around hers and held her eyes for a moment, then leaned forward to take a slow, sensuous bite. The five watching hosts' jaws dropped in unison. Haruhi, oblivious,
took a quick bite and looked around. "Oh look! Floral arrangements." She grabbed his arm and pulled him off in that direction.

"You know," Honey said, "maybe Kyo-chan isn't the one who needs helps with this."

The Hosts threaded their way through the crowd to keep their eyes on the couple.

"You have to admit, these are pretty good," Haruhi said as they stood in front of an orchid and bamboo arrangement.

Kyoya nodded but added "Hikaru and Kaoru's are better."

"Yes but they both have black belts in flower arranging," Haruhi replied.

Tamaki did a double take looking at the twins.

"Yeah, what of it?" they said.

"We need to find a way to make her notice him," said Honey still focused on his targets.

"I've already taken care of that," said Tamaki. "In fact, I'm surprised it hasn't worked already."

The entire group turned to look at him in alarm. "What did you do, Tamaki?"

"Women can't resist a man who's irresistible to small animals."

"Even assuming you're right…" said Kaoru.

"Which I don't," said Hikaru.

"…we're setting her up with Kyoya not Mori," finished Kaoru.

"Wait, I stood a chance with Haruhi?" said Mori.

"No, no," Tamaki insisted, "it's perfect. Just watch."

"Huh?" Kyoya looked down. A small cat had snuck out from under one of the display tables and began rubbing against Kyoya's legs.

"Oh how cute!" Haruhi bent down and scratched the cat between the ears. The cat emitted a loud purr. Haruhi looked up at Kyoya, her eyes sparkling.

"Why didn't anyone tell me I stood a chance with Haruhi?" Mori said.

"Too much competition as it was," said Hikaru.

"How'd you do that?" asked Honey.

"I doused his socks with spray-on catnip."

As she stood up, a second cat appeared and began rubbing against Kyoya's other leg. "Looks like you're magic today," Haruhi teased. A third cat came up, but when it saw the first it immediately puffed up and growled. Claws came out and Kyoya became the victim of a poorly aimed swipe. When he tried to back away, the second cat wrapped its claws around his leg and bit his ankle.
"Maybe I used too much catnip," Tamaki mused.

~oOo~

Kyoya had meant to just go into his room and clean off his mauled ankle and come right back out to Haruhi. He had even left the door ajar, something he never did. He really didn't suspect anything dangerous – the cats were almost certainly pets – but having grown up with a father and two brothers who were doctors, leaving an animal bite untended went against the grain. His computer flashed with an urgent message. Well, he'd just deal with this one email.

A soft knock on his door interrupted his thoughts. "Kyoya, is everything ok?" Haruhi poked her head around the door.

"What?"

"You've been in here an hour and half."

Kyoya swore under his breath. "Sorry. I was taking care of some business."

"What business? It's Friday evening. The market is closed."

"Tokyo is closed. The market in London just opened."

"Your British biotech?"

He smiled. "You remembered."

"You haven't taken care of your leg yet! If you get gangrene, this is on you."

She marched past him into the bathroom, reemerging with a towel, washcloth and the little coffee pot filled with warm water from the tap. She knelt on the floor at his feet, removed his shoe, carefully rolled up his pant leg and slowly peeled off his sock lest dried blood had attached it to his skin. He closed his laptop and set it to one side. She dipped the washcloth in the water then gently, carefully began washing his leg and foot. He'd been flirting with her all afternoon; was she finally flirting back? Or was she just being Haruhi? Then it hit him. Tamaki and the twins were constantly pawing at her. Kissing her, touching her, feeding her. If she'd ever given them any encouragement, they'd be all over her. No wonder she was cautious. No wonder she set limits.

She dried his leg and started on the other one even though it was barely scratched. Every bit as slowly she slipped off his shoe, rolled up his pant leg and peeled off his sock. His hands dug into the comforter and his breathing became shallow. The warm washcloth massaged his leg. Don't do anything, he thought. Just let her finish.

He was staring at her so hard he barely noticed when she switched to the towel to dry him off. Done, it slipped from her hand. Kyoya had honestly meant to reach down and help her off the floor, but as soon as she was eye level with him, he pulled her to him and kissed her hard. Then he froze, as surprised by what he'd done as she was. He waited for her to slap him or push him away with a cutting remark, but she merely looked at him as though trying to process what had happened. She leaned towards him until her lips were only inches from his then stopped.

"Haruhi," he breathed.

She leaned the rest of the way in and kissed him to forestall whatever he had been going to say.

"We have dinner reservations in one hour," she said, removing his glasses and setting them to one side. "If it takes us a half hour to get ready, we have a half hour to kill."
We're going to miss those reservations, he thought as he pulled her to him. He ran his tongue over her lower lip, then paused.

Limits.

She had set a limit.

He'd bet his entire stock portfolio she had never offered any of the others a half hour. He kissed her lightly. "One half hour," he agreed as he turned his face to inhale the scent of her hair. They'd keep that reservation if it killed him.

And privately, he suspected it might.

~oOo~

Dinner was probably very good. Kyoya honestly wasn't paying any attention. When the meal was finally over and they were leaving the dining room, Haruhi paused by the windows. "Look! They have the gardens lit up. Do you want to go for a walk?"

No, he thought. What I want is for us to go back to my room for another half hour. And another half hour. And another half hour after that. But instead he gave her an indulgent smile and led her out onto the terrace.

As soon as they were out in the garden, she slipped her hand out of his and stepped away. In and of itself, he didn't mind. He'd always felt that public displays of affection were indicative of insecurity, insincerity or a lack of self-discipline. It was the way she did it, like she suddenly wanted physical space between them. What the hell had gone wrong? Had somebody said something to her? Had one of the morons called her? He wondered if he could steal her phone long enough to check her call log. She'd certainly enjoyed the art show this afternoon, amateurish though it had been. She'd damned near seduced him in his room afterwards. If it hadn't been for that stupid 30 minute time limit…

The time limit.

There was only so far things could go in a half hour. She felt safe within that constraint. Now, with the whole night in front of them, there was no predicting how far things might go.

She strolled with her arms coyly behind her, admiring the artfully pruned plum trees showing their first blooms over beds of camellias. The night blooming jasmine filled that air with a sweet scent. If her obvious delight hadn't had that little bit of an edge to it, he would have enjoyed watching her. "When the lights change color on the fountain, it's like the water itself is changing color," she said.

"Enough, Haruhi." Kyoya caught her by the arm and pulled her over to him. "It's getting cold. Let's go back to our rooms."

The brief expression of panic that flashed across her face confirmed the problem. She looked everywhere but at him. He gently tilted her face up towards his. "Look at me, Haruhi." Reluctantly, she did so. "I will never take more from you than you are ready to give. Never. I care for you. I will not leave you just because you say 'no' to me. Now, I will take you back to your room and if you change your mind about how you want to spend tonight, if you want to pick up where we left off or merely repeat earlier, I will leave the glass door open and you may come or leave as you please." He slipped his arm around her and led her back towards their rooms. He'd probably given Tachibana a coronary for the security nightmare he had just created, but oh well, Ootori employees had nothing if not good medical benefits.
When they reached her room he kissed her on the forehead, wished her goodnight and went to his own room. He closed the door behind him and leaned on it, letting out a breath he didn't even know he was holding.

The maid had been in the room. The towel and washcloth were gone from the floor, replaced by fresh ones in the bathroom. The coffee pot had been washed and placed back on the coffee maker. The rumpled bedcovers had been straightened and turned down. There was a chocolate mint on the pillow.

She wasn't coming.

He pushed off the door, turned off the light and went onto the bathroom. He took off his clothes, wrapped a towel around his waist and draped another over his neck then went to soak in the open air bath.

They hadn't actually removed the barrier between the adjoining patios – those planters must have weighed over a thousand pounds each – but they had opened a passageway between them. An archway draped in green foliage this time of year. The flowers would come later in the spring.

From the bath he could see the light spilling out from her room onto her half of the patio. He saw it go out.

A surge of anger washed through him. She should have come to him. He was an Ootori, damn it. He'd paid a high enough price for the god-damned name. There should be some benefits that came with it. A commoner like Haruhi should be pleased that an Ootori wanted her in his bed.

But Haruhi Fujioka was not common.

She's already had three millionaires make a play for her and fail. Four if you counted Kasanoda. Kyoya might not like where Kasanoda's money and power came from, but there was no denying that he had it. The competitive part of Kyoya want to win her simply because the others had failed.

The introspective part of him wanted her because she was the first girl to ever look at him and not see the Ootori Group. She didn't see bank accounts, business deals or familial alliances. She saw a man: quiet, calculating, determined, protective of his friends. She saw Kyoya.

He closed his eyes and leaned back, letting the moonlit water wash over him. He had no idea how long he was there before he finally got out, dried himself off, wrapped the towel back around his waist. As the darkness of the room enveloped him, he became aware of her silhouette still in the dress she'd worn at dinner. The tight bodice accentuated her tiny waist, giving her is definitively feminine shape. Hitachiin original, he calculated; ¥200,000 minimum. Custom made for her, add another 200,000. Yuhuza or Hikaru? The designer made a difference in the value. Kyoya had long ago realized that artistic and versatile Hikaru would take over his mother's fashion empire while clever and innovative Kaoru would inherit his father's software and computer firm, though the two would cross pollinate their whole lives making a creative force that would render them both unbeatable in either industry. Neither designer, he decided. That had the clean lines of Kaoru's work. Add another ¥100,000 for the exclusivity of the designer. He wondered if she had any idea what she was wearing.

"If I didn't tell you earlier, it's a lovely dress."

"Thank you. It was left over after one of the Hitachiin fashion shows. They said if it fit, I could keep it."
The odds of it not fitting were about one in ten million, Kyoya thought.

They lapsed into silence for the space of three breaths.

"Haruhi," he whispered.

"… One half hour …" she said before she lost her nerve.

"One half hour," he agreed. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. 10:02. He moved forward slowly and touched her very gently, as though afraid she might evaporate. His finger lightly traced the silk of her neckline. He bent to kiss her shoulder then began to work his way up her neck to nibble on her earlobe. She tentatively raised her shoulder and placed them on his chest, still damp from the bath. Her fingers lightly traced up the contours of his chest before wrapping around his neck to draw him closer. The silk of her dress brushed against his bare skin, taunting him. His hand tightened around her waist as she kissed his neck in echo of his earlier movements. He slid his hand up her back and began unzipping her dress.

"No." She stiffened and pulled away.

His hand immediately dropped to her waist.

Her eyes filled with a mixture of fear and regret as she waited to see how he would react.

Kyoya regarded her intently, wondering if there wasn't something more at work than those idiots pawing at her constantly without invitation. He should have put a stop to it long ago. Well, now that she was his, it would stop today. The twins might mess with Tamaki by continuing their physical flirtation with his woman, but they were not going to do that to Kyoya.

The offending hand remained on her waist while his other hand ran through her hair. He brushed his lips over hers lightly en route to her shoulders, where he began his seduction of her over again from the very start. It was going to be hard not overstepping her boundaries if he didn't know where they were.

He swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed then lie down beside her.

"Kyo…" he put his fingers across her lips to forestall her objections.

"I promised you, Haruhi. So trust me."

His fingers slid off her lips, down her chin, traced across her throat, between her breasts and down her belly. She shivered in pleasure. He allowed himself a half smile of satisfaction before he wrapped his arms tightly around her and in one swift motion rolled onto his back pulling her on top of him. He gave her a heartbeat to register their change of positions then laced his fingers through hers and pulled his hands down onto the bed by his head. It looked for all the world like she had him pinned. He cocked one eyebrow in challenge and waited.

Haruhi hesitated. She kissed him lightly at first, a second time a little more firmly then a third time with long hard passion. In every case, Kyoya matched her intensity exactly. She went back to the lightest possible kiss and again, he matched her. She knew it was illusory, but it gave her a curious sense of power. She freed her right hand from his left and lightly raked her fingernails down his forearm and across his midsection. He arched his back and she took advantage of his change of position to run her tongue over the base of his neck. He freed his other hand then pulled her up into a slow, consuming kiss. She started to protest that he was cheating when he gazed into her eyes and said "One half hour, Haruhi."
She pushed herself up and looked at the clock. 10:35. She stared at it until it said 10:36.

Kyoya gently turned her face back to his. "One half hour?" he asked.

She took his arms and pushed them emphatically back onto the bed. "One half hour." She gave him a stern look for moving his hands and resumed her attentions to his neck. He laughed at her softly, so she bit him.

"Ow, you horrible creature."

She nuzzled the spot by way of insincere apology.

His hands disobediently encircled her again. The zipper of her dress had been about a third of the way down when he had stopped. He slipped his hand into the opening to feel the skin of her back, but found instead satin. She was wearing a slip. He traced the top of the slip, the line matched the dress exactly. Custom slip. Add another ¥20,000. Realistically, he knew the slip was there to make the dressing hang properly; but a sneaking part of his mind wondered if Kaoru wasn't taunting him. Telling him even if he got the dress off of her, Haruhi would still be fully dressed.

"I thought I told you to leave those on the bed," she said.

"It is an expensive dress Haruhi," Kyoya chided. "We really ought to remove it before we damage it."

Her eye is clouded over a bit. Boundaries.

"You're wearing a slip, it's not like you would truly be undressed," he added. The comment made her keenly aware that he was still wearing nothing but a towel at his waist.

She pointedly moved to put his hands on the bed. "They stay there or we are done for the night," she said firmly. She sat up, her legs now straddling his body. He arched an eyebrow in surprise. She slowly, very slowly, unzipped the dress, the silk coming looser with every inch. She reached down to the hem separating the dress from the slip and with deliberate movements begin to peel it upwards so as not to pull the slip by mistake. She arched her back to get the dress clear of her shoulders, shifting her weight against him if she did so. Much more of this, he thought, and I'm going to be done for the night regardless. She neatly folded the dress and set it on the corner of the bed. She put both palms on the center of his chest and butterflied them out. She watched with weird fascination as her hands circled over his chest and down toward his waist of their own accord. Men and women were built so differently.

"Haruhi," he said in a ragged voice, "please let me have my hands."

"Five more minutes," she said.

He looked at the clock. 10:50. He clutched the bedcovers to keep his hands where they were.

Carefully, so as not to dislodge the towel, she skimmed over the outer line of his hips. He emitted a low sound from somewhere deep in his throat. A wicked smile flashed across her face. This woman was going to be hard to hold, Kyoya realized. This was the active Haruhi they had seen briefly her first year. The twins would have gone insane had they realized what they had missed out on. But they were not going to find out, at least not from him. His hands reached up and grasped her waist firmly. She started to protest then glanced at the clock. He had ten minutes to inflict as much torment on her as she had on him that evening. He knew he would not succeed, but it would not be for want of trying.
Abruptly their kisses switched from deeply passionate to barely there. "One half hour," she whispered.

"One half hour," he acknowledged. He ran his thumb once more lightly over her jaw line and let her go. If they extended their time again, it would be for the rest of the night and they both knew it. She slipped from his bed, draped her folded dress across her arm and disappeared through the door of false dreams.

He watched as the night enveloped her. He had one more night before they headed home.
The morning was a riot of color. Kyoya led Haruhi into the resort breakfast room where green plants adorned white pillars. Broad windows opened onto a cerulean sky accented by fluffy white clouds. Haruhi herself was dressed in a gauze broomstick skirt of graduating yellow, ranging from palest lemon cream to a sensuous goldenrod. Her top was artfully layered wine red chiffon. Sleeves that should have been long were slashed and flowed behind her like wings when she walked. Hikaru's design. Funny, only two years ago nobody could tell them apart. Now, the Host Club could get them every time and even tell whose work was whose. Haruhi again. Somehow she'd taken two people whose personalities were dangerously close to merging and turned them into distinct individuals, and she had done it without in any way lessening how close the two of them were. No wonder they were crazy for her. She'd curbed Tamaki's more manic impulses and provided him with much needed grounding while simultaneously luring Kyoya into mischief. How many times had he leaned over her shoulder and whispered "I'll cancel a third of your debt if you do this Haruhi...?" then drove himself to his most creative to find a way to add to her debt so she couldn't ever clear it. She became the little sister Honey and Mori had always wanted. Well, maybe not so much Mori. He looked at her with something other than brotherly affection sometimes. But he seemed unwilling to compete against his more flamboyant friends. Kyoya could sympathize. Whereas Honey might appear oblivious and carefree, but he was always the first to notice who interacted with her, and how they interacted with her. He didn't seem to care which of his close friends ended up with her, but it was definitely going to be one of his close friends. Nobody else was good enough for her.

The hostess seated Kyoya and Haruhi when a flash of blonde hair caught his eye. "Excuse me for a moment," he said. He left the dining room and found Tamaki and the twins by the front desk with their bags.

"Leaving?"

Tamaki shrugged. "That is the rule isn't it? We leave halfway through the date and you get the rest of it to yourself?"

"Thank you for this by the way," Kyoya said. "She never would have come if she thought I had been paying."

Tamaki nodded. "Sorry about the cats."

Kyoya looked at the twins. "And thank you for the clothes."

"We didn't do it for you," Hikaru said a little sourly.

"Nevertheless, they treat her better because she looks like she belongs. And I deeply appreciate that."

Honey and Mori came up. "Ready to go?" asked Tamaki.

"Do you think I could sneak back into the dining room to get one last piece of cake?" asked Honey.
"No!" they all said.

"If it's any consolation, the ice cream on the way out is pretty good."

Honey scrunched his face. Ice cream was not as good as cake. But it would do in a pinch.

"Oh and keep an eye on the weather," Tamaki said

"I've seen the forecast," Kyoya said. He searched for a way to smooth things over. "Next week, why don't we all have dinner together?"

"Around the kotatsu?" Tamaki asked hopefully.

That stupid thing was the ultimate symbol of friendship and family to Tamaki. "If you want," Kyoya answered. He looked over his shoulder into the dining room. "I should get back before she comes looking for me."

"Take care of her," Tamaki said in a soft voice.

"Always."

As Tamaki watched him go, he could hear the squabbling begin behind him. "A kotatsu is kind of redundant in a heated house, isn't it?"

"Shut up Hikaru," said Mori.

"I'm not Hikaru, I'm Kaoru."

Whap! "Stop getting me in trouble."

"Mitsukuni, next time a girl likes me, say something."

"Takashi? Minori Saito likes you."

"Really?"

"Dude, she had tea with you every day for two years," Hikaru said, exasperated.

"And funny, whenever you happen to drop by the club, those are the days she comes back to Ouran to visit her sister," added Kaoru.

"Huh. So she's not really visiting her sister?"

"Pretty sure she's not," said Kaoru.

"Oh."

"Here's her phone number," said Honey. "I had Kyo-chan get it for you."

Tamaki smiled to himself. He might have to rearrange his plans a bit, but his little family was going to be ok.

~oOo~

Tamaki entered Suoh Mansion #2 to the normal respectful greetings of the housekeeper.

"Welcome home, sir. You have a visitor waiting in the drawing room."
He went immediately to the room to find Shizue Suoh seated in a high backed chair, her face a mask of cold rage.

"Grandmother," Tamaki bowed.

"How dare you defy me, you filthy child." She rose, crossed the room and slapped him as hard as she could. It left a noticeable red mark across his fair skin. "I told you to end things with that commoner."

"I did!" Tamaki protested.

"You went away with her this weekend?"

"No! I mean there were lots of people in the group."

"Who paid for her room?" The old woman knew the answer before she ever asked.

"It… It wasn't like that. We made the reservations all at the same time," he said desperately. "Of course they all went onto the same credit card."

"It is time you learned that I do not make idle threats. Be glad it is only the girl who will pay for your indiscretion this time. If you believe that club is an excuse to disobey me and perhaps it is time for you to leave that club as well."

Suddenly his small family was dissolving in front of his eyes. "Please don't make her pay for this grandmother. If you have to punish someone, punish me."

"I am punishing you. People in our position influence the lives of hundreds, sometimes thousands of people Tamaki. Your decisions affect your employees, their families, even the small business owners who depend on your employees. You make a mistake, and sometimes all of them pay. Be grateful you can learn this lesson with only one person paying the price. I was not so fortunate." Shizue narrowed her eyes. "Out of respect for their families, I will let you say goodbye to those boys on Monday. But by the end of school you will sever all ties to those boys." Her orders given, she walked past him as though he was no longer even in the room. But when she got to the door it was blocked by her son.

"I think not," said Yuzuru. "Those boys may be idiots now, but in 20 years they will be some of the most wealthy and influential men in Japan. And the shared follies of youth can forge surprisingly strong ties."

"You of all people should understand the cost of indulging in personal whims," she said cuttingly.

"While you should know the pointlessness of denying a man something he considers truly important. First rule of leadership, Tamaki: never give an order you know will not be obeyed."

"Yes sir," Tamaki said quietly, hoping he was not damning Haruhi by agreeing with his father.

"And you will leave the Fujioka girl alone," Yuzuru said, reading Tamaki's mind. "He ended the relationship as you asked and the girl has moved on."

"Evidentially he was more attached to her than she to him," Shizue said with vicious pleasure. Tamaki's hands curled into fists, though he kept them hidden behind his back.

"Be that as it may, he arranged this weekend so that she would bond with her new boyfriend, and
not try to return to Tamaki. One does not punish people for going beyond what is asked. Do try to be gracious in your victory."

"This new boyfriend," she asked. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"Yes," Tamaki answered.

"Is he rich?"

"Yes."

Shizue smirked. "Have you considered you would be doing him a favor to get this gold digger out of his life?"

There was no defense he could offer that she would not twist so he simply said "We had a deal grandmother. I kept my end. I am asking you to keep yours."

The old lady mulled it over. When she failed to answer, Yuzuru commented "Your grandmother cannot do anything else. The boy Miss Fujioka stayed at the resort with is the youngest Ootori son."

"Am I supposed to be impressed because a teenage boy wants to have sex with a teenage girl?" She seemed to enjoy watching Tamaki's misery.

"You're supposed to wonder what the Ootoris saw in her that you missed. I have never seen a single member of that family do anything that was not in the family's best interest."

"Then evidently Yoshio Ootori has done a better job raising his sons than I did of raising mine."

Her peace said, she brushed past the two like they were no longer there.

"Father… Haruhi would not… It isn't like… She's not… after…"

"Tamaki, it's a given that if she dates any of her classmates she is dating above herself. I do not ascribe to that young woman mercenary motives."

"Will grandmother keep promise?" Tamaki asked uncertainly.

"Your grandmother is a bitter, vicious woman who does not like to lose. But she is not dishonorable. If your deal was that she would leave Haruhi alone, then she will. But there's no guarantee she will leave the people around Haruhi alone."

~oOo~

Tamaki had purchased a first class spa package. Not that it mattered; if Haruhi had wanted anything that was not included, Kyoya would quietly have upgraded it. She never asked for anything and - conscious of the wealth differences between herself and the others - was curiously reluctant to accept their gifts, so this chance to spoil her was rare. Fifty years from now when they were married with children and grandchildren, she'd probably still be careful... fifty years from now... It surprised him that he could picture it so clearly. A white diamond solitaire on her left hand. He'd even picked out the ring. Fifty years if they could survive the next one, when he went off to university while she finished high school. A year in which she was alone with the twins every day. It suddenly occurred to him maybe the twins were not graciously ceding the field – that maybe they were playing the long game. It didn't really matter who she finished this year with. It mattered who she finished next year with. To make matters worse, Kyoya had been planning on going abroad for college: Harvard or Stanford for undergraduate, the Wharton School or maybe
Chicago or London for his MBA. That was a minimum of six years. She'd never wait.

"Don't you tell me that 'if the girl had been worth having she'd have waited for you' ... the girl really worth having won't wait for anybody." That literature class was getting annoying.

"Haruhi, have you given any thought to where you are going to college?" Kyoya asked over his poached salmon.

"Wherever I can get a scholarship I suppose," she said. "The University of Tokyo as a preference."

"Have you thought about Harvard or Stanford?"

"Like I could afford either one of those."

"They have scholarships. In fact both of those schools are ridiculously well endowed. For that matter, the Ootori group will pay for your law degree if you agree to work for them for a few years after you finish."

"Is that a real thing or did you just make that up?" She asked picking a fresh strawberry from her fruit salad and popping it in her mouth.

"The former," he said. The latter, he thought. But it will be a real thing by the time you qualify.

After they finished their decadent western style brunch, Haruhi went off to get one of those all over body wrap detox sessions, the kind designed to rid your body of exactly the sort of things she's eaten that morning. Kyoya sequestered himself in a private grotto and lounged in an indecently comfortable chair while he finished the physics problem set that was due on Monday. Then he checked the weather. The sky was due to cloud over around 5 o'clock, with the storm front following around seven. The art festival's concert and fireworks weren't officially canceled yet, but there were notices to watch for further updates.

He watched her face during their couples massage. Haruhi truly relaxed, not worrying about anything, was such an unusual sight. He wished he could make it last longer. "We should eat early tonight," he said.

"Why?" She asked.

Because you won't eat anything after the storm starts, he thought. "So we can get into the village early for a good seat for the fireworks and concert."

"OK. That makes sense," she said. Apparently she hadn't been following the weather forecast.

"Ready to go?" Haruhi said once dinner was done.

"You should grab a jacket in case it gets cold," Kyoya said.

"What? Don't want to give me yours?" she teased.

Oddly enough, he did. There was some primitive territorial declaration made when a woman wore her man's clothes. But instead he said "Be practical. Then I'd be cold."

Once in her room, she went to the closet to get out a coat. Kyoya went to the far wall and closed the blinds. Like his room, the entire exterior wall was glass, intended to help bring the guest back in harmony with nature. The blinds only went up to the top of the door, leaving from the top of the doorframe to the ceiling uncovered glass. The blinds were meant for privacy, not environmental
control. Goddamn it, a five star resort should let you control your own schedule, Kyoya thought. He turned on every light in the room.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He tried to formulate an answer when the sky did it for him.

She almost missed the flash of light because the room was so bright, but the distant rolling sound seemed to go on and on. "Are they starting the fireworks already?" She said desperately hoping for that answer.

"They cancelled the fireworks Haruhi," he said softly.

"Oh..." The thunder sounded again, this time a little closer. "Then I guess the evening's over. Goodnight."

She didn't wait for an answer, but went over and started rooting through her suitcase. "Where are they?" she muttered. Her search became a little more frantic. "Where are they, where are they...?"

Another clap not thunder and she began grabbing handfuls of clothes and throwing them on the floor. "They're not here. How could I forget them?"

Kyoya grabbed her shaking hands to steady her. "Haruhi, what are you looking for?"

"Hikaru gave me noise cancelling headphones. I was sure I packed them, but they're not here."

"It will be alright, Haruhi," he said in a steady voice.

"I know." Her eyes darted around the room, finally lighting on the closet. She tried to free her hands from his.

Kyoya gritted his teeth. She was not going to spend the night cowering alone in a closet. He wrapped his arms around her.

An enormous bolt of lightning loosed right overhead and the whole hotel went dark. The resulting thunder shook the building. It took all of his strength to keep her from breaking away in a blind panic. Her eyes were huge, her breathing ragged. Another roll of thunder, distant but threatening.

"Kyoya, make me forget the storm."

He gazed into her soul for a long while. Then he softly whispered, "No." Her head shot up in surprise. "When we make love for the first time, you will not want to forget anything. You will not be frightened, and you will not be trying to shut out anything. You will be completely open to me, and I to you." He lifted her chin up. "You will be open to every sight, to every sound," he whispered in her ear. "To every taste," he ran his tongue lightly over her lips. "To every touch," he ran a finger down her chest. "You will be my whole world; and I will be yours. We will not be rushing through one thing to the next to keep ourselves distracted. We will savor every passing feeling even if it takes us the whole night." The hypnotic quality in his voice almost made her forget the storm.

Almost.

The next clap of thunder caused her to clasp him still closer. He pulled her onto the bed and lay half next to her, half on top of her. He held her close with her head nestled against his chest so she couldn't see the lightning. And half joking he whispered "Maybe you should just marry me. Lightning would never dare strike an Ootori."
In the predawn hours, with her arms still tightly entwined about him and her head still firmly planted against his chest, Kyoya admitted to himself that his plan might not work. It had been simple really: he would date Haruhi just long enough for Shizue Suoh's attention to drift elsewhere. In the meantime, he could use this interval to cure himself. In two years Kyoya had been unable to shake this peculiar longing he had for Haruhi. Avoidance hadn't solved the problem. So perhaps, if he just overindulged in her, spent long hours in her company, he would come to realize that she was really just as annoying as every other girl he'd ever gone out with. Then when old lady Suoh had forgotten and moved on, he could hand Haruhi back to Tamaki where she belonged.

But Haruhi had not proved to be annoying. Quite the opposite. She didn't pout if he told her he had to study instead of spending time with her. They could sit in a room and read quietly for hours without her suddenly deciding that meant he was mad at her. She didn't babble, wheedle for gifts, or cling. Except in a storm, of course. Then quiet, competent, sensible Haruhi completely came apart. But even then, she was trying to pull it all together. Failing of course, but trying nonetheless. If Kyoya hadn't been there, she would have spent the whole evening curled up in a ball in the corner of the closet whimpering quietly to herself. Not making a scene. Not demanding attention. A woman like that would be wasted on Tamaki. He unwound his hand from around her head just enough to brush a stray hair from her forehead with his thumb. The movement caused her to stir in her sleep. "Is it over?" she asked, still more asleep than awake.

"Yes. It rained itself out a couple hours ago."

She nodded against his chest then whispered "thank you." She turned her head slightly and kissed his chest then turn back and snuggled against him once more.

No, Kyoya did not want to give her back.

Chapter End Notes

As you probably noticed (and will again), there are a couple sections where a character thinks one thing then a few paragraphs later may think something different. (Kyoya's motives for being with Haruhi for example). I hope it comes across as wrestling with it internally and not being wishy-washy or just as bad writing on my part. Just as several of the characters have multiple reasons for their actions and they'll give one to one person but a different reason to another. Does this work as a storytelling device or not?
Yoshio Ootori walked into his house, his wife a half step behind. He shrugged off his coat and handed it to the waiting butler. "Welcome home sir," the butler said bowing.

Kyoya's father made an acknowledging noise. "Anything of interest happen while we were gone?"

"Possibly sir," said the butler. "Master Kyoya has a new girlfriend."

"Who?"

"A Miss Haruhi Fujioka, sir."

"Fujioka? I thought she was practically engaged to the Suoh heir."

"That has apparently ended, sir."

"Has this affected Kyoya's friendship with the Suoh boy?"

"It appears not, sir. They were all over here the other night having dinner around the kotatsu."

"The Suoh boy is still fascinated with that thing?" Kyoya's mother shook her head.

"Who are 'they all'? " Yoshio returned his attention to the butler.

"The Suoh heir, the Haninozuka heir, the eldest Morinozuka boy, the Hitachiin brothers and Miss Fujioka. While the young lady and Mr. Suoh sat as far from each other as possible and exchanged nothing beyond superficial pleasantries, there did not seem to be any undue tension. There's a preliminary file on Miss Fujioka on your desk in the study. Security would like to know if you want them to complete the investigation or drop it."

"Complete it."

"Very good sir."

As the Ootoris headed down the hall towards the study, Mrs. Ootori said "Fujioka. I don't recognize the name. What company are they affiliated with?"

"None," said Mr. Ootori. "She's a commoner."

"Commoner? Where would Kyoya come in contact with one of those?"

"She has the academic scholarship to Ouran."

"I thought that child was thrown out after it failed to make grades against either Kyoya or Tamaki Suoh."

"Yes, that one was expelled. Miss Fujioka has the scholarship for the year behind Kyoya. And impressively, she has managed to hold the top spot in her class for two full years."

Mrs. Ootori made a derisive noise indicating she was less than impressed with the students behind Kyoya that could allow a commoner to beat them. "You must tell him to end the relationship."

"That might be awkward," Yoshio said, "since only a year ago I told him to consider her for his
bride if he could get her."

"But she brings nothing! You must think of the Ootori Group."

"I am thinking of the Ootori Group. In the event it has escaped your notice, our third son is brilliant. Far more so than his older brothers. If he were to marry an heiress, a girl with her own company, Kyoya would take over management. Where then would his loyalties lie? With the family that gave him everything or with the family to tried to deny him everything? Because if Kyoya ever faces his brothers across a hostile conference table, I can tell you who will walk out of that room the winner. And Kyoya is still in high school when I say that.

"It is far less dangerous for Kyoya to marry a girl with little and remain in the Ootori Group."

His mother did not look convinced. "Hm. I will read the file when you're done with it." And that she left the room.

~oOo~

It was never a good thing, Kyoya thought, to be met at the door by the butler informing you that your father was waiting for you in his study. Especially when your father had been away for nearly a month and no doubt had an enormous backlog of work. Still, one did not keep Yoshio Ootori waiting. Kyoya handed his book bag to the butler and went immediately to see his father. He stood respectfully waiting for acknowledgment just inside the study door while his father finished up some paperwork. He signed the paper and moved it to one side before pulling a file to the middle of his desk. "Haruhi Fujioka. Highly intelligent, hardworking, fiercely loyal to her friends. No money. No family worth speaking of. She wants to be an attorney like her mother, but because of her father's financial incompetence is forced to rely on scholarships. To that end, she has bent all of her efforts into maintaining her grades despite difficult competition and being sucked into that ludicrous club of yours. Making her the proverbial careless man's careful daughter. Is that a fair assessment?"

Kyoya considered. "Yes sir."

"Is this a passing fancy or do you intend to keep her?"

"I am not sure yet."

"I have never known you to be unsure Kyoya. Just unwilling to divulge information." He flipped through the file. "She could have a less embarrassing family... Still, that will not be an issue much longer... As long as you can keep it out of the media and as long as it does not negatively impact your friendship with the Suoh heir, you may continue. But get that stupid matter of her gender cleared up before this all becomes common knowledge."

"Yes sir." Kyoya said. He'd already worked it out anyway. He'd talk to Kasanoda about it next week. "Excuse me, father. What did you mean when you said her family will not be an issue much longer?"

His father pulled a piece of paper out of the file and handed it to Kyoya. "Stage four metastatic cancer."

Kyoya looked stunned. "When does he start treatment?"

"He doesn't. By the time they found it, it was already too late. He opted for palliative care and since then has spent every waking moment working as much as he can in an attempt to leave his daughter debt free and perhaps even with a small inheritance. Between that and his insurance
money, she should have enough to complete school. I cannot approve of the way he lives his life, but I do approve of the way he is handling his death."

"How long does he have?"

"I had the head of oncology look over his file this afternoon. Three, four months at the outside. Probably much less."

~oOo~

It was late afternoon, heading in to evening. Ranka would be at work. On the bright side, it meant that neither Haruhi nor any of the others were likely to be there. Kyoya got out of the car over Hotta's extremely disapproving look.

Kyoya walked up to the bar. Ranka did a double take. "What are you doing here, rich boy?"

Kyoya said nothing, just looked at Ranka.

"Shit. You know."

"And Haruhi doesn't." Coming from Kyoya, it was an accusation.

"You think it's going to hurt any less? Trust me, I had a little advanced warning when we lost Kotoko. All it does is make you dread every day, because what if this is the last? You can't sleep at night, because what if she's gone in the morning? You can't eat, you can't concentrate... That fancy school of yours, they'll kick her out if her grades slip. They gonna cut her any slack?"

"No," Kyoya said.

"Then why the hell would you want to tell her?"

Kyoya couldn't answer.

"Just be there when she needs you," Ranka went on. "But tell your pretty-boys that if any of them uses this as an excuse to sleep with her, I will come back from the dead and kill them."

~oOo~

"Are you sure about this?" Kasadona said. "The guy who's after her has got to be dead, because prison won't always do the trick."

"Yeah," Kyoya said. "But she's got somebody new after her now, somebody way more dangerous, somebody who will use this gender change thing against her."

"How does a nice girl like Haruhi get on so many people's bad side?" Kasanoda asked.

"I guess mean people just like to prey on nice people." Kyoya really didn't like or that put him and the rest of the Hosts.

Kasanoda made a general noise of agreement. "All right I'll do it tomorrow morning."

~oOo~

About half the gardening club was gathered in the hot house tending their plants. Kasanoda had a sizable basket of strawberries, leading to a little bit of envy.
"What are you gonna do with all of those?" Momoka asked.

Kasanoda shrugged. "I thought I'd give a bunch to Fujioka. She really likes them and there's no way she can afford out of season strawberries."

"She?"

"Knock it off already. The whole school knows that she lost that stupid bet with the Host Club and they made her dress like a boy for an entire year. And having spent all of her money on a boy's wardrobe, she couldn't afford the girl's wardrobe her second year."

Momoka blinked and didn't say anything.

"I mean, I know you knew," continued Kasanoda, "you were her regular customer and all. Sometimes I think you're the only thing that kept her sane. Talking to a sensible girl and all."

"Well... She did always wear girls' clothes during cosplay, so I guess it was kind of obvious..."

Ootori was right. The emperor's new clothes. No one would admit they were the only one who didn't know.

"Yeah. Sometimes I think those guys in the Host Club were real jerks for doing that to her. Other times I think, well, would any of us have even bothered to talk to her if they hadn't? She doesn't seem too mad about it, so maybe it's ok."

That was before school. By lunch time, everybody in the school knew that Haruhi Fujioka was a girl. Even the ones who hadn't known Haruhi Fujioka existed. By the end of school, reservations were up six times, website traffic was up tenfold and Haruhi related merchandise was through the roof. A reasonably profitable way to end the year, Kyoya mused. "By the way," he said casually as the Hosts were setting up for the afternoon, "Haruhi was outted today."

Tamaki dropped the tea set he was carrying.

Honey choked on the cake he was sampling.

Hiraku spewed his tea all over Kaoru.

Mori froze.

Haruhi cocked her head to one side. "Huh. Ok."

"How...how could this have happened?" Hikaru demanded.

"I don't know exactly. I wasn't there at the time," Kyoya said. Plausible deniability. "But since it had to come out eventually, better that it happen now when we're around to limit the damage."

"What are we going to say?" asked Kaoru.

"Try the truth," said Mori. "We forced her into this."

"That just sounds...perverted," Tamaki said.

"There's no way to make this sound good Boss," said Kaoru.

"Embrace your degenerate nature. We find it works for us," Hikaru added.
And sure enough, they were inundated with accusatory questions. "How could you guys do that to Haruhi?" "How could you be so mean?"

"Because it was fun," said Kaoru.

"Because she's a commoner and we could," said Hikaru.

"Because she owed us money," said Kyoya.

"You know we had the playful little devil thing working for us until you threw in the money bit," said Kaoru in an aside.

"But we got to like her as a person eventually," said Tamaki.

"You're horrible!" said the girls.

"Actually, hanging out with you guys and the Host Club has been the most fun I've ever had." Haruhi said to the girls. "I really should be thanking you."

"Oh poor sweet, wronged Haruhi!" The girls looped their arms through hers and pulled her from the room.

"That could have gone worse," said Honey.

Kasanoda wandered into the room with a basket of strawberries. "Where they dragging Fujioka off to?"

"At a guess, they're going to put her in a dress and do her make up," said Kyoya.

"Hm. So if she's officially now a chick does that mean she's out of the club?" asked Kasanoda.
Chapter 6

~oOo~

Class president Kazukiyo sat in the library trying to read for his literature class. But it was hard with gossip all around him. Two of the star athletes lounged right next to him speculating in unflattering manner.

"So one of those Host Club guys is really a girl, huh?"

The other one sniggered. "Yeah, their own private hostess for two years. If I'd known those were the perks, maybe I would've joined that club."

It really bothered him. Haruhi had been a good friend; Kazukiyo'd always felt a little like a geek or an outcast but he – that is she – had consistently been friendly. She helped him through that scary Halloween episode, she helped him learn to ski, God knows she protected him from the Hitachiin brothers, she'd even helped him get his girlfriend. He kind of felt he owed her. Mind you, he wasn't about to go take on two of the school star athletes. But one thing he had figured out: brains and subtlety were very effective tools. He casually leaned towards them. "You guys do know that Haninozuka regards her as his little sister right? I mean, he hears you talking like that, he'll kill you. I mean like - actually kill you. And given that Kasanoda is one of her close friends as well, they'll never find the bodies." He casually turned the page of his book, then looked up like a thought just occurred to him. "Although given that, none of the others probably got to touch her either." He went back to his reading. The two athletes abruptly ended the conversation. Kazukiyo allowed himself is satisfied smile.

They eyed him skeptically. "You back off because of Haninozuka too?"

"Nah," he said "Hikaru Hitachiin would beat the shit out of me long before I ever got to that point." Kazukiyo wasn't sure how he knew that, but he suddenly, absolutely did. Probably that ski trip when they did all that mad room switching at the last minute to put Hikaru and Haruhi together.

"Hitachiin?"

"Yeah, he's got a temper."

~oOo~

The conversation bothered Kazukiyo quite a bit. Those guys were not the fastest turtles in the herd. If they thought that about Haruhi, others did too. But Fujioka just didn't strike him as the kind of girl who would sleep with six guys. Even if she had been a boy, he didn't think he (she?) was the type to sleep with six people at the same time. And while the Hitachiin twins were definite class 1A troublemakers, he never pegged them for the type who might coerce a girl into sex. On the other hand, what did he know? He'd known Fujioka for two years and hadn't realized "he" was a girl. And admittedly, Kazukiyo didn't know the older Host Club members that well. Maybe the older boys led and the younger ones went along with it? But no. He was back to Fujioka was a nice person. It just didn't fit.

Kazukiyo wondered if he should warn the Host Club about the rumors. He really didn't want them thinking HE believed it. And they weren't stupid. They had to know. So he decided not to say anything to them. He'd just keep doing what he had been doing: slowing the rumors when he heard
Tamaki had an uncanny ability to manipulate the people around him. He had cleared Music Room 3 of guests spot on the end of the session and somehow made them all feel as though leaving when they'd much rather linger was an act of selfless love. The Hosts all made fun of Tamaki's exaggerated mannerisms, but there was a reason he was king of the host club. The second the door closed behind the last guest, Tamaki turned to Haruhi. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." She wasn't sure if she was lying or not.

"You don't look fine." Which was an ironic statement really, because the girls who had dragged her off had indeed put her in a dress, French braided her hair into an elegant roll, done her makeup. Haruhi had never looked so feminine. Beautiful, in fact. But the beauty was a façade. She looked worn, like she was nearing the end. "Why don't you skip the rest of cleanup. We'll get you some dinner. I mean, not me of course..."

"Why not you?"

The rest of the Hosts stopped their cleaning to eavesdrop.

"Why not you?" she repeated.

"I'm not good for you, Haruhi," he said quietly.

"Why not?"

"Kyoya, come take your woman to dinner."

"Why?" she demanded. "Why did you leave me? Why did you end things?"

"Because you can't afford me." And with that, Tamaki left.

She looked like she'd been struck. She staggered back a step and landed on a chair with an audible thump.

Kyoya moved up silently. "Haruhi?"

"Leave me alone."

"He didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"And how else can you take something like that?"

Kyoya couldn't believe he was going to do this - to repair things between the woman he loved and her ex. "He doesn't care about your lack of money or connections. He ended it because his grandmother made him."

"Why? What does she have over him?"

"She has you."
"How? She pretty effectively ended that leverage."

"She threatened to destroy you and your father."

"What? How?"

"She can get you kicked out of Ouran. She can make sure you don't get a scholarship to college. She knows people on the board of regents of every major university in this country; she can make sure you don't get into any of them. She can get your father fired from his job. She can make it very difficult for him to get another one. She could screw up the billing on her father's health care. And while the bureaucrats would eventually get it straightened out, they wouldn't do so in time. Her father would spend the last few months of his life in unbearable pain and whatever funds he had saved up would get sucked into medical expenses and leave Haruhi deeply in debt. But Kyoya couldn't even mention that part. "And she can do all of that between lunch and tea and still have time for a matinee."

"Am I really that bad for him?"

"It has nothing to do with you. You're just a pawn in the power struggle between his father and his grandmother. She can use you to control Tamaki; she can use Tamaki to control his father."

"Tami-chan left you because he loves you and that's the only way to protect you," Honey said from across the room.

A flash of bitterness crossed her face. "Are you trying to protect me too?"

Kyoya turned away.

"That's not fair," Honey said coming up to sit beside her. "Kyo-chan is with you because he loves you. He's loved you for a very long time. But you should know that Hika-chan and Kao-chan stood aside for him even though they want to be with you too because they know that she won't cross an Ootori. Not even a third son. Not until she's out other options."

"Did it ever occur to any of you idiots that I should have a say in any of this?" She shouted at them.

"To do what?" Kyoya asked scathingly. "To lose him and not have your life screwed up or to screw up your life and end up losing him anyway? We were trying to protect your feelings Haruhi."

"You could have fooled me. In the last 10 minutes you've told me that I'm an ugly, poverty-stricken object of pity."

"Funny, I thought I heard them say they cared about you," said Kaoru.

"Yeah, concern and pity - not the same thing," put in Hikaru.

"And how would you know? You still treat me like I'm some toy that you picked up in the dime store." Haruhi stomped out and slammed the door of Music Room 3.

She got about halfway out of the building and then stopped. She looked at one of the broad windows onto the gardens beyond where the security lights cast eerie shadows through the trees. She really wasn't being fair to the guys, but she really didn't want to be fair either. They had no right to make that call for her. Tamaki dumped her, telling her he'd found someone else. Kyoya picked her up out of ... What? Some distorted sense of chivalry? Honey's bizarre comment was beyond absurd. From what he said, the entire Host Club was carrying a secret torch for her. Seriously, how gullible did they think she was?
She pushed away from the windowsill and headed out of the building. Usually, one of the guys gave her a ride home, but there was no way in hell she was going back in there. She decided to walk home rather than taking the subway; she really didn't want to be around people just now.

It wasn't quite spring yet and the short days combined with the late winter chill were probably going to make her regret not having a thicker coat.

Two blocks into the walk and she realized it wasn't the coat, it would be the dress that was a problem. The thin tights did little to keep her legs warm and the wind kept catching her skirt and whipping it up. She had to watch the hem of the dress and push it down constantly, which is why she didn't see the guy she ran into. She looked up and mumbled an apology.

"Well, well," he said. "If it isn't the little Hostess."

She recognized him vaguely. His name was Dai or something like that. Swim team, tennis team one of those. She repeated the apology and tried to move past him, but he moved to block her path. "You're looking cold sweetie. Let's get out of the wind and warm you up." He pulled her into a little alley that was out of the wind and out of view of the street.

"I need to get going," Haruhi said in a level voice.

"Oh, I don't think so. Your little club made my girlfriend break up with me, so you owe me." He pushed her against the wall and pinned her there with one hand while the other started pushing her skirt up. She struggled against him for all the good it did.

"C'mon sweetie. You've had six guys already. What's one more?" He leaned in to press his advantage and she closed her eyes.

She could feel his head snap back and his hand left her thigh. She opened her eyes in time to see Mori spin the guy around and slam him into the opposite wall of the narrow alley, twisting Dai's arm up tightly behind him.

Mori leaned close and in a low voice said "If she really was my lover, your arm would be broken in three places by now. Count yourself lucky she's just my friend." Mori twisted Dai's arm up a little higher and there was a sickening pop. Dai screamed and dropped to the ground when Mori released him. "But then, you didn't really think she was my lover, because you wouldn't be stupid enough to attack her if you did."

Haruhi watched the scene, horrified. "You didn't break his arm did you?"

"Just dislocated his shoulder. He'll be fine in a couple weeks."

"But when he tells..."

Mori glared he boy on the ground with contempt. "He's not going to tell anyone. His father is a judge with political ambitions. It will never come out that his son attacked a girl. Especially not a commoner. That would definitely end his father's political career." He rounded on Haruhi, "And you... Do you like putting yourself in dangerous situations?"

"I was just walking home!"

"After dark, through nearly deserted streets." He took off his coat and draped it over her shoulders to still the trembling she wasn't until that moment aware had started. "I don't care how mad at us you are, ask for a ride next time."
He took her to a coffee shop and bought her an overpriced large. He didn't say much, which was oddly comforting. Twenty minutes to sort her feelings and organize her thoughts. Then he called for a car to take them home. Dropping her off at her front door, he said "I hope this won't put you off wearing dresses. You looked lovely tonight."

She grimaced. "I really can't afford the Ouran girls' uniform."

"Ask Kyoya. His sister's probably got a closet full of them."

"I told you, I don't want charity."

Mori gave her a funny look. "Don't you give away your old clothes that don't fit anymore? She got married the week after she finished high school; her father wanted to close the deal. I doubt she got rid of them, she just didn't take them with her when she moved.

"And if it matters at all to you Haruhi, I'm the least wealthy one in the bunch."

~oOo~

Kyoya knew he shouldn't do this even before he did. When he got home from school, his parents were out; his father still at work, his mother at a board meeting for one of her charities. No surprise there: they had been out of the country for almost a month. On business naturally. His father regarded vacations as an unavoidable but pointless business expense for which the company paid full wages and received no work in return. Yoshio had found a way to turn it of course. Ootori employees received a substantial discount to vacation packages at Ootori owned resorts, thus a decent percentage of the money did wind up back in company coffers. (Discounts applied when employees returned the forms along with a completed customer satisfaction survey that included the kind of questions one didn't normally ask customers.) Thus he calculated neither one of his parents would be home anytime soon.

He went into his father's study and paused for a moment. No one ever sat in his father's chair. Or even directly across the desk where one might get the misapprehension that you were equals. The small chair that one might sit in, such as it was, was angled a little to one side. Psychological warfare against his own family.

Kyoya sat down in his father's chair.

He reached for the file on Haruhi. Interesting. It was all paper. No links or references to computer files. His father distrusted the security of electronic information. An internet connection, the right skill set, and determination were all that was necessary to obtain any electronic information anywhere in the world. Truly sensitive information he kept in paper form. Still vulnerable, but to get it one would have to get through the grounds security, into the house, past an army of servants, and into the study, and then figure out where in the room it was stored. Not to mention that in this day and age, few information thieves would even think to look for non-electronic information. Or the thief could buy off one of the servants. But the Ootori household was thoroughly vetted. By the same people who prepared this file.

He told himself it was curiosity. Not about her so much; he'd done a cursory background check on her after they'd indentured her to the Host Club. He just wanted to see what career professionals had come up with that he had missed. He flipped open the file.

He skipped over the basic physical information. He already knew her age, height, weight...

I.Q.: 148 (measured at age 14)
Identifying characteristics: 1 cm scar on the small of her back. When she'd first entered middle school, she's beat out a boy for top marks in the class. He was so angry, he pushed her to the ground. She landed on broken glass. Six stitches that left a mark. She wouldn't be cowed into letting her grades drop, but she never boasted about her academic accomplishments again. His self-effacing Haruhi wanted success, but was leery of the accolades that came with it.

Birthdate, major milestones, awards (mostly academic). Things Kyoya had already turned up. A brief history of her parents: wedding date, mother's career, the illness that took her from them, father's career and what the file euphemistically termed his "aberrant behavior" following his wife's death.

Kyoya paused. Birthdate. Wedding date. There were only six months between the two.

Her parents had had to get married. No wonder Haruhi was so cautious about physical relations with boys. She loved her parents, and they seem to have loved each other. But there was no way she couldn't know that her mother's life had changed course due to the unexpected addition.

Allergies: none

General health: excellent. Attached were the actual results from her Ouran school physicals, the ones that included gender along with ... what the hell? They'd run a DNA test on her? He skimmed over the report. Primarily looking for heritable genetic defects.

A week later when Kyoya mentioned it to his sister Fuyumi, she laughed for almost two minutes straight.

"I fail to see what's funny," Kyoya said irritably.

"Are you kidding? This is hysterical!" she said, trying to control her laughter. "He wants grandchildren."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why?' His own sons hate him. It'd be nice to have someone who adores you. Not to mention several of father's friends are starting to have grandchildren. He can't be outdone. Yuuichi and his wife are at best civil and she doesn't want to interrupt her career. Akito isn't married. Then you come along and find a girl who is bright, loyal, discreet, healthy and of prime child-bearing age."

"That can't be enough to make her acceptable."

"Not on its own, I'm sure. Our father may be focused, but he's not narrow. He probably has 50 reasons why she's acceptable and 35 more why she's not. But whatever the ratio, she passed by enough margin to give you permission to pursue her."

"It would be asking her to give up her dreams."

"Farthest thing from it. She doesn't have a career to interrupt yet. She could have one or two in college and with an army of nannies it would barely even impact her studies. Then he'd pay to send her off to whatever law school or grad school in the world she wanted to go to, provided she leaves the children at home with their doting grandparents."

"That's twisted."

"Well, you want an accomplishment our brothers can't match. Only one of you gets to give him his
first grandchild. Mind you, you do have to be married first. He won't accept an illegitimate grandchild."

"Why don't you do it?"

"My children won't be Ootoris."

Kyoya flipped the file closed and put it back where he had found it. It was then he noticed another unlabeled file right next to it. Curious, he pulled it out and opened it.

Souh financials. A list of board members. Every major decision the board had made in the last four years and who voted which way.

"That file however, is not yours to look at," his father said dryly from the doorway. "And get out of my chair. You haven't earned that privilege yet."

Kyoya looked up with a start. He slowly closed the file and put it back then stood up. "You're going after Suoh Corp."

"Don't be an idiot. We were almost bought out a year ago; we don't have a big enough war chest to go after Suoh. Guess again. Or better still figure it out and keep it to yourself."
Mori scanned Music Room 3 as he dropped his book bag off the next morning. Haruhi wasn't there. He didn't really think she would be. Tamaki was absent also. Again, no surprise. Kyoya was standing at the window staring out. His back was tense and his posture unnaturally still. Honey looked up at him out of big blue eyes. "Takashi, did you take Haruhi out last night?"

"Just coffee before I dropped her off at home." His eyes drifted from Honey to Kyoya. "May I ask how you know?"

"I have a security detail on her," Kyoya answered quietly.

"Then they should be fired," Mori equally quietly and equally coldly. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a kendo club meeting to get to."

"Takashi," Honey called out as his cousin turn to leave. "Did something happen last night?"

"No." But the way Mori said it, it was an accusation.

~oOo~

Mori was too centered a martial artist to take out his irritation on his sparring partner. But that didn't mean he had to go easy on him. Partially for that reason, he selected Kasanoda as his partner that morning. Ritsu would neither expect nor appreciate special treatment. That had been one of the conditions in taking him as an apprentice; in order to control the energy you release to the world, you must first control the energy within.

At the end of the grueling session, Kasanoda knelt on the mat, assumed a more formal demeanor and laid his bukuto before him. "Sensei, I need you guidance."

Mori nodded giving him permission to continue.

"I have done as Ootori-senpai has asked and revealed Fujioka-san's gender, but now I am receiving questions and I do not know how you want them answered."

Mori raised an eyebrow. Ootori-senpai? "Since I was not present when he spoke to you, you will have to enlighten me that I may better answer your questions."

Kasanoda nodded sharply. "I have been aware for some time that Fujioka-san was forced to conceal her gender due to ... circumstances. Because I felt I owed her a debt, I investigated to see if I could help. I came to realize that her identity was assumed, created by a professional organization, probably witness protection."

"What makes you say that?"

"Her identity is too clean. She has made nothing but highest marks her entire academic career. She has never been in trouble. Not even a detention. Nobody is that clean. Her father's personality and dress preference vary wildly, indicating he is not entirely comfortable with certain aspects of his identity. Her mother's illness set on very suddenly meaning under the circumstances, it was more than likely a hit. Without family connections or wealth, she gained admittance to Ouran; which makes sense when you consider that the children of the extremely wealthy and powerful attend."
The security at the school is tighter than many heads of state have. I am also aware that the Morinozuka family owns the company that provides security at Ouran, and that many of the guards here were trained by the Haninozuka. Which means she was placed in the Host Club not by accident or by losing a bet but to keep her in close proximity to yourself and Honey-Senpai."

Completely logical and completely wrong. "Hm. I must ask you to keep your analysis to yourself."

"Of course, sensei. Ootori-senpai has said that I should lay the blame for the deception on himself and the Host Club and this I have done. But there are still those who cast aspersions on Fujiokasan's character. How should I address this?"

_PREFERABLY BY BEATING THE CRAP OUT OF OOTORI-SAN_, Mori thought. That bastard had played them all. And Mori had practically gift wrapped Haruhi for him. The others had all stood back when Kyoya made a play for her because of Mori's analysis. Her identity hadn't "leaked out," it had been deliberately released. By Ootori. Who could now date her openly, something Tamaki could never do.

He briefly considered. Was it too late to do anything about the Shadow King? Yes, probably. In the first place, the real reason he and Mitzkuni were on campus this morning was because each of them had been contracted to teach a single martial art class at the school. There were professional organizations that we're trying to figure out how to get somebody inside that school. And the standard contract was very specific: there were to be no relations between faculty and students. He'd resign if Haruhi he would go out with him but that led to the second reason. If the Shadow King had tipped his hand, chances were he'd already won. Oh well, maybe he'd use the phone number that Mitzkuni he had gotten for him. And Kyoya had gotten for him. Damn it.

"Sensei?" Kasanoda's voice brought Mori back to the moment.

"The accusation to be absurd if there wasn't some moron willing to act on it."

"Is the moron dead?" Whatever his failings, Kasanoda was not slow on the uptake.

"Just a dislocated shoulder. One should try to scale one's response to the offense."

It was pretty clear Kasanoda did think his response was scaled to the offense.

"You cannot intimidate a rumor out of existence," Mori continued. "You can, however, mock it out of existence."

Kasanoda nodded. "Politics is a continuation of war by other means," he said flipping Clausewitz.

Mori gave him a rare smile. He liked his apprentice. It was a shame they'd have to distance themselves somewhat once Kasanoda graduated, but the Morinozuka family could not be publicly seen to have too close ties to a yakuza family.

Kasanoda took his advice to heart all the way through first period. But when he walked into second and saw Dai Mitsuo with his uniform blazer draped over her shoulder and his arm immobilized his temper went as red as his hair. He bumped into Dai's shoulder very hard as they passed each other. When Dai let out a grunt pain, Kasanoda gave him a derogatory backward glance. "Dislocated shoulder?"

"Yeah, I had a motorcycle accident. What do you Yanqui?"

"Nothing," Kasanoda gave him his scariest smile. "Count yourself lucky. Those kind of accidents can be so much worse."
The meeting was ostensibly to plan their next Cosplay, but it was quickly derailed by the nagging guilt Haruhi felt seeing Dai walk around with his arm immobilized. He was a tennis player, after all.

"Yes, but he's not a very good tennis player," Honey piped up.

Really? Even sweet little Honey?

"It's just ... was it really necessary?" Haruhi said.

"Yes," Mori said. "If you're going to be stupid enough to try and walk alone in the dark then, yes. Actions have consequences, for you and the people around you. And if Kyoya's security is that lax..."

"They aren't lax," Kyoya said, exasperated. "They were told to keep an eye on her discreetly but when you came up they had to back off. She might not notice she was being followed, but you would."

"Wait, I'm being followed?"

"I've had you followed for months." Kyoya said dismissively.

"Why? What gives you the right?"

"Because that blond idiot wouldn't do it."

"Hey, I was trying to respect her privacy."

"At what cost? She was kidnapped last year and damn near assaulted last night."

"Which she wouldn't have been, if you haven't revealed her gender," Mori reminded him.

"What?!" Tamaki gasped, looking at Kyoya. "You did that?"

"Please, we engineered this entire mess to amuse ourselves. We have an obligation to clean it up before we go."

Haruhi glared at them all. "Much as I appreciate your high handed concern has it dawned on any of you morons that if I had wanted my gender cleared up, I could have done it at any time in the last two years and there's not a damned thing you could have done to stop it?"

The guys all blinked. Clearly, the thought had not occurred to them. "How many times do we have to explain this to you Haruhi?" Kyoya said sounding aggravated. "The backlash..."

"Yeah, I got it," Haruhi said. "And explain to me again how it's somehow better that you guys get hit with all this crap than me. In the event you haven't noticed, I don't have any social standing to lose."

"It doesn't matter if it hits us, Haruhi. It won't stick."

"Maybe it is for the best Haruhi," Tamaki said. "It was one of the things my grandmother was holding over you, and now she doesn't have that."

"I'm not scared of your grandmother."
"I know," said Tamaki. "And that's what scares me."

The words hung in the air between them. Finally she rolled her eyes and annoyance. "You we're not getting any planning done today; I'm going home."

"Fine, Kyoya said. "I'll send for the car."

"I don't want to ride from any of you." She turned to walk out of the room but somehow Mori had placed himself strategically between her and the door.

"I don't care which of us takes you home, but you're not going alone."

"And THAT is exactly the kind of statement that gets taken out of context and is creating this mess."

A little bit of Dark Honey flashed behind a set of guileless blue eyes. "Then publicly make a choice, stick with it and end the speculation."

"What?"

"Haru-chan, people are watching because they don't know what is going to happen. As soon as they think they know, they'll get bored and move on. Meanwhile you have four men in this room who are smart, good looking and very rich. And any of them would have you in a heartbeat. So pick one," he said bluntly.

"Only four?" She said sarcastically.

"Tama-chan would take you if he could, but he can't. And I'm under a love curse and don't have any choice."

She looked at him blankly for a moment then cracked up. "For a second I thought you were serious." She stifled the next round of laughter. "Fine, someone take me home. I don't really care who." She walked out the door still shaking her head. Kyoya quickly moved to follow her before the twins could register the opening she'd left them.

"She really doesn't get, does she Hika?" Kaoru asked rhetorically.

"Nope, she really doesn't."

~oOo~

She wished she could convince Kyoya to just drop her off at the curb and let her go up by herself, but he always insisted on walking her to the front door. The apartment was dark; her father was still at work. Rather abruptly, a feeling of emptiness washed over her and she didn't want to be alone. "Do you … want to come in? I wasn't planning anything fancy for dinner but you're welcome to stay if you want to."

"That would be nice, thank you," he answered. He texted his driver Hotta that he would be staying a while, and slipped the cell phone back into his coat pocket.

"Make yourself at home," she said as she slipped off her jacket and went to the kitchen. He followed suit and leaned against the counter in an out-of-the-way corner where he could watch her as she moved around the kitchen. He wondered if maybe he should get her a cooking class, the kind taught by celebrity chefs to amateurs who had little talent. She actually had some culinary talent and would probably become the chef’s pet in short order. Would she miss cooking when she
didn't have to do it as a daily chore? Of course bringing that about might prove difficult. He thought back on the afternoon's conversation. "I thought you were serious." "Someone take me home, I don't care who." She didn't really believe that he loved her. After what happened with Tamaki, he couldn't say he was surprised. She had believed Tamaki, look where that had gotten her. And granted, he hadn't said anything himself. Nor would he until she was ready to admit she was in love with him. One sided relationships were so awkward. Mind you, he was usually on the other end, so this was at least a novelty.

The food was excellent, doubly so if you factored in the limited range and quality of ingredients. Some pathetic little middle class commoner could've fallen in love with her for her cooking alone. But one would never be given a chance. Kyoya would rather see her wind up with one of those lecherous twins than an undeserving commoner. His chest squeezed tight at the thought. No, not the twins, they had had their chances. They had blown it. She was his now. Irrevocably his.

When she rose to clear the dishes he took her hand and pulled her over to the couch. Her mind might refuse to accept the verbal expressions of affection, but her body understood it on a physical level. He would just have to repeat the lesson until she got it on all levels.

Outside in the car, Hotta turned up the heat. He really wished his young employer would reconsider this affair. He had no problem with the girl, but the building was just too damned exposed. He scanned the rooftops again and the curb and the exterior of the building then noticed a very colorfully dressed redhead slowly ascending the stairs. He pulled out his phone and texted his young employer but across the room, tucked in the coat pocket, the buzzing of the phone went unheeded.

Ranka walked in to find his daughter laying back on the corner of the couch with the black haired boy on top of her. Whether it was the sound of the lock clicking open or the cold air that followed that alerted him, the boy spun around and put his body between Haruhi and whatever threat was coming through the door. Haruhi sat upright. "Dad..."

Kyoya placed his hand on hers in a silent plea to not say anything that might make this worse. "Into your room, young lady. Me and rich boy here are going to have a talk."

Kyoya squeezed her hand hoping she'd take it as a signal to go. Apparently she got the message, but not before she glared at her father and said "'Rich boy and I'. "

That did not help, Haruhi, Kyoya thought.

Heavy silence hung in the room until they heard Haruhi close the door of her bedroom, and for a few seconds after. Well, Kyoya thought, he supposed this was a rite of passage, having a girl's indignant father read you the riot act. And one he wasn't likely to get anywhere else. Most of the Ouran fathers would have to fake outrage at finding their daughter with an Ootori. He waited. Courtesy and tradition gave the father the opening salvo.

"Normally his is where the father asks whether your intentions are honorable, but we both know yours aren't so we can skip that part."

Kyoya raised an eyebrow.

"Oh please," Ranka didn't even need him to respond, "we both know your kind doesn't marry where there's no money. If one of us peasants so much as looks at one of you, we get accused of gold digging, but you're no better. Before you say 'I do' you'll know exactly to the last yen and share of
stock how much she has."

Kyoya really felt like he should be offended, but Ranka was absolutely right. "You don't think much of us do you?"

"After that blond idiot broke her heart?"

"Tamaki didn't have a choice."

"You always have a choice. He just didn't think she was worth the price he would have to pay to have her."

It was the reverse actually. He didn't think he was worth the price she would have to pay to have him. But there was no way to explain that to Ranka.

"Let's be honest here. Even knowing all this, I didn't object to her running with you guys because if she's going to be an attorney, she'll have to deal with your kind eventually. The experience could prove valuable. We both know you're only in it for the entertainment. But we also know what's coming down the road for her. And she won't be entertaining much longer. So if you're not planning to stick it out, leave her now. Tonight. Before she really starts to care for you. Don't do to her what that Suoh kid did."
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

A/N: This one is kind of a short bridging chapter. And fair warning: this chapter is kind of dark and the next couple chapters will be a mix of light and dark before we get back to light-hearted Host Club mayhem. Hope you can bear with me.

~oOo~

"Are you done embarrassing me?" Haruhi said to her father.

"Rich boy has gone home for the night if that's what you're asking," her father replied.

"He has a name you know."

"Not to me he doesn't. He hasn't earned one yet."

"You're not being fair. Just because… Just because Tam… Tamaki left me without warning… Doesn't mean Kyoya will." From the tone of her voice, it was clear she wanted rather than believed it to be true.

Frankly, Ranka thought the two were cut from the same cloth, but faced with his daughter's cracking voice and emotions barely held in check he decided not to push it. Maybe he should have encouraged her with those idiot twins who were at least in her grade and wouldn't have graduation as an excuse to leave her, but he doubted they had the emotional maturity to get her through the summer. "I'll make you a deal honey: I will take tomorrow night off work and we can spend it just the two of us. When you get home from school, you can tell me if I chased rich boy off. And then I will tell you why I did it."

~oOo~

Kyoya lay back in bed, his fingers laced behind his head, staring at the ceiling. How much did he really want her? He couldn't even believe he was asking the question. Under any other circumstance he would grab hold of her and never let go. But he was planning on leaving the country in six months. And not returning for six years. Granted, he made those plans back when she was firmly tied to Tamaki and his chances of getting her were nonexistent. Watching them grow closer and more intimate day after day was a form of self-punishment that Kyoya did not intend to indulge in. He didn't really need the education; he already knew what he needed to know to make his way in the world. He was after the sheepskin and the connections. Both of his brothers had graduated with high honors from nationally ranked schools, but neither one of them had gone to a world-class institution.

He could take her with him he supposed. She was certainly smart enough to swim in those waters. But she missed the application deadlines for the September start, and she hadn't finished high school yet anyway. Ouran, like most Japanese schools, did not grant early graduations. Lately he'd been leaning towards Stanford, simply because the weather was better. But Ouran had a sister
school in Boston. If he went to Harvard he could keep her with him. Would she go? Or faced with
overwhelming loss, which she cling tightly to this handful of familiar things left to her? Her crappy
apartment. Her friends. The school. Whatever he decided was best, he should probably ask her
before he started setting things up. She became irrational whenever they arranged her life without
her consent, even if it really was in her best interests.

In order to bring this about however, a number of very delicate things would have to happen in a
very particular order. He picked up his cell phone. He should feel guilty about calling his friend at
this time of night, but given how many times Tamaki had done the same to him, he didn't feel bad
in the slightest.

"Yeah," said the groggy blond.

"I'm putting together an investment pool. You want in?"

"Kyoya, it's 2:30 in the morning."

"You call me with your stupid ideas at all hours. Do you want in or not?"

"Umm, sure."

"Good. Minimum buy-in is ¥100 million. We should take a research trip over spring break. I'm
thinking a week in London and a week in San Francisco."

"San Francisco?"

"There's a couple of biotechs I'm looking at out there if I still have money after London.

"I'll get you the wire information in the morning."

"Yeah, whatever. Goodnight." click

Kyoya began counting. Five...four...three...two... RING

"Kyoya! You're taking us in a trip?"

"I'm not taking you anywhere. If you're going, you're paying you own way."

Tamaki ignored him. "What are we going to be doing?"

"I'm going to be filing the paperwork to establish a shell corporation in Britain and interview some
corporate attorneys so we can have a representative in country."

"That sounds boring."

"Many of the things we have to do to make a living are boring. Get used to it."

"You mean like a spy?"

"Something like a spy."

"Can I wear a trench coat?"
"No."

"But it's London in March!"

"Alright, maybe a trench coat."

~oOo~

It was late afternoon before Tamaki's father had time to see him. "What do you want, Tamaki? I'm busy," he said barely glancing up from his paperwork.

"Yes sir. I need you to release funds from my trust."

"You have a generous monthly allowance. What can you possibly need in excess of that?"

"Kyoya's starting an investment pool."

"Kyoya Ootori?" Yuzuro sat bolt upright. A year ago, completely under the radar, the kid had acquired 32% of the Class A voting shares in the Ootori Group, which, combined with his father’s 25%, gave them an unbreakable controlling interest in the zaibatsu, derailing the hostile takeover bid by Grand Tonnerre of France. No other stockholder controlled more than 4%, and the Ootori family had always assumed that it would be nigh impossible to override their 25% vote. Well, now the assumption was reality. And the kid had done it all anonymously. He'd done it so subtly that no one had even noticed someone was buying up large blocks of Ootori stock, let alone that it was all one buyer. Only half dozen people in the world knew who the otherwise unidentified K. O. was. But Yuzuro Suoh was one of them. And he'd done intensive research to find out where K.O. got the money and what else he'd done. It wasn't easy; the kid had gone to extensive measures to hide his involvement. Probably because no one in the business world would take a young teenage boy seriously. K. O. had invested aggressively, mostly in companies that dealt with high-risk youth oriented products. It had paid off handsomely. If the kid was putting together an investment pool, Suoh wanted in. "This investment pool, it's invitation only?"

"Yes sir."

"Get me the account number."

Tamaki slid a piece of paper across the desk. His father picked it up and immediately begin typing on the computer pulling up the account.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deposit</td>
<td>Wire from XXXXXXXXXXXX53 Hitachiin K</td>
<td>¥500,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposit</td>
<td>Wire from XXXXXXXXXXXX52 Hitachiin H</td>
<td>¥500,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposit</td>
<td>Wire from XXXXXXXXXXXX78 Morinozuka T</td>
<td>¥400,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposit</td>
<td>Wire from XXXXXXXXXXXX37 Haninozuka M</td>
<td>¥600,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposit</td>
<td>Wire from XXXXXXXXXXXX92 K. O.</td>
<td>¥1,000,000,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yuzuro pulled up Tamaki's trust. Account balance: ¥678,500,000. He rubbed his fingers across his chin staring at the screen. He opened a third window and began typing again.

Tamaki craned his neck around. "What are you...? Is that Kyoya's account? Can you do that?"

"No," his father said dryly, "it appears to belong to an entity called 'OHC Investments.' Yes, I can do it. No, I'm not supposed to. But before I move a billion yen any place, I want to know where it's going."
A new line appeared at the top of the screen:

Deposit++++++Wire from XXXXXXXXXXX07 Suoh T++++++++++¥1,000,000,000

"A billion...?"

"I'm putting you in as a full partner. I don't recommend you challenge any of his decisions, but as an equal share holder, you have a right to require explanations for all of them."

"A full partner." Tamaki was speechless at his father's trust.

The computer beeped again.

Deposit++++++Wire from XXXXXXXXXXX92 K. O.++++++++++++++¥1

Yuzuro allowed himself a cynical smile. Not quite an equal partner.

~oOo~

Ranka paced the length of the apartment and back. He'd rested most of the day so he'd have energy for tonight. But he was losing the battle and wouldn't be able to hide it much longer, so he guessed it was about time to tell his daughter. He picked up takeout from her favorite restaurant. He didn't figure either one of them would want to cook and certainly not to clean up later. He'd wait to tell her till after dinner, because nobody would eat afterwards. Funny how he divided everything into before and after. Probably because he remembered the sharp demarcation when he found out about his wife.

Haruhi walked in from school and took in the whole picture. Her dad in unusually sedate clothing, the take out on the table. "What's going on dad?"

"Can't a father want to have a nice quiet evening with his daughter?" He said with a smile. "It's been so long since we've been able to spend time just the two of us."

"It has been."

"How was your day? Anything happen at school?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Why?"

"Did rich boy walk?"

"No, were you expecting him to?"

"Well, yeah. Kind of."

"Is this dinner some kind of apology in case he did?" She said gesturing around the table.

"I suppose so."

"God I love you dad." She kissed him on the cheek. "Oh, shrimp!" She said digging into the boxes. She started talking, and actually telling him about her day. And telling him about the guys, and the stupid things they did. It was the kind of meal a father would treasure his whole life, even if he was given another 50 years.

He couldn't do it. Not tonight. He couldn't ruin this perfect memory for both of them.
It was Saturday. Ranka couldn't afford to take both Friday and Saturday nights off, they were the busiest nights of the week. He wondered if telling her on a night when he couldn't be here for her was too cowardly thing to do. He'd almost made up his mind to do it, when rich boy called. "You didn't tell her last night."

"How would you know?"

"Because she didn't call me. She didn't call Tamaki because he would have called me. The twins went boating, which they would not do if they thought she needed them. And the others would have called me as well."

"And you just assumed that because she's a girl she's automatically going to cry to you guys? Doesn't it occur to you a woman can be strong?"

"Haruhi more than most, that's why I like her."

"'Like?'"

"I accept your terms, Fujioka-San. I will take care of her."

"I was out of line to ask that. You're not even legally an adult yourself."

Even over the phone Ranka could picture Kyoya adjusting his glasses. "You have limited options."

"Very limited," Ranka agreed.

~oOo~

Once he had confirmed that Ranka was going to work that night, Kyoya called Haruhi. He told her his parents had season tickets to the opera (which they did) and they weren't going tonight (which they were not), did she want to go? Haruhi had never been to the opera and it sounded interesting. Kyoya forbore to mention that the reason his parents were not going to the opera that night was because their season tickets were on Wednesday, not on Saturday.

In between dinner and the opera they killed time by wandering through nearby art galleries until they closed and they were left with some touristy gift shops. The kind that sold glittery sweatshirts, refrigerator magnets shaped like sushi, and cheap costume jewelry.

"Haruhi, come over here." When she did, he picked up her hand and slid a ruby and gold eternity band on her finger.

"Kyoya-senpai, this is a ring."

"You're very astute Haruhi. Does it fit?"

"Why are you buying me a ring, senpai?"

"Because Tamaki's head will explode."

"Is it real?" she asked, more than a little cautious.

"For ¥500? I highly doubt it." He gestured behind him and sure enough, there was a tray with two
dozen or more rings in various sizes and "stones." He'd initially had her try it on so he'd have her ring size for future reference, but she seemed oddly taken with it. "Which do you like?"

She kind of smiled down at her hand and a shy voice said "I like this one."

~oOo~

She played with the ring all through the opera. Outwardly, he suppressed a smile. Every time he looked over her other hand was twisting the ring around and she kept looking down at it. Inwardly, Kyoya winced. A ¥500 engagement ring. He couldn't even imagine what his father would say. Of course, it wasn't really an engagement ring; she didn't know it was and therefore it wasn't. But he given her a ring and she had accepted. He could work from that.

~oOo~

It was almost eleven before Haruhi woke up the next morning. For her, that was an unheard-of luxury. She uncurled just a bit and smiled as she looked at the ring on her finger. She rolled on her side. On the nightstand was the large manila envelope that Kyoya had given her last thing last night. It was a passport application. He said he planned it as one last trip for the Host Club, but it had somehow gotten hijacked. While in London he had to file investment paperwork and Tamaki was going to have to do a brief audit of the Suoh Bank's London branch. Honey and Mori were going to have to meet with MI5. Then they would skip over to Paris for three days because apparently it was fashion week and Yuhuza insisted that her sons do something useful to help with her show. But San Francisco would be mostly fun he promised. She protested that she really couldn't afford that kind of a trip but he waved her objections aside. "Haruhi, the club never took money from the school. We raised all of our own funds so we can do whatever we want with it. I can't think of anything more appropriate than one last trip together." Although he added apologetically "Sorry. It kind of turned into a working vacation, and you're probably going to have to coordinate everybody's schedules. Welcome to our world." She didn't mind the working and helping out part, but the way he said "welcome to our world" kind of implied she wasn't going to be allowed to leave it. Oh, and then he just thrown in there that his parents had invited her to dinner next week. Carrots and sticks. I have this wonderful prize for you, but first you have to walk across this bed of hot coals. She felt intimidated in the extreme but on the other hand, Tamaki's family have been ready to disown him for dating her. If the Ootoris were willing to give her a chance, she should take it.

She took a long leisurely shower, smiling when she got out and slipped the ring back on her finger. She poked her head down the hall. Her dad's coat was on the coat tree and his purse on the floor next to it. Odd that he wasn't up yet, but then he been working such very long hours and probably needed to catch up. She tiptoed into the kitchen and began making them both omelets. She sprinkled them with chives and garnished the plates with the last of the strawberries the Kasanoda had given her. She knocked on her father's bedroom door. "Dad? You up yet?"

No answer.

"Dad?" She opened the door and peeked around it. With a gasp, she rushed forward. Her father lay crumpled on the floor, white as the sheets on his unused bed, his hand still gripping the comforter he'd half pulled off when he collapsed.

She desperately clutched her purse tight against her the entire ambulance ride to the hospital as she watched the paramedics looming over her father. It wasn't until she was sitting in the emergency room with its ubiquitous "no cell phone" signs everywhere that she realized she'd left hers at home on the charger.
The nearest hospital was not Ootori owned. She wasn't sure if she was relieved or distressed not to have that overbearing family breathing down her neck. A little overbearing might have been comforting just now.

It seemed like forever before the doctor came out to see her. As busy as ER doctors always were, the fact that we was speaking gently to her was frightening. "The tumor has eaten through the wall of his intestines. It ruptured last night spilling bacteria and blood into his abdominal cavity. We cleaned it up as best we could, but with the cancer as far advanced as it is, the prognosis isn't good. I'm sorry, Miss Fujioka."

"Can I see him?"

"He is still unconscious, but you may sit with him as long as you like."

~oOo~

"You may sit wherever you like," the tea house host gestured to a group of open tables in the greenhouse garden.

They selected a table and Kyoya pulled a chair out for his sister before seating himself. "I can't get her to take me seriously."

"Why would she?" Fuyumi said. "Fairytales and Hollywood movies to one side, people from our class don't marry people from her class very often." She fell silent while the waiter brought their usual tea and cakes. "Let's face it," she said pouring her brother's tea, "the whole world knows you're just screwing around with her until you get bored or find something better. Just like your friend Tamaki did."

His eyes flared even through his glasses. "I did not scr...!" His voice came out low and heated. Then he caught himself. He tilted his head up so the light bounced off his glasses making his eyes hard to see. "And neither did Tamaki."

"Ooh, sensitive spot," Fuyumi sounded delighted. "But it is what it looks like, and that is what the world sees," she added apologetically.

Kyoya turned his head away, his jaw tightened in anger, but said nothing.

"And if you're not careful, some commoner will come along and he'll make her an offer. And she will believe him where she could never convince herself to believe any of you guys. And while your friends are amazingly dense, they are not actually stupid. They will figure out that she's not taking you seriously or they will see somebody else enter into the picture and then they will re-enter the game. So if you want to win this girl, you have to move now and you have to play for keeps."

"They can't re-enter the game," Kyoya said. "They are still blocked by that old woman."

"I wouldn't count on that for much longer. That old woman is 71 years old and last week she went in for an EKG."

~oOo~

The heart monitor beat out a steady even rhythm. Haruhi clung to that as her own lifeline to sanity. He was going to be OK. He was going to be OK. He had to be OK. It was evening before he woke up.
"Hey baby girl, how was your day?" He said groggily through the morpheme drip.

"Don't even joke! How could you not tell me you had cancer?"

"Because there was nothing you could do."

"Yeah, well I felt like an idiot. The paramedics asked if you were on any medication and I said no. Then I opened up your purse and I found a ton of them."

Silence reigned for a few minutes.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I just wanted us to be normal for as long as we could."

"I love you dad. Please get better."

"Would that I could, baby." He reached out and took her hand and squeezed it, wincing slightly as the IV needle shifted under his thin skin.

She was trying so hard not to cry; it was almost a relief when the nurse came in and said "I'm sorry Miss, visiting hours are almost over."

Haruhi nodded. "I'll be back first thing in the morning to check on you, dad."

Ranka shook his head. "Tomorrow's a school day."

"I'm not going to school tomorrow. I'm not going to that stupid club. I'm not even going to that stupid dinner. I'll be right here with you."

He cocked his head a little. "What stupid dinner?"

"Kyoya's family invited me. But I'll just go another time."

"No honey. You need to go this time. And this way you can tell me all about it." She started to shake her head no then her dad looked up with those big brown eyes. "Please do this for me."

She got back to the apartment and was met by the sight of the cold omelets and the last of the strawberries, now starting to dry. As she threw them out she wondered if this was the last meal she would ever cook for father. When she finished cleaning up the kitchen, she sank to the living room floor and put a blanket over her and hid like the worst thunderstorm in history was raging outside her door.
Chapter 10

~oOo~

"Haru, you ok?" Kaoru asked.

Her head snapped up. "I'm fine. Why?"

"Because it's the end of class and your notebook is still empty. Your notebook is never empty."

"Oh. Um. I'm just ... distracted." She couldn't bring herself to tell them why. She'd already lost one parent; she was about to lose the other. These two had never lost anything. None of them really did had. Well, maybe Tamaki. He might understand. But as much as she wanted to go cry on his shoulder, she knew he wouldn't let her get that close, which meant there was no point in even trying. Kyoya was never a good shoulder for crying, so much for leaning on the boyfriend. Mori? If he was going to be here today? She felt pathetic going down the list like that. If she didn't want to be an object of pity, she shouldn't act like one. She bit her lip and swallowed the pain to try and forestall the tears.

"Yeah, no kidding." Kaoru said.

Hikaru leaned in. "Distracted by what? A pair of luscious golden eyes perhaps?"

"You wish," she said pushing Hikaru away. She grasped at the first plausible excuse that leapt to mind.

"I'm supposed to have dinner with Kyoya's family tonight. I'm kind of nervous."

"Eww." Hikaru gave a shutter that was only half mocking.

"The food will be good, the company will suck," Kaoru said.

"We could kidnap you and spare you," Hikaru offered. "No, seriously. We could have you in Kyoto before the car shows to pick you up."

For second, she looked like she was considering it. Then she shook her head. "Probably not a good idea at this time."

"Alternatively, you could sit with us at lunch and we can teach you how to eat," Kaoru said.

"Thank you, but I know how to eat."

"Not that kind of meal you don't," Hikaru said.

"Besides," she protested, "I can't afford the cafeteria."

"Our treat!" The twins said together.

"So what are you having for dinner?" Hikaru asked once they made it to the cafeteria.

"I don't know."

"Hm. That makes a lot tougher. We better order some of everything," Kaoru said.
About the time they loaded up the fourth tray she finally protested. "I can't eat that much."

"Fancy meals aren't about eating, Haruhi," Hikaru said. "They're about making you feel bad if you don't know how."

"Damn rich people" she muttered under her breath.

Kaoru loaded up a fifth tray then they headed to a table half way across the cafeteria from where Kyoya and Tamaki were sitting.

Kyoya noticed and got up from his seat next to Tamaki. "What are you doing?"

"Back off! She can eat with us if she wants!" Hikaru said.

Surprised at the rebuff, Kyoya looked at Haruhi who had a hand over her face in a moment of supreme embarrassment. Rather than make it worse, Kyoya adjusted his glasses and walked back to his seat, though he and Tamaki kept looking over their shoulders at the trio.

Momoka wandered up and sat across the table from Haruhi. "What are you guys making such a scene about? Oh, you're teaching her table etiquette."

"Yeah," Kaoru said. "She's got a fancy dinner coming up."

"That's sweet of you," Momoka smiled. "You have a salad knife in the wrong place," she said pointing at the offending object.

"We do not."

No really, it goes on the outside."

"It really doesn't."

"Hey Toru, you're an expert on tableware. Come over and correct these cretins."

Toru Suzushima wandered over and took a look. "Depending on the order of the meal, the salad knife can be there too. But you definitely have the demitasse spoon where the desert spoon goes."

"This," Hikaru said, whacking him on the knuckles with the offending spoon, "is too big to be a demitasse spoon."

"What kind of crappy silver do your parents own?"

Haruhi put her head down on the plate. "Can I just eat with chopsticks?"

~oOo~

She wore the dress the twins had given her for dinner at the resort. Kyoya had liked it, so that boded well. She slipped on the ring he gave her. It was costume jewelry, but it gave her courage.

~oOo~

Kyoya's mother played with the pendant of her necklace in an irritated manner. She'd looked at the file. Whatever her husband had seen in this girl was not apparent to her. And at the spa this afternoon, the women had all been gossiping about how Shizue Suoh had had to pay a fortune to get some trashy tramp away from her grandson. That same little tramp now had her claws in Kyoya.
While Fuyumi made her apologies to her father for her husband's absence that night (he had a prior business engagement), Kyoya's mother looked at her other sons. "What do you know of this girl?"

Akito shrugged. "She's the Suoh heir's castoff."

"Apparently she has a taste for boys with money. My friend's sister Ayanokoji was the third year when this girl was a first. She said this girl has never seen boy whose parents are worth less than ¥5 billion and when they went up to Karuizawa, she ran into an ex-boyfriend of hers who obviously still had feelings for her and she pretended they had never gone out."

The Ootori matriarch pursed her lips as the couple walked in.

~oOo~

Rather than just sending a car, Kyoya had gone to pick Haruhi up. That had probably been prudent, because being kidnapped to Kyoto was sounding better and better every minute.

~oOo~

Fuyumi was instantly at Haruhi's side. "Oh Haru-chan! That dress is stunning! Dior?"

"Hitachiin."

The matriarch's eyes skimmed over Haruhi. That dress cost more than the girl's father made in a month. She must have really stuck it to old lady Suoh. Well, the Ootoris would not be so crass as to resort to money.

As they sat down to dinner, Mrs. Ootori said, "I understand you are the scholarship student at Ouran."

Haruhi nodded. "I am."

"I must say, I am impressed," Yuuichi said. "A difficult feat. And especially stressful because if you let your grades slip even a little, even one time, you know you will be expelled because you can't afford the tuition."

"Yuuichi," his father warned.

"I meant no disrespect father. I merely wish to express my admiration for her hard work and dedication under what must be considerable pressure."

"Particularly given how many activities and clubs are available at that school," Akito added. "You met Kyoya through a club didn't you?"

"I thought that club was boys only," Yuuichi's wife said.

Haruhi glanced at Kyoya uncomfortably. Fortunately, he smoothly interjected "We made a special exception for Haruhi."

"How open-minded of you," she answered with a touch of condescension. "We'll convince you women are the equal of men yet."

"I have always felt women are the equal of men. I just do not believe the two are the same," Kyoya replied unruffled.

"He's splitting hairs Fujioka-san. You mustn't let him get away with that."
The way they were all looking at her ... were they expecting her to start some sort of a fight with Kyoya in front of his highly conservative father? Her parents had never had much use for traditional roles, but she was aware of societal norms. She cast her eyes down, partially to appear demure but mostly so she could gather her thoughts under their uncomfortable stares. "There are of course areas were a person's sex does not matter: academics, or business – certainly I would not expect Ootori-sama to go easy in a business negotiation because the other company's head was a woman - but there are other situations in which a person sex definitely does matter." She was thinking of Okinawa, and not the afternoon on the beach. She glanced up without moving her head. Ootori-sama looked pleased. Kyoya's sister-in-law, not so much.

"Oh, she's smart," the woman said. "You're going to have a hard time controlling this one Kyoya-kun."

"There would be no point in choosing a partner you could control," Kyoya said quietly.

Interesting. Kyoya wanted a partner, a consort. Not just another asset. His father would have chosen based on property and alliances, but preferably someone the family could control. So who was controlling Yuuichi's wife? Her husband or her mother-in-law? Haruhi twisted the ring on her finger absentmindedly. "Lovely ring," commented Yoshio.

"Thank you," she said not taking her eyes from it. "It's just an inexpensive piece of costume jewelry, but I'm very fond of it."

"Funny how the objective value of a thing often shows little resemblance to its true worth." Kyoya adjusted his glasses.

"Yes, appearances can be so deceiving," Akito said smoothly. "Tell me Miss Fujioka, when you were in that club of my brother's did you entertain boys or girls?"

"Entertain' is a grand word for having tea and conversation. But by that definition, both I suppose," Haruhi answered honestly.

"Did you ever kiss any of your clients?"

"Enough Akito!" Yoshio said angrily.

"Your father's quite right," his mother agreed. "That is not suitable conversation for the dinner table."

Haruhi sincerely hoped Kaoru was right about the food, because he was dead on about the company.

His mother gave a less than sincere smile. "Tell us about your family, Miss Fujioka."

I'd rather go back to talking about the clients I kissed, she thought, than give you grounds to snipe at them. "My mother was an attorney," Haruhi answered politely.

"Was?" asked Yuuichi.

"She passed away a few years ago."

"I am sorry. And your father?"

"He...works at a club." There was a hitch in her voice as she answered. What sort of monsters were these people to tear into a man who was in the hospital losing the battle for his life? They didn't
know, she reminded herself. Although if they did, at best they would change their deliberate cruelty for pity. She'd rather have their cruelty. Well, Kaoru had warned her. "That cool, calculating bastard is actually the nice one in his family."

"Fuyumi seems nice."

"She doesn't count. They knew from the day she was born she'd be bartered off. They raised her to be a negotiable asset, not a true Ootori."

Haruhi came back to the present at the sound of Yuuichi's voice. "Any club we might have been to?"

"Unlikely. It caters to a specialty clientele," Kyoya put in in a tone of voice that said the matter was settled.

But apparently it wasn't. "Is he a manager at the club?"

Damn them. They knew the answers before they asked the questions. They were just trying to make her answer to embarrass her. Voltaire was right. "No, he's a bartender," she said bluntly.

"Being a skilled bartender requires as much creativity as being a top chef," Akito smiled. "Does he have other creative hobbies?"

Haruhi stood up in anger before she was even aware of her actions. They were all staring at her. She bowed respectfully to Kyoya's father and said, "Please excuse me Ootori-sama." As she left the room, she could hear the argument starting behind her.

"How dare you disrespect me at my own table?"

"You?"

"You disrespect my guest, you disrespect me."

"You bring a social climbing jade into my house a require me welcome her like family," the Ootori matriarch's fury was palpable.

Fuyumi was indignant. "Mother! I did not think it was possible to be a worse judge of character than Akito, but clearly I am wrong."

"Take off your blinders, Fuyumi," Yuuichi's wife spat out. "She is a grasping little harlot who brings nothing to this family."

Kyoya tilted his head so the glare on his glasses vanished and his brothers could see his eyes clearly. "If any of you ever speak to her or of her that way again, I will destroy you." He quite deliberately rose and bowed to the head of the table. "Father."

"Am I supposed to be cowed by the idle threat of a third son?" Akito's voice trailed after him.

Without turning around Kyoya said "pack up your household. You leave Tokyo by the end of the week," and left the room.

"Am I supposed to take that seriously?"

His father cocked a cynical eyebrow. "When you disrespect the intended of the man who owns the company you work for, there will be consequences."
"Owns?" His wife gasped. "You gave the company to Kyoya?"

"I gave him nothing. He seized control of the company in a hostile takeover a year ago."

"What do you mean?" Akito said stunned.

"You have an MBA. I would think you would be familiar with the term."

~oOo~

Kyoya had hoped to hell she had gone to the bathroom. She hadn't. Or onto the patio for air. She hadn't.

The butler came up. "Did she call for a car?" Kyoya asked.

"No sir, she walked. But she did ask if I would give you this." He handed Kyoya the ring.

The crappy little ¥500 ring. She wouldn't even keep that. Somewhere, two very third-rate hospitals in miserable backwater towns with horrible weather were each about to get a very first-rate doctor.

He swore as he turned for the garage. He slid into his Acura NSX and was in second gear even before he cleared the driveway. He slammed it into third as soon as he hit the street.

How he didn't get a ticket ripping through the streets of downtown Tokyo at those speeds was a question only the gods of broken romance could answer. He tried calling her cell, but it immediately rolled over to voicemail. She probably turned it off so it wouldn't ring during dinner. He got to her apartment and took the stairs two at a time. The apartment was dark and no one answered when he beat on the door. Years ago Ranka had given him a key; he opened the door and went in. "Haruhi?" His voice sounded hollow even in his own ears, what must sound like in hers?

She wasn't there.

Think! He enjoined himself. If she walked or took public transit or even a cab, he got here ahead of her. He moved the car so that he could see her approach but she was unlikely to see him waiting for her. Just in case. A half hour passed. She didn't come. He drove very slowly back to his house along the route she was most likely to take. There was no sign of her. Where else would she go? He drove from his house to Suoh Mansion #2 looking all the way. Again, no sign of her. Parked out in front, he called Tamaki.

"Is she there?"

"Who? Haruhi? Isn't she having dinner with you tonight?"

Kyoya caught his breath. "My family ambushed her. She walked out ... I don't know where she went."

"You try her apartment?"

"Of course I tried her apartment you idiot! That's the first place I checked." He adjusted his glasses, though there was no one to hide his eyes from. "I was... hoping she'd come to you."

"She can't come to me. Not anymore." Tamaki's voice betrayed as much pain as Kyoya's. "Why did you let them attack her? Why didn't you protect her?"

"I thought she could take them on her own. Then she... she just folded."
"And all this time we thought my grandmother would be the biggest threat to Haruhi."

"Your grandmother is not absolved. There's no way four members of my family turned on Haruhi on the same night in direct opposition to my father's wishes without some serious manipulation."

"I'll be right over."

"Don't bother. I'm out front of your house now."

Tamaki was down in a flash. He slid into the passenger seat. "You know this car is a two seater."

"Yeah...?"

"If you find her, you have to throw me out on the street."

"I'll pay your cab fare."

"Maybe we should use one of my cars. Besides, she'll be less likely to bolt if she recognizes my car."

"I don't want a god damned driver tonight." He put the car into gear and took off. "My security team will be along anytime now anyway as soon as they figure out that I've flown without them."

"This car have a tracer on it?"

"Probably. Tachibana is not incompetent. Also I have my cell phone on."

"So where are we headed?"

"Honey's."

Tamaki nodded cautiously. "She might go there. Honey and Mori are solid in a crisis. But you know she's more likely to..."

"No. She can't go there." Because if she went there, he had lost her. The twins were both crazy about her, and their parents adored her. It's not like she would be welcomed into the bosom of a warm and close knit family; the parents couldn't even take time for their own children, they weren't going to rearrange their lives for an outsider. Still, being adored by someone in their spare time beat the hell out of being despised in their spare time.

Tamaki short-circuited the process. He punched a number into his cell phone. "Honey? Is Haruhi over there?"

"Isn't she having dinner at the Ootoris' tonight?"

"That... didn't go so well."

"Why didn't Kyo-chan protect her?"

"He wanted them to see she had claws of her own so they would leave her alone."

"But Haru-chan doesn't have claws. She wouldn't have put up with us for two years if she had."

"We are just trying to make sure she landed somewhere safe."

"Did you try her apartment?"
"Of course we tried her apartment!" Kyoya fairly shouted across the car.

"I can call Takashi and the twins if you want," Honey offered. "They'll be less likely to hide her from me."

"Good thinking. And it's ok if she doesn't want to talk to us. We just want to know she's safe," Tamaki said.

"It is NOT ok if she doesn't want to talk to us," Kyoya said.

"Thanks, Honey," Tamaki ended the call. "First things first. We have to figure out where she is."

They ended up back at her apartment, sitting on the stairs. The twins showed up about five minutes later. "Did you knock on the door?"

"Of course we knocked."

Hikaru slid past them. "Maybe she's just not answering 'cause it's you. Maybe she'd answer for me."

"I have the key to the apartment, Hikaru. She's not there."

"What time does her dad get off? If she went over to Mei or Momoko's, she'd at least call him to let him know, right?"

Honey and Mori arrived as well, but after an hour in the winter cold, they had to concede she wasn't coming home tonight.

"We'll just have to catch her at school tomorrow," Kaoru said.

~oOo~

Haruhi had gone from the Ootori house to the hospital. She snuck into her father's room in case he was asleep. He looked over at her bleary eyed from exhaustion and the painkillers. "How did it go, baby girl?"

She bit her lip and smiled. "It was great dad. The food was amazing. I could eat that every day and never get tired of it." She tried to recall everything she'd had for lunch in case he asked detailed questions. But he skipped to what was really important.

"And did you like his family?"

"His sister is the sweetest person ever born. And his father actually seemed to approve."

"How could they not approve of my brilliant and beautiful daughter..." He drifted off under the painkillers again. She stayed there holding his hand for the rest of the night.

The junior nurse of the ward whispered softly to her superior "Visiting hours are over. Should we...?"

The older woman shook her head. "No, he doesn't have much time left. Let her stay."

~oOo~

Haruhi didn't show up for school the next day. At first they all thought she was just avoiding the music room, but she didn't show for class either. Half way through first period, Hikaru had developed a nasty cough.
"Sensei," Kaoru said, "I think I need to take my brother to the nurse."

"Nice try, Mr. Hitachiin. But I know you have a chemistry exam next period."

*cough*cough*wheeze*

"No really, sensei, he had an attack of something over the weekend. I really think we need to call our dad."

Mom was always an easier touch with this sort of thing, but she was out of her country going over fabric selections with one of her manufactures.

The teacher sighed. "Fine, you may call from the nurse's office."

Since his father knew full well he hadn't had an attack of anything the previous weekend, Hikaru made every effort to sound particularly weak. "Hi dad...?"

"The nurse tells me even the thought of your chemistry test is making you physically ill."

Well, shit. Cards on the table time. "Dad, please let me out of here. Haruhi didn't come to school today."

"I see. And the sole reason I pay your exorbitant tuition to that school is so you can sit next to a girl."

"It's not like that..."

"You were hoping to copy from her on the test?"

"She went to the Ootori's last night and they hurt her."

"Is it actionable in a court of law?"

"Well, no."

"So let me get this straight – you want me to excuse you from a chemistry test so you can go and make a pass at your closest friend's girlfriend who is mad at your friend because his family are all a bunch of jerks."

"Um ... yeah?"

"Go take your chemistry test."

"Can I leave after the test?"

"If you leave so much as one minute before the final bell, I will tell security there to break your ankles. Get back to class."

"Dad, how did you know what happened?"

"Because we designed the software that runs some of their medical equipment so I've worked with Ootori-sama and his sons. I know they're jerks."

"See? Haruhi doesn't deserve to wind up in a family like that."

"Count your blessings," their dad said drily. "When Ootori discovered he needed our expertise to
create the software interface, he tried to buy the company. Had you two been born girls, one of you would be engaged to Kyoya now."

The twins screamed in horror. "Oh God dad, there are some things you can never unhear!"

~oOo~

Kyoya did have to wonder why the twins stared at him with open mouthed terror and revulsion all the way through lunch.

~oOo~

Even though Kyoya left the minute the final bell rung, by the time he got to the car Honey was already sitting on the hood and Mori was leaning against the car. The twins, cross armed, were blocking the car door. Tamaki came up behind him completing the encirclement by semi hostile forces. "Look, I made a bad call," he said. "But since I made the mistake myself, it would be better if I fixed it myself."

"Yeah, that's not happening," said Hikaru. "We're not giving you a second chance to hurt her."

"I didn't..."

"You permitted it to happen," said Mori. He opened the door to the limo and Honey hopped off the hood and got in first. Then Kyoya. Then the others piled in. As though they were concerned he might try to drive off without them. Which he would have. It was not a small car, but six large guys was still a bit much.

And while his family's behavior had been offensive, this whole backlash was excessive. He wondered if she had any idea of the power she wielded.

They knocked at the apartment door and when no one answered, let themselves in. Funny, they would never have considered it an option at any of the others' houses, Kyoya thought. Intimacy, a lack of respect, or just an awareness that the others' houses all had a full time staff? "Anyone home?" he called out.

No answer.

They fanned out in the tiny apartment, past the living room with its sundry pictures and TV, into the kitchen. It was clean, but it usually was, so that didn't signify. The garbage hadn't been taken out which was unusual but it wasn't overflowing. He looked in. Two uneaten omelets and some sliced but withered strawberries.

"What's this doing out?" came Kaoru's voice from the bedroom. There, laying neatly on the bed, was Kaoru's dress.

"Haruhi wore it last night," Kyoya answered. It hadn't been there last night when Kyoya checked the apartment, so she'd been home between now and then.

"Um ... has this always been here...?" Tamaki's asked from the living room.

There, on the little alter next to her mother's picture, was Ranka's.

"Oh no," Kyoya breathed in a barely audible voice.

"Kyoya?" Tamaki said. The others all stared aghast.
"The oncologist said three or four months."

"Oncologist?" Tamaki's voice had an edge. "Why didn't you tell us?!"

"I couldn't tell you, Ranka hadn't told Haruhi."

"Then how did you find out!?" Hikaru demanded

"My father turned it up in a background check." He pulled a phone out of his coat pocket. Not his usual phone, a burner phone. He punched in the number for his father's secretary. "This is K.O. I need you to search through all admissions records for all Ootori own facilities for a Ryoji Fujioka."

"I DON'T CARE IF IT VIOLATES PRIVACY RULES, DO IT!"

Kaoru looked with distaste at the ancient desktop computer in the corner. He dug in Haruhi's book bag, pulled out the laptop Hikaru had given her and began typing.

"What are you guys doing?" Honey asked.

"He wasn't taken to an Ootori owned facility," Kyoya said.

"Got it," Kaoru said.

"Oh please," Hikaru answered. "Our dad runs one of the most cutting edge software companies in Japan. Just because we design women's clothing for fun, you think we can't hack something as basic as a minimally secured public service network?"

"Ambulance dispatched to this address at 11:50 a.m. Sunday morning. Patient breathing but unresponsive. Taken to Tokyo General." Kaoru filled them all in.

~oOo~

They found Haruhi standing at the nurses' station, her hand on a piece of paper, a pen in her fingers. She wasn't writing. She wasn't moving. Like she was in a state of semi-shock. Like whatever auto pilot had brought her to that point had disengaged and left her void.

"Haruhi?"

She didn't acknowledge them. She just kept staring ahead.

Kyoya walked over to her slowly. He took the pen from her and set it on the counter. He picked up her hand and slid the ¥500 ring back on her finger. He wrapped one arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to him and begin stroking her hair with the other hand. Tamaki came over and squeezed her arm and put one hand in the middle of her back. She drew a ragged breath and let out a noise more animal than human. Fat tears soaked through Kyoya's shirt. Honey came up and wrapped his arms around her waist. The twins came over and hugged her on the other side. Mori loomed over them all and kissed her softly on the top of her head. Her knees buckled and the only thing keeping her upright was the support from the Hosts. The grief counselor from the hospital came up, took one look at this mass of the best of humanity, and realized he had nothing more to offer her. He left them in peace.
Haruhi wasn't entirely sure how she got home. She had put the water on her father's lips and then there were all these forms from the mortuary and she just couldn't even think straight anymore. She had a vague recollection of Honey and some flowers and incense, and of Mori putting a knife on her dad's chest. Then they were all crammed into a car holding her so tightly she couldn't breathe, but if breathing meant letting go, she would rather suffocate.

Once home, as they put her to bed, she heard Tamaki calling the school and Kyoya calling the insurance company. A knock on the door interrupted the twins' discussion of suit vs. kimono. Mei and Kasanoda came in, carrying a large noodle and marinated chicken dish.

"Seriously? You guys don't have any food?"

"This isn't a party," Hikaru said bitingly.

"This is Haru," Mei said. "She gets focused good or bad and shuts out everything. How long do you think it's been since she ate?"

They all looked at each other guiltily.

"She smells food, she'll get hungry, she'll come out and eat. Otherwise she'll stay in her room and cry. Where is she now?"

"In her room crying," said Hikaru.

Mei shook her head with a withering look. "You have cell phones. Use them!"

"She's bossy," said Kaoru.

"You have no idea," Kasanoda replied.

Mei started to push her way past them to into Haruhi's room but Hikaru took hold of her arm to stop her. "She said she wanted to be alone."

Kasanoda grabbed Hikaru's wrist and twisted it off Mai's arm. "Let her go in." The two glared at each other then Kasanoda kind of shrugged. "It's a chick thing. They're good for each other."

Haruhi's phone rang. They all looked at each other not sure what to do. Hikaru answered it. He turned to the others. "It's the hospital. She didn't finish filling out all the funeral instruction forms before we left. They want to know what to do." All the guys' eyes started darting around the room looking for someone - anyone - to answer. At length, Ritsu said, "I got this." He pulled out his cell phone and hit a number on his contact list. "Kasanoda here. I need you to arrange a funeral… No, it's OK. The guy's already dead… No, no alibis this time. He died in the hospital surrounded by doctors… " he paused and looked at Mori. "You sure it was cancer and not something else? Things can be made to look innocent."

Mori gave a sharp nod. "Cancer."

Kasanoda didn't look convinced. "Don't think they'll be an autopsy so no worries." Then he stopped and looked around the room. The guys she ran with her all high muckety-muck social types. If
there was anything embarrassing, the media might drag it out in the open just for a few cheap headlines. "On second thought, make sure if there's an autopsy it's our guy. And scrub the report before it's released. ... simple dignified ceremony. Like we would for the family. Thanks." He ended the call and look up at the room as six pairs of wide and horrified eyes. "What? Like you guys don't have professional contacts."

~oOo~

Shortly after the food arrived, Mei came out, dragging Haruhi behind her into the bathroom.

"Seriously? They go to the bathroom in packs even at home?" Hikaru said to Kyoya.

"How would I know? I only have one sister." Which was more one more than any of the rest of them had.

In the bathroom Haruhi splashed water on her face. Mei brushed her friend's hair and pulled it back. And put a little mascara on her. "Do I really need that?"

"Haruhi, you're the prettiest girl I know, but yes, today you really need this."

"You ready?" Mei said to her friend. Haruhi took a deep breath and threw your shoulders back then nodded. "Remember," Mei whispered. "Your dad might not have ever had sons, but you have a house full of brothers out there who would do anything for you. And given that set of brothers, the word 'anything' is pretty much literal."

The two girls emerged into the living room. Haruhi's composure was fragile but perfect. She kept her head up and only stumbled a little when she saw the family alter draped in white. Kyoya doubted most 30 year olds could pull themselves together the way Haruhi had. He wasn't even sure his mother could. It might even be worth taking over the Ootori family just so he could put her on top.

She came over to the table and looked at all the boxes of food. "You guys bought all this?"

"Well you can't expect them to make anything, can you?" Mei said. "I doubt these guys know how to boil water."

"Hey! We make very good tea," Tamaki retorted indignantly.

"And instant coffee," Hikaru added.

Haruhi gave a laugh that was carefully guarded so it didn't turn back into tears.

The two boys started filling her plate with food. And overfilling.

"That's way too much," Kyoya pointed out.

"She's got to make up for two or three missed meals," said Hikaru.

"It doesn't work that way," Mori said, handing her a drink.

Kaoru noticed Honey sitting in the corner, watching. "Not going to join in?"

"It's too soon for cake," Honey said as though that were the real tragedy.

Kaoru wasn't fooled. "What are you thinking senpai? For real."
Honey measured his words before speaking. "I'm thinking that Tami-chan and Hika-chan want her to be happy, but they both wish she was sad a little longer so they could comfort her. I'm thinking that Takashi and Kyo-chan are both impressed by how well she's pulled herself together in such a short time. Kyo-chan is regarding her with possessive pride, but there's a little too much possession in his pride. It's increased Takashi's respect for her ten-fold and he doesn't truly respect that many people, so now he's wishing he had tried a little harder to get her. And I'm thinking this whole thing has made you sad, because you know that burying your feelings to make the people around you more comfortable doesn't work."

"You're not a very comforting person to talk to, you know that?"

Honey shrugged. "It was Tami-chan who first showed me that even if the truth isn't what people want it to be, it's still the truth."

"And what about you?"

"Fortunately for me, I'm under a love curse, so I'm immune."
It was the morning of the wake. Because Haruhi was the only close family member Ranka had, she would have to carry out all of the rites herself. She was already exhausted and numb. The next two days would be hell. And she was the kind of person who wouldn't - couldn't - bring herself to ask for help. But the hosts figured that if they didn't offer to help, she couldn't turn them down. So they just assigned themselves Haruhi duties. Honey and Mori had taken her to the mortuary last night to help her with the preparations, Kyoya and Tamaki had spent the night on her couch last night so she wouldn't be alone and they were now waiting for the twins to come and bring her breakfast, allowing them to go home and get dressed. Because of his promise to Ranka, Kyoya really felt that HE should be the one to escort her to the wake, but that arrangement would have left the twins sleeping alone with her in her apartment. Which was NOT going to happen.

Tamaki bounded out of bed. Kyoya hated morning people.

"Commoners are so clever - they can hide a whole bed inside a couch. Like a futon with springs!" Tamaki appeared delighted.

"Like a futon with nails sticking up. How did they convince people that torture device constituted a bed?" the Evil Low Blood Pressure Lord snapped back.

"Was the princess bothered by the pea?"

"The princess was bothered by a watermelon. The floor was more comfortable."

"It's not my fault you rolled out of bed."

"I didn't roll, I was pushed."

"How would you know? Were you awake when it happened?"

"As a matter of fact, I was." And indeed, he had been lying on his half of the uncomfortable "full" bed (seriously? Full sized for what? A dog?) thinking that if the blond idiot hadn't been there, Kyoya would have gone and curled up next to Haruhi in her bed. But then that's precisely why the blond idiot had stayed the night. He hadn't missed the exchange yesterday. As they lay on the hide-a-bed the night before, a silence hung over them. "That was a ring you put on her finger at the hospital."

"It was a cheap piece of costume jewelry from a tourist shop. Just colored glass and plated white metal."

"Why would you buy her something like that?"

"Because she wanted it."

"Please don't do that to me again. I'll get there ... I will. But I'm not there yet."

Kyoya rubbed his forehead at the memory. Fortunately, Tamaki took it for morning grogginess.

"Go take your shower. I'll start the coffee."

Tamaki was right. Shower and coffee helped. But as he sent the blond down the hall to the
bathroom, he called back "No singing in the shower. The walls are thin and Haruhi's still asleep."

"What make you think I sing in the shower?"

"Because that's the sort of mental defect you morning people have."

Kyoya hadn't brought a blow dryer, so he was towel drying his hair before putting on his shirt. He'd packed it neatly, but somehow it was still wrinkled when he pulled it out. How annoying. It wasn't what he would be wearing to the wake; he was only wearing it to go home in to change, but even so. He'd just slipped it on, without yet starting to button it up when the twins knocked bearing breakfast. He unlocked the door to let them in.

It was not the twins.

It was a stuffy looking middle aged woman. They stared at each other in surprise for a moment. "I am looking for Haruhi Fujioka," the woman said.

"She's still in bed. May I help you?"

The woman's glance raked over the half-dressed teenaged boy who, based on the early hour, the rumpled shirt and the damp hair, had clearly spent the night. "I am her Aunt Rei. You will inform her I am here."

Kyoya stood aside to admit her. He supposed she had no reason to lie about her identity, although in two years he had never once heard her name nor seen a picture of her. Indeed, she was so far estranged from the Fujiokas that she had not even appeared on the background check. But Haruhi had added an aunt to her emergency contacts at school, so he would treat her with basic courtesy.

Tamaki picked that moment to lean out into the hall with only a towel wrapped around his waist. "Is that the twins? Did they remember to bring jelly? Haruhi ran out last night."

Kyoya adjusted his glasses. "No, it is not the twins. This is ... I'm sorry, I didn't catch your full name."

"Inoue. Rei Inoue." Her voice was dripping ice.

"Inoue-san, may I present Tamaki Suoh?" Fortunately, before the charming blond could come out wearing only his towel, the twins barged in and distracted her.

"You hired a maid, good thinking," said Kaoru handing her the carry out bags from the restaurant. "Haru really likes strawberries, so make sure the fruit ends up by her plate," Hikaru added.

Kyoya winced. "This is not a maid. This is Haruhi's aunt, Inoue-san."

The twins at least had the decency to look embarrassed. "I'm so sorry. You were just, you know, dressed like a servant. So which side of the family are you from?" Kaoru said, trying to make conversation.

"Don't be an idiot, Kao," Hikaru slapped him upside the head. "She looks just like Ranka would if he put on 20 pounds."

Kyoya muttered as he walked past Tamaki "Go put some clothes on." Haruhi was going to kill them.

Kyoya knocked softly on her bedroom door. "Haruhi?" He said in a quiet voice, "you have a
"guest." He slipped into her room, sat on the edge of her bed and gently stroked her hair until she stirred.

"What time is it?"

"It's still early. I wouldn't have disturbed you but there's a lady here, Rei Inoue; she said she's your aunt."

Haruhi blinked, trying to wake up. "I'll be out as soon as I'm dressed."

Rei noticed the lack of honorifics when speaking to or about her niece, the way they all just made themselves at home and the way that one boy had just walked into her bedroom, barely even knocking. Exactly how intimate was she with these boys? Inoue-san was beginning to regret reconciling with her brother. She had her own daughter, just turned 16. She really didn't need to bring a slutty cousin into the family around the impressionable young girl. Especially one who was in it with not just one but four boys.

Honey and Mori walked in and handed Inoue-san their coats. "I thought you were going to meet us there," said Kaoru.

"We just wanted to check on Haru-chan. She was having a rough time last night," Honey said. Then looking at Tamaki added "I know you both wanted to spend time with her but you did make sure she got plenty of sleep didn't you?"

"Of course," Tamaki replied. "We put her in bed as soon as dinner was over."

"And good thinking on the maid. Haru likes to keep the house clean, but since everybody's been through she can't have had time."

Haruhi came out, still a little short on sleep and a little unsteady on her feet. "Aunt, it has been many years."

"Niece," Inoue-san answered coldly.

Haruhi bowed respectfully. "Yoroshiku Onagaishimasu."

"Wait. She's not the maid?" Honey said.

"Enough!" Inoue-san threw down the coats. "Get out of this house now all of you!" She rounded on Haruhi. "I knew your father engaged in a Bohemian lifestyle, but I never dreamed he would allow his daughter to live this completely amoral existence."

"Amoral?" Haruhi looked at the hosts. "What have you guys been saying to her?"

"Nothing!" protested the twins.

"I swear I've been here through the whole conversation. I have no idea what she's talking about," Tamaki added.

"Spending the night with young men who wander freely in and out of your bedroom and casually discuss having sex with you..."

Tamaki sprayed his coffee all over the room.

"Hey! I'm wearing this today boss!" Kaoru grabbed a napkin to clean off his sleeve.
"As soon as the funeral is over, we are leaving Tokyo. You will pack what few things you have of value and we will go home. The rest of the trash in this apartment can be given away or sold."

"What do you mean go home? Where is home?" Tamaki said.

"Osaka, though it is no concern of yours."

"But what about school?" the twins said.

"There are schools in Osaka."

"What gives you the right to order her around so?" Kyoya asked.

"By the will of her father, I am now her legal guardian until the age of 20."

~oOo~

"Everybody out," Kyoya said quietly but forcefully.

"But we're supposed to give Haruhi a ride to the wake," Hikaru protested.

"Then wait in the car. If she needs the ride, she will join you." Kyoya took a deep breath and bowed to the woman. "Inoue-san, I fear we have given you a wildly inaccurate impression of our relationship to your niece. We hold her in the utmost esteem, and any lack of formality noted is because we regard her as family. Sumimasen deshita."

Out in the street, the others looked at him. "Kyoya..." Tamaki began.

"Go home and change, Tamaki. I'll see you at the wake."

Kyoya got into the car. Haruhi was a minor. How the hell had he overlooked that fact? It was one of the main reasons he did his business through corporate fronts and under the pseudonym K.O. Technically, since he himself was a minor, he couldn't even enter into a contract, but he could own stock in a corporation and that corporation could enter contracts. The fact that the corporation was owned by a minor would be a grey area should it ever come up. Hence the alias. Technically, Haruhi couldn't even rent the apartment she lived in.

When he arrived home, he changed into his suit and immediately went downstairs to his father's library. As he dug through the law books, his father came up behind him. "Anything I can help you with?"

"Who do we have in family law?"

"Why? You going to file for emancipation?"

"Haruhi's aunt is going to force her to move to Osaka tomorrow. She's not even going to let Haruhi finish the school year."

"That seems shortsighted. Why don't you explain to her the advantages of doing it your way?"

"She won't listen. She thinks we are a bad influence."

"She may have a point. Because of you and your friends, her niece had to spend two years dressed as a boy." He watched as his son pushed up his glasses obscuring his eyes. Yoshio was inwardly pleased. He'd gotten to Kyoya. "I shall, however, be bitterly disappointed in you if you simply rollover and surrender. I have found your creativity these last few years to be breathtaking in its
scope. Usually misguided and occasionally dangerous but breathtaking nonetheless. ... Personally, I credit the Suoh boy. You were not a creative child before he entered your life."

Kyoya angrily snapped closed the book he was browsing and stalked out of the room. Yoshio looked after him stoking his beard before pulling out his phone.

"Yuzuro-san, I know we agreed to not get involved so we can see what would happen when our sons actually had a prize worth fighting over, but we may have a problem."

"The Hitachiins?"

"Middle class morality."

~oOo~

Rei Inoue stood in the corner of the room glowering. The room was filled with Ranka's friends, some of whom had dressed as men. But more of them had come in very tasteful and stylish drag. "I think she's just mad because they make better looking women than she does," Hikaru muttered.

Kyoya sighed. "We need to be polite to her for Haruhi's sake."

"Wouldn't it just be easier to piss her off so badly that she washes her hands of Haruhi and leave us all alone?" Hikaru asked.

It was a mark of Kyoya's desperation that the idea actually sounded like it had merit.

"Have we talked to an attorney yet?" Tamaki asked.

"Don't bother," Mori said. "I Googled her aunt. The woman is a blood relative, financially stable, married with children Haruhi's age. No court in Japan is going to take custody away from her. You'd have to own the judge."

"How much does a judge cost?" Kaoru asked.

"What the ...?" Honey slapped Tamaki's arm. They all looked over to see Yuzuro Suoh placing an elegant black and white koden bukuro onto a silver tray. He scanned the room.

One quick look at her middle class mourning attire and her disapproving look as she gazed at her brother's coworkers and friends told Yuzuro Suoh everything he needed to know about the woman. You walked over and bowed formally "I am sorry for your loss."

The woman sniffed appraisingly at the man in a conservative but well cut suit. She was clearly trying to figure out how he fit in to the circus of freaks. "You were an associate of my brother's?"

"I don't believe I ever met him. His daughter attends my school. It is out of respect for her that I am here today."

Ah, she thought. School principal. Having a normal sort of relationship in which to fit the man made her much more comfortable.

He continued, "It is my understanding that you will be withdrawing her from school as soon as the year is finished. We will be sorry to lose her. The scholarship that she has is very competitive and hard to get, and requires that she maintain the top grade every year. She would have been the first student in six years to have completed the program."

"We will be leaving sooner than that; as soon as the funeral is past, we will return home."
He looked at her quizzically. "But they're only 10 days left in the school year. Surely that will make it very difficult for her new instructors to evaluate her even if her teachers at Ouran forward her grades." It was apparent from the woman's expression that Haruhi's grades were of very secondary importance to the woman's convenience. "And of course," he added smoothly, "it will be a great comfort to you to know that she qualifies for a scholarship and thus will not have to impose on your generosity to pay for her education."

"Unfortunately I cannot leave her here unsupervised for two weeks. It would be inappropriate for a young lady to live by herself in that environment."

"Very sensible of you. I can see that a suitable chaperone would have to be arranged." He nodded across the room at Ootori. Yoshio came up and bowed to his compatriot. "Ootori-sama, may I introduce you to Rei Inoue-san, Miss Fujioka's aunt and guardian. She was just saying she needed to find a suitable chaperone for Miss Fujioka to stay with until the end of the school year. Your oldest daughter is married with a home of her own, yes?"

"She and her husband would be pleased to assist. Just until the end of school or until after the trip?"

"What trip?" The woman asked suspiciously. She appeared to have accidentally agreed to more than she intended already. 

"A cultural, educational and sightseeing trip organized by ... one of the clubs at school. The fees have been paid and are non-refundable. I believe her father intended it to be his final gift to his daughter. Have you children of your own?"

"Two," she said. "A daughter who is just a year younger than Haruhi and a son who is already in college."

"Indeed. What is your son studying?" Yoshio went in for the kill.

"Accounting," she said proudly. 

"A very useful profession and one for which my company always has need." He pulled out a business card and handed it to her. "Have Miss Fujioka pass along his resume when he is close to graduation."

The two men excused themselves. "And that," Ootori said to his son on their way out the door, "was my present to you."

Just before the two older men left their sons overheard Yuzuro say "you owe me lunch and a martini for that." Yoshio answered "So I do."

~oOo~
Chapter 13

~oOo~

"Not sitting the vigil with your young lady?" Yoshio asked his son in a patronizing tone.

"No, her aunt seem to think it unnecessary. And Haruhi did not wish to offend her aunt." Kyoya adjusted his glasses in irritation. Despite treating Haruhi and the old bat with all the deference due the Empress and despite repeated attempts at polite conversation, he had gotten nowhere with her. Even Tamaki had failed. Kyoya wasn't sure Tamaki had failed with a woman since he was five. Whereas his father had walked in and in five minutes had all the concessions he wanted out of her. A lesson, Kyoya supposed, in relative influence. "I've told her security detail to notify me if Inoue-san leaves." There was a glint in his father's eyes. Evidently Yoshio enjoyed seeing his son thwarted. He probably thought it was character building or something. Kyoya would live with the extra character as long as it meant Haruhi got to finish the school year at Ouran and go on the trip with them. "And how much do I owe you for that present?"

"You need to pardon your brothers and allow them to remain in Tokyo."

"No."

"You need them Kyoya, we need them. Healthcare companies run solely by businessmen tend to provide very poor levels of healthcare."

"You're a doctor. Does this mean you're planning on retiring?"

"They didn't know, Kyoya."

"Didn't know what? That I'd never brought a girl home to meet the family before? Or didn't know that when their brother and their father introduce them to someone they should show basic courtesy to that person? How would you have responded had someone accused mother of being a social climbing whore?"

"Your mother is from a very old and established family."

"That wouldn't necessarily make the charge false against mother and it doesn't make the charge true against Haruhi."

"Hm." Yoshio regarded his son for a moment. "I told Fuyumi and her husband they needed to go to the funeral tomorrow to introduce themselves to Inoue-san so she will know her niece will be staying with a respectable family." He didn't have to complete the thought. He could just as easily tell them to never mind.

"There will come a day when you can't outmaneuver me old man."

"No doubt. But this is not that day."

"I will rescind the order for them to leave if Haruhi can get past it. But the insult was against her; she must be the one to forgive them."

"Fair enough."

~oOo~
Kyoya received the text at three in the morning that Inoue-san had left but that another man has gone in. Kyoya's security had taken him to be part of the temple staff because he simply sat outside quietly and respectfully and made no attempt to interact with the family until now.

Kyoya got up immediately and threw on clothes and his coat then made us way to the garage Aijima was sitting by his car, reading a book. "Tachibana said you might go out tonight," he said, barely looking up.

"Don't try to stop me."

"My job is not to stop you, it's merely to accompany you. Given the hour, may I suggest that I drive?"

At the temple, he found Haruhi kneeling on the floor, a piece of paper clutched in her hands. The strange man had his arm around her shoulders. An initial surge of jealousy was tamped down down when Kyoya realized the man was in his 40s or 50s. If this was her uncle, he'd already shown more compassion than his wife had. The man noticed Kyoya before Haruhi did. He whispered something to her, squeezed her once tightly then rose and bowed. He gave Kyoya an evaluating look on his way out.

"Who was that?"

She took a deep breath before formulating an answer. "That was my dad's lover. I guess they used to meet during the daytime while I was at school... he knew my aunt wouldn't approve so he waited until she was gone before he came to pay his respects.

"He also said... If my aunt took me away from Tokyo ... That he would take care of the incense and prayers for my father. So I didn't need to worry about it."

Kyoya's arms slipped around her. She looked down at the paper In her hands. "And my dad gave this to him to give to me when the time was right." Kyoya looked down.

My dearest Haruhi,

Life doesn't go the way you want it. And they say that for every good thing in your life you have to pay somewhere else. But if this less than ideal death is the price I pay for having you and your mother, then I still think I got the better end of the deal.

I'm not going to say something stupid like don't grieve for me. I know you will. But don't let it consume you. When I lost your mother, I shut down. I thought I couldn't go on without her. And indeed, the only way I could go on is to change who I was. But you have become the most amazing, talented and brilliant daughter any father could ever ask for. Don't change because of this. Don't close yourself off. Go. Live life. Have adventures. Tonight. Tomorrow. Don't wait. It will make it easier for me to move on if I know that you have. Whether it's on day 49 or year 49, I will hear your prayers just as clearly and I will watch over you just as closely no matter where you are and what you are doing. And I will always be

Your loving father,

Ryoji

~oOo~
Haruhi went through her first day back at school in a fog. Part of her felt like she shouldn't even be there, but exams were coming up and if she didn't get through them, she would never complete her second and now final year at Ouran. At the end of the day, her arms filled with notes to copy borrowed from her classmates, she went out to the car the Shidos had sent for her. She looked back at the school. What she really wanted to do was go back in there to Music Room 3, curl up in Kyoya's arms and just be with her friends. But it would make for a pretty dismal Host Club session if she did. She bit her lip. She wasn't going to be a burden, wasn't going to drag them down; she been virtually on her own after her mother died, this wasn't that different. But it was. If she could just get to the car without crying...

Waiting between her and her haven was someone she really didn't have the strength to deal with now. Kyoya's brother's wife. What was her name? Haruhi couldn't think straight.

"Fujioka-san," the woman bowed. "I need to apologize for my behavior the other night. What I said was unkind and uncalled for. I had a bad day and I took it out on you."

Haruhi nodded, but it was really more acknowledgment than acceptance. It dawned on the woman that this girl had had an exceptionally hard day herself. Vagaries weren't going to be enough. "You must understand, Yuuichi and I had an arranged marriage, but it has been a good marriage. It has brought great merit to both of our families and both of our families' businesses. We are compatible and have much respect for each other. But he has never looked at me the way Kyoya looks at you."

"What do you mean?"

The woman gave a sad smile. "He respects you and admires you. He is proud of your accomplishments. He does not worry that you might overshadow him; he wants you to succeed. He enjoys your conversation and your company for its own sake. He wants to protect you and lay the world at your feet. But what he really wants to do is take you to bed. I have never had a man regard me with all those things at one time, and I know that I never will. And I was jealous. So when my mother-in-law heard those unflattering things about you at her day spa, rather than alleviate her fears, I exacerbated them. It was an unworthy action on my part and I regret it deeply." The woman bowed again and departed.

The next day, Haruhi kept looking at Kyoya trying to see whatever it was that woman had seen in his eyes. But Kyoya looked at her the way he always did. The woman must've been mistaken.
Hikaru flicked a piece of lint off his shoulder in annoyance. As weeks went, that one sucked. The one after wasn't so hot either. Yeah, the harridan had gone back to Osaka without Haruhi, but she'd left behind a curfew which Shido-san and Fuyumi determined to honor. Being alone just gave her extra time to dwell on her loss. And every time Haruhi had started to bounce back even a little, something came up. The third day memorial, the seventh day memorial. She'd had to skip the Ouran fair and the ball because she was in mourning. She's had to miss all the Host Club meetings as well. It was so not fun, they cancelled the final cosplay. The final cosplay ever. The final Host Club meetings ever. Without Tamaki's brilliant ideas and Kyoya's financial genius it wasn't really viable; and without Haruhi, it would be just the twins or they would have to recruit new members. And the entire rest of the world was filled with idiots.

Haruhi did get to go to graduation and to dinner with them all afterwards. The Rationalization King (aka the Shadow King) said to her with that deadpan voice of his "You have to eat Haruhi. I fail to see how it makes any difference in the grand scheme of things whether you eat with us or alone."

Tamaki almost blew it when he looked at her with those big violet-blue eyes of his and followed up with, "We promise we won't have any fun."

"We certainly won't have any fun if you're not there," Hikaru said.

Haruhi made an exasperated noise. "If I go to hell, you guys are going with me."

"Deal!" Kaoru said without any hesitation.

"Yay! Haru-chan is coming with us!" Honey was bouncing with excitement

"Hey, what happened to no fun?"

"That's at dinner," Honey explained. "I'm getting it all out of my system now." He took her by the hand and started to lead her towards the waiting cars. "And to limit the fun, I promise for dessert I will only have a kind of cake that I don't really like."

"There's a kind of cake you don't like?" Mori asked.

Honey thought about it. "Hm. Maybe I better stick to pie."

Another menu with no prices.

"I am sorry about… You guys having to cancel everything," she said.

"It's not like it's something you chose." Kyoya said.

Tamaki pouted. "But I did have the perfect cosplay picked out for us."

"He was stuck on the spy theme," Kyoya said.

"I had a great dress picked out for you," Tamaki muttered.

"I can just imagine," Haruhi said dryly.

"No, it really was hot," Hikaru chimed in.

"It was this slinky little black number with a slit up the thigh just exposing a garter that doubles as a gun holster." Kaoru added.

"A real gun would be too heavy for that garter," Mori felt obliged to mention.
"Hollywood spies, ok?"

Tamaki started to sprout mushrooms in the restaurant. "Would have been perfect too. We were all going to dress in tuxedos and trench coats and dark glasses with fancy spy watches and everything. To dance with us all the girls would have had to slip us little bits of information."

It did sound kind of fun actually. "You know," Haruhi said, "spies are supposed to be secretive and show up where and when they're not expected... We could always have the party after we get back from our trip."

Honey gasped. "And we could have it in a secret location, and everybody would have to know a secret password to get in."

"And Haruhi could wear the dress," Tamaki sounded so pleased.

"I don't know about the dress. Maybe something a little more like a working outfit. That covers a little more. Like Black Widow in the Avengers."

"Skin tight leather Haruhi?" Kyoya sounded both amused and intrigued.

"Or maybe the dress wouldn't be so bad."

~oOo~

She felt...guilty planning a party that would take place on the 50th day. Literally the first day it was permissible to go to one. I hope you meant what you said about living life, Dad.

In the car on the way home the twins got that look in their eyes. "Haru... I know you're not supposed to have any fun..."

"It's not about not having fun," Haruhi said under her breath.

"... but work, by definition, isn't fun. And with Mom's new lines coming out, we have two solid weeks of photo shoots coming up and wanted to know if you want a job," Hikaru offered.

"I'm not a model," Haruhi replied.

"With that skin, you could be. But that's not the job," Kaoru said. "We need a gopher. You know, someone to fetch and carry and run errands. Mostly for the photo stylist."

"How much does it pay?" Kyoya asked.

"You're not opposed to this?" Haruhi had expected opposition.

"Well, I can think of things I'd rather you do than watch while these two take their clothes off in front of you, but the fashion industry does pay pretty well at the top end of the scale." Kyoya adjusted his glasses making it clear that he expected them to pay her at the top end of the scale.

"Wait," Tamaki's choked, "take their clothes off in front of her? No one is taking their clothes off in front of my little ..." he caught himself just in time "...princess. We'll get you a respectable job at the bank or in one of our hotels where nobody takes their clothes off."

"People don't take their clothes off at hotels?" Hikaru taunted him.
"You know what I mean, you degenerates!"

"As much fun as all this sounds, I can't take either job. It's apparently time I stop imposing on people. I leave tomorrow morning for Osaka."

Silence fell in the car.

"That wasn't the deal," Kyoya said in a low voice. The temperature in the car dropped ten degrees.

The car pulled up at the Shido residence. "Wait here." Kyoya got out of the car.

Haruhi started to follow, but five sets of hands grabbed her and pulled her back into the car.

"You really don't want to be in there right now."

"No kidding," said Hikaru. "They don't want to be in there right now."

---

Kyoya walked into his sister's house without knocking. He found her with her husband in the dining room. He raised his head just a bit so the light reflected off his glasses shielding the fury in his eyes. "Father asked you to host Haruhi for a few weeks. If you felt it was an imposition, you should have taken it up with him or me, rather than packing her off to Osaka without warning."

"Whoever decided it was an imposition, it wasn't us," Fuyumi protested. "She's so quiet, we barely know she's here, and when we do see her, she's pleasant company."

"Then who…?"

Shido made a dismissive noise. "At a guess? The aunt. Apparently, public schools in Osaka still have a week left to go and her new family feels it would be better for her to attend the last week of school and start making new friends to settle in. Speaking of which, where is she?"

"Still in the car."

"She's not your graduation present Kyoya-kun. She is my ward for 10 more hours, and I am not going to fail in that duty," Shido-san said

"Why does everyone assume that's where this is going?"

"Because she is pretty and you are 18. Because the other night when Fuyumi and I were out at dinner, you came over, curled up on the couch with her to watch a movie, but didn't actually watch much of the movie. Because despite that both of you are pretending otherwise, she is frightened and alone and you are moving heaven and earth to try and keep her with you. For God's sake, you made a deal with Yoshio Ootori. No one does that unless they're desperate."

"You did once."

His eyes flicked to Fuyumi. "And I got what I wanted and I don't regret it. But I did pay a steep price." He gave a half smile. "Fuyumi, would you go extract Haruhi-kun from that car."

"You know," he continued after his wife left, "you would have more credibility if you put a ring on her finger."

"She's 17 years old."
"Fuyumi was 18. If you are not sure, a long engagement is not a bad thing. And you can always break it if you realize it was a mistake. But I would point out to you that what touched all this off was that young Mr. Suoh was planning on doing the same. Largely, I suspect, to keep her in his pocket while he went off to college and she remained at Ouran."

"That's not it. He can't conceive of life without her."

"He'll have to if she marries his best friend. Or are you going to have to look over your shoulder your whole life?"

Kyoya shook his head. "They are both of them too honorable for that."

"My advice still stands. Do it now, before she goes to Osaka. It will be much harder to call her back once she is gone. Do you have a ring?"

"No," Kyoya said. "But I have one picked out."

Shido-san nodded. "I will call and make arrangements for the jewelry store to open while you drop your friends off. Then you can come back and take care of it."

"Why are you doing this?" Kyoya asked suspiciously.

"Because you're the only one of my brothers-in-law that I like. And I've grown curiously fond of her this past week. You suit each other." He rubbed his chin weighing his words. "And I don't really see the point of sending her off to live with a bunch of relatives that don't even want her."

They dropped the twins off first, then Mori. As Honey got out of the car, he stopped and looked back. "You will do right by her. Promise?"

"Yes," Kyoya said in a quiet voice.

Once Honey was out of the car, Kyoya turned to his best friend. "Everyone expects us to be able to pull a rabbit out of a hat and solve this."

"Does that mean you do not have a plan?"

"I have two plans. But one of them involves threatening her family, for which Haruhi would never forgive us."

"And the other…?"

Kyoya said nothing.

"Ah," Tamaki said after a pause.

"I don't know that it matters. I don't think she'll accept. We've only been together a few weeks and she has trust issues."

"Which I gave her."

Kyoya didn't deny it.

"Do you think… Do you think she would've accepted me?" Tamaki asked hesitantly.

Kyoya turned to face the window before answering. "Yes."
"You know, when Kaoru realized that he and his brother were both in love with ... with her ... and he just gracefully stepped aside, I don't think I ever gave him enough credit." Tamaki's next word came out forced. "When?"

"Tonight. After I drop you off, I'm going to the jeweler's."

"No," Tamaki said with finality. "We'll go to the jeweler's together, then you can drop me off."

"There's no reason to put yourself through that."

"You put yourself through it for me."

"That was different. I'd already come to terms with it."

"Whatever you say. Just promise me you're not going to buy that boring thing you picked out when we were there."

"It's tasteful and elegant."

"It's dull and unimaginative."

"A ring should be symbolic of the two involved. She does different things to me than she does to you."

"Well she doesn't make you dull and unimaginative. You're ten times as much fun when she's around."

~oOo~

It took longer than he expected to get back to the house and when he got there he half expected her to already be in bed but she was sitting in Fuyumi's study having tea. The lights in the room were ever so slightly dimmed and there was a fire in the fireplace. Out the back door, hidden spotlights strategically lit Fuyumi's small tea garden. For a man who thought himself a loner, he seemed to have an awful lot of co-conspirators.

Haruhi flashed surprise when she saw him back at the house. "Did you forget something?"

Fuyumi squeezed Haruhi's hand. "Yes, I rather think he did," she said as she rose to leave the room. Smooth and well-spoken Kyoya was suddenly at a loss for words. "... Haruhi ... I... I don't want you to go to Osaka tomorrow."

"I don't particularly want to go either," she said in her practical but oblivious manner. "But I don't have a choice."

"Your father once told me you always have a choice. You just have to be willing to pay the price for it."

"She's my legal guardian Kyoya."

"What if she wasn't? What if somebody else was?"

"My father asked her to take care of me."

"He also asked me to take care of you Haruhi. Please let me."
"You're the most amazing person I've ever met, Kyoya-senpai. But there are limits to what even you can do. My aunt is not going to budge."

"Anyone can be persuaded, Haruhi. It just requires the right leverage."

"Leverage?" Fuyumi whispered with her ear to the door. "Oh my god, he's treating this like a business deal."

"Fuyumi, come away from there. Give the man some privacy," her husband said.

"I can't," she hissed. "I promised Tamaki I'd keep him in the loop."

"You're on the phone to Tamaki?" Her husband whispered indignantly.

"Not… the phone... Bluetooth." She squirmed guiltily.

"What's going on?" Tamaki said urgently into his phone.

"He's treating this like a leveraged deal."

"Oh God, he's going to blow it." Tamaki sounded frustrated. "Hold on just a second." Fuyumi could hear a noise in the background. "Hey Kao, can you create a conference call with all of us?"

"Sure boss, what's up?" Kaoru asked.

"Kyoya is proposing to Haruhi and he's screwing it up."

"Oooh juicy." Around Tokyo, three cell phones rang simultaneously.

Hikaru walked into the room where Kaoru was working on the computer, with his cell phone plastered to his ear. "What's going on Kao?"

"Kyoya's proposing to Haruhi and he's screwing up."

"Awesome! You have a live feed?"

"Just Fuyumi's running commentary."

"Why didn't she bug the room?" Honey put in.

"Fuyumi," her husband said. "Hang. Up. The. Phone. He will never forgive you for this."

"Oh! He's down on one knee now. He's pulling out the ring. ... Kind of a small ring."

"See!" Tamaki said excitedly. "I told him it wasn't fancy enough."

"Shh. Shh. Shh."

"Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?" Kyoya asked.

Haruhi gently touched the ring still in its box without offering him her hand. "I want to finish school, Kyoya. I want to become an attorney."

"Of course," he said easily. "All Ootori women are educated. It's a prerequisite." Seeing that she didn't quite believe him, he went on, "Have I ever told you about my family? My great grandmother wanted to be a doctor, but this was in the 20s or 30s and no medical school in Japan would admit her. So she went to America, got her degree, and practiced for a year before her
family called her home. Her first week back in Japan she marched into my great grandfather's office, threw her credentials down on the desk and demanded he hire her. He told her he'd give her an interview if she went out to lunch with him. She apparently spent the entire lunch discussing diseases common in Japan and their rather graphic symptoms. She did get the job but he still insisted on another date, a real date.

"My grandmother also wanted to be a doctor and she figured that as my grandfather had been raised by a strong woman he was less likely to be intimidated by one. So she deliberately screwed up every omiai her parents took her to until they agreed to meet my grandfather.

"My own mother graduated seventh in her class at Kyoto. Not top 7%, top seven. Then she got into the business world and discovered that even in the 1980s and 90s it didn't matter how good she was at her job she was still expected to make the coffee and serve the men at the office and let them take credit for all of her accomplishments. I understand she got one of her particularly egregious coworkers who stole a promotion from her built up with a great idea and then told him if he didn't put her name on the proposal with his, she'd quit without giving him the details. He didn't and she did." Kyoya shrugged. "Then she married and started having children, about one every four years. After the fourth, she announced she was done having children and my father could damned well keep his promise of a real career. She now sits on the Board of Directors for several charities. Mostly charities that have no men on the boards."

"But from what you just said all of those women were in college, or graduated. I'm still in high school."

"Haruhi, half the girls at Ouran are engaged, betrothed or otherwise promised. It's not like you will be unusual."

"It's all as part of business deals."

"Fine, let's make a deal then." He appeared to consider. "Sometime in the first six years of our marriage you have to give me a child. Maybe two. Brilliant children; you'll have to drown the stupid ones."

"I'm not drowning any of my children!"

"Hm. All right then I suppose. As long as they have your beautiful brown eyes, I'll forgive them. But stupid grey eyed ones will have to be put up for adoption."

"What kind of man threatens to drown a woman's children while he's proposing to her?" Tamaki said.

Fuyumi gasped. "She laughed. Oh my God it worked."

Haruhi reluctantly gave him her hand and he slipped the ring on her finger. He kissed her to seal the deal. "My aunt is never going to believe this is real."

"Your aunt was raised being told that if she wasn't engaged by the time she was 21, no man would have her. She'll believe it. Especially if you tell her you're marrying into an older conservative family." Although frankly, he thought, I don't care what the rest of the world believes as long as you believe it. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her again, a slow, consuming, passionate kiss that spoke to that part of her that knew she belonged to him. That part answered him, shutting off her unsure brain. She leaned into him with her whole being. Her hands timidly moved across his shoulders, kneading the fine linen of his shirt before slipping down, uncertainly. He ran his fingers down her arms, catching her hands in his, brought them to his lips, kissed them, then placed
them on the top button of his shirt. Then he waited. Almost of their own accord, her fingers undid the button and slipped down to the next one. She watched her hands as though she wasn't sure what they were doing. When they reach the bottom of the shirt her hands slid back up through the opening they had created and traced cross his well-defined chest. As her hands moved back down, he slid his arms behind her head and undid the buttons on his sleeves. When her hands completed the circuit and came back up, they continued to his shoulders removing his shirt. Her breath flowed over his bare skin. Suddenly even the thin fabric of her dress was too intrusive. He moved his hands to the top of her zipper and watched her for permission. She gave a barely perceptible nod. He carefully, deliberately unzipped the dress feeling the fabric loosen with every inch. He traced back up her sides then hooked his thumbs under the dress and slip and slid them off her shoulders and down her sides. When he reached her slender hips he let go and they dropped to the floor. She shivered.

"You're cold," Kyoya said.

She shook her head in denial of the cause, but he led her the three steps over to the fireplace, knelt down on the thick rug in front of it and slowly pulled her down towards him. The heat of the fire on one side and the cold of the room on the other made every nerve in their bodies crackle with life. He was overwhelmed with the desire to see her wearing nothing but the rings he had given her. Then, when she knelt bare before him, he would explore every square centimeter of her body. The hollow of her neck. The little scar on her back. The parts he'd only fantasized about. His fingers moved to the clasp of her bra.

His pants buzzed.

He angrily jerked his cell phone out to shut it off, but caught the text message on the screen:

Shido: We'll be in in 10 minutes.

He answered back: Stay Out!

"Wait, are you texting?" Haruhi asked. The romantic mood evaporated instantly.

"I'm telling them to leave us the hell alone."

The phone flashed again.

Shido: She is not your graduation present.

Kyoya threw the phone across the room.

~oOo~

If poor Shido-san was under any misconceptions that he would be taking Haruhi to her train, he was disabused early. Kyoya arrived at 7 a.m.

"What are you doing here?" Haruhi asked.

"I wanted to have breakfast with you before you go to the train station, and since my sister absolutely forbade me to spend the night last night, I came over early this morning."

Haruhi had only just sat down next to him when five more guys piled in through the door. "What are you doing here?" Kyoya said threateningly.

"We're taking Haru-chan to the train station," said Honey, as he helped himself to a pastry.
"No, I am," Kyoya said.

"I am the guardian, it's my responsibility." Poor Shido-san had lost control 15 minutes ago and didn't even realize it yet.

"Her bag's already in the boss's car," the twins said. So it was that poor Shido-san had to sit in the front seat next to the driver while six guys and his temporary ward squished into the back of the limo. The whole way to the train station, they all kept touching her - her hands, her arms, her hair - but Kyoya couldn't even bring himself to be mad at them. Well, until their farewells. Hikaru hugged her a bit too long for Kyoya's liking and jealous anger flared when he heard Tamaki whisper "We'll come for you, princess. Don't doubt us."

"You. Stay. Here." Kyoya said in a didactic tone as he led Haruhi off to say his goodbyes in semi-privacy. He kissed her softly and ran his fingers over her face. "I'll be down on Friday."

She pursed her lips to try to prevent the tears, and nodded before she turned to get on the train. Six heartbroken guys watched as the train pulled out.

"So we're going to Osaka this weekend?" Tamaki asked.

"You're not going anywhere. I am going to see my fiancée."

"Sounds like a date to us," the twins said. "You know the club rules when someone takes Haru on a date."

"It's not a date," Kyoya repeated.

"It's a date," said Mori.

~oOo~
Chapter 15

~oOo~

When the train pulled out, Kyoya felt like he'd been gutted. They had counted on him from the start to keep Haruhi with them. And he had, for two years. But now he had failed them all. And he had failed himself most of all.

There had to be a way around it. There had to be some leverage.

~oOo~

Suoh had set up an alert on the OHC Investment account. Deposits and transfers. That morning, ¥2 billion had moved out of the account. A couple hours later ¥935,000 were transferred in. At first he wondered how the kid had managed to lose that much money that fast. But no, the outgoing funds had moved to one of KO's investment accounts. The deposit had been a transfer from the Host Club account. Why bother with that small of an amount? Why not just use it to pay for the girl's share of their upcoming trip?

The girl.

It put her into their investment pool albeit at one seventh of the smallest share. The trip was to London, Paris and San Francisco. The money had been moved into one of the KO's accounts at Morgan Stanley. They had offices in all three of those locations. So did Suoh Financials. What could Stanley offer him that Suoh couldn't?

¥2.2 billion.
£16 million.
€19 million.
$20 million.

Not enough to buy a company, but enough to get the attention of an underwriting syndicate. Stanley must be underwriting an IPO and the reclusive Japanese investor KO had enough pull to get in at the opening price. Suoh pull up a list of upcoming IPOs through Morgan Stanley looking for candidates that fit KO's pattern. The most likely one was a video game company going public later this week. The stock would initially spike and then probably drop which meant that KO would sell within the first two days. Suoh chuckled to himself. Must be frustrating as hell to know you were going to net almost ¥1 billion for your friends within a week but you still couldn't outmaneuver a middle-class housewife from Osaka.

~oOo~

Haruhi's first week in Osaka was… different. She was met at the train station by her aunt who looked as disagreeable and unhappy at her arrival as her friends had at her departure. Her aunt's modest three-bedroom home was larger and nicer than Haruhi's old apartment, but she would have to share a bedroom with her cousin Kimi, who was less than thrilled at losing her privacy. The first thing her cousin said to her when they were alone was "Is it true your dad was a gay transvestite?"

"Bisexual," Haruhi said with a little bit more taunting back than was strictly speaking necessary. "But after mom died he swore he never love another woman, and he never did."
"Did he love men?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

The look on her cousin's face went from disgust to the kind of repulsion usually reserved for contagious plague victims.

Her older cousin the accountant regarded her with a kind of contempt, as if it was her fault that she had lost her parents. Her uncle, she supposed, wasn't too bad. He wasn't delighted at her moving in, but he regarded it as a duty that he - as a respectable family man - would have to take on. Haruhi gathered his coworkers and friends expressed approval for his most correct actions. Still, they weren't really any worse than the snobs at Ouran had been when she first started school there. She could live with them if she had to, and maybe they'd even come around eventually.

The kids at school generally avoided her. Either they didn't know what to say to a girl orphaned and forced to move in with strangers or Kimi had told them about her father and they kind of sneered at her. Haruhi emailed the guys every day so she didn't feel totally alone even though she had to be careful not to say anything that might give them the right idea. The teachers seemed reasonably fair although they really didn't know what to do with the student who showed up with less than two weeks of school left. So far, she'd had a literature essay, a term paper, two quizzes and four problems sets. But compared to what she had to do at Ouran, the material was pretty simple. Class A at Ouran was expected to excel in everything, especially academics. Although cranking out the term paper in three days had been a bit of a challenge. She tried not to feel too vain when she overheard the term paper teacher saying that she had run Haruhi's paper through three different plagiarism software packages and couldn't find the source. The teacher had ultimately had to send the paper back to Ouran where the teachers had confirmed that it was Haruhi's writing style and that the girl was an exceptional student, even by Ouran standards. Mostly Haruhi didn't mind. All the schoolwork kept her busy and away from her new family and out of everybody's hair.

Her cousin had cleared the wall above Haruhi's bed so she could put up pictures as though it was some kind of personality test. Well, you couldn't go wrong with pictures of friends. She put up one of her and Kyoya dressed in cosplay as Chinese royalty, one of her and Tamaki dancing at her first Ouran school fair, one of Honey and Mori at one of their martial arts tournaments, and a candid shot of the twins goofing off at one of their mother's fashion shoots.

"You like them?" Her cousin asked nodding towards the pictures. *Why would I put up pictures of people I didn't like,* thought Haruhi. *That would be stupid.* But out loud she said, "Yeah, I do." Somehow, it made her more normal in her cousin's eyes that she had friends. Well, whatever worked.

Then she backslid in Kimi's eyes by doing homework while Kimi was reading teen magazines. Haruhi didn't mean to make the girl look bad, but she had to read a semester's worth of books in short order.

The weekend was almost here. It was exam week so all she had left was reading. It was for her literature class; maybe she could pretend she was reading for fun. All she had to do was meet up with her cousin so they could walk home and...

The kids weren't vacating the school yard. They were all plastered up next to the fence. A second look told her it was mostly girls. Murmuring girls. "I think it's them." "It's definitely them." "Oh my god, what are they doing here?" One girl emitted a high pitched noise that turned into a collective squeal. Being too short to see over the crowd, Haruhi kind of had to skirt around to the side of the crowd and crane her neck to see.
A limo.

Two bodyguards made sure the squealing girls got no closer than 15 feet. Hikaru was leaning back against the door of the car, arms crossed in front of him, weight on one leg with the other leg negligently draped over the first. Kaoru sat on the hood of the car, leaning forward, golden eyes scanning the crowd. "Haruhi!" He called out.

The guards honed in on the girl their employers were waiting for, quickly glancing at a reference photo to make sure they had the right girl before they pulled her through the perimeter.

"What are you guys doing here?" she asked.

"We had a photo shoot at Osaka Castle this morning. Anyway, we haven't had lunch yet so we thought we grab you for a bite," Hikaru said, opening the car door.

"Haruhi!" Kimi was struggling to push her way through the crowd. The twins looked at her questioningly.

"My cousin," Haruhi said with a little grimace.

One look at the girl's star-struck expression and the twins were all evil grins. "Don't you dare," Haruhi muttered under her breath. They motioned to the guard to let her pass.

"Haruhi, you didn't tell us you had such an adorable cousin," Kaoru draped himself over Kimi's shoulder. The girl was positively melting into the sidewalk. He slid his arms off the girl and sauntered languidly towards Haruhi, slipped his fingers through hers and pulled her into the limo behind him. Kimi blinked uncertain as to what he just happened. Hikaru smirked and gestured for her to get in the car.

The back of the limo had two seats facing each other. Kaoru was in the corner with Haruhi pulled up tightly next to him. Kimi's choices were to sit next to Haruhi or to sit across from her, hoping Hikaru would prefer the more empty side. She sat across. But Hikaru slid in on the other side of Haru. The guards closed the car door behind them and the car moved off. Even through the rolled up windows, they could hear the squealing girls left behind at the school.

Haruhi hoped the twins would drop their excessive facades, but with Kimi in the car, they stayed in full-on Host mode. Even towards Haruhi. "How long are you guys in town?" she asked trying to restore normalcy.

"We're shooting here today and tomorrow, but we'll stay through the weekend," Kaoru said invitingly.

"You know, the job offer is still open," Hikaru said, brushing Haruhi's hair back over her ear seductively. "With mom's new line out, we'll be shooting on location all over Japan."

"And I'm supposed to commute from Osaka?" Haruhi said immune to the flirting.

"Of course not. You can stay in our hotel room with us..." Hikaru breathed into her ear.

"We always get the big bed and we don't mind sharing..." Kaoru ran his fingers lightly over Haruhi's jaw, turning her face to his.

"That's enough!" She slapped Kaoru's hand away.

"Ow!" he said, cradling his hand against his chest.
"Are you hurt, Kaoru?" Hikaru said, leaning across Haruhi, his head resting on her chest as he massaged his brother's hand.

"The pain is indescribable," Kaoru said melodramatically.

"That's because it doesn't really hurt," Haruhi said, noticing her cousin's wide-eyed stare. "Now cut it out you two, she's starting to take you seriously!"

Kaoru immediately jumped across to sit next to Kimi. "That's because she's sensitive and caring. She would never hurt us, would you?"

"Never," she promised in a small voice.

Kaoru's abrupt movement had dropped Hikaru's head onto Haruhi's lap where he had made himself comfortable. "Why can't you be that kind?" He looked up with his sad golden eyes.

"Because I'm engaged!" she said, pushing him onto the floor.

"Then break it," he said flippantly. "He's too boring for you anyway. You need someone who will keep your life interesting."

"I'm tired of interesting. I want stable for a while. I want to be the one being taken care of for a change."

"You know we'd take care of you, Haru," Kaoru said seriously.

"What? Both of you at the same time?"

"In parallel ... in serial ... we're flexible," Hikaru grinned.

"I really didn't need that visual," Haruhi said under her breath. "And maybe," she said a little louder, "just maybe when I'm done with stable, I want to be the wild one in the pair."

"You?" the twins howled with laughter. "Your idea of wild is mixing ice cream toppings. And ... picking fights with Okinawan townies. And getting thrown off cliffs. None of which you should do, by the way."

"Bite me," Haruhi said.

"Just say where," Hikaru answered her.

The shocked look on her cousin's face made Haruhi think it was time to change the topic. "Kimi, you better call your mom so she doesn't freak out when we don't get home on time."

Kimi reached down into her book bag to get the phone. The boys leaned over and glanced in, noticing her teen magazines. Hikaru kept his head down so Kimi couldn't see but Haruhi caught the devilish grin he flashed Kaoru.

"Tell your cousin not to be so mean to my poor brother," Kaoru said twirling Kimi's hair through his fingers.

"You really should be nicer to them," Kimi agreed. "You don't want them to go away."

Hikaru let out a long suffering sigh. "You'll have to excuse Haruhi. We've kept her in ignorance. Could you enlighten her?" He guided her hand down to her book bag. She took out the first magazine and opened it - to the mini poster centerfold no less - and handed it across. There were
the twins in the middle of a green field. Hikaru was seated on a stump, legs apart, elbows on his knees, leaning forward so his unbuttoned shirt fell open showing his chest. Kaoru leaned on his brother, arm draped across Hikaru's shoulder. Both of them had smoldering sexy looks in their eyes. Haruhi glanced up just as Kimi handed her another magazine. A full-page ad. The brothers were standing back to back slightly offset and turned so you saw three quarters of Kaoru, eyes cast to one side and one quarter of Hikaru as he looked back over his shoulder. Unfortunately for the twins, what crossed Haruhi's mind is that it was an effective ad. You could see the front of the one outfit and the back of the other as they leaned on each other in their skin-tight jeans and slightly loose dress shirts. Every girl would want to be with them, which meant that every guy would want to be them. The caption in the bottom corner read

Our style.

Our time.

Hitachiin

"Huh," said Haruhi handing it back. "I guess that would explain the girls at school. Both schools, actually."

"You sure you don't want to come to our photo shoot tomorrow?" Hikaru challenged her.

"I have school tomorrow."

Kaoru turned Kimi's face to his. "Can't you convince her to bring you?"

"No!" Haruhi's eyes went wide in alarm. "No, no, no, no! If she skips school her mom will blame me and kick me out!"

"Really?" The twins became intensely interested. Oh dear God, what had she done?

Hikaru pulled out his phone. "Hey boss, Haru says if we get her kicked out of her aunt's house, she'll move back to Tokyo with us."

"I did not say that! I said nothing of the kind!"

Through the phone she could hear Tamaki's enthusiastic reply. "Good work men! We'll be on the next train down. I'll let Honey and Mori know that Operation: Get Haruhi Kicked Out is a go."

"OK, but if we get her kicked out before you guys even get down here she's staying with us."

"I did not agree to any of this."

"Don't worry about your cousin," Kaoru purred to Kimi. "She could always come live with us, then you could come visit her."

"No fair enlisting my cousin!"

They got to the restaurant. Kimi vanished into the back, ostensibly to use the restroom but even before she left the room her phone was out and they could hear her. "Oh my god oh my god oh my god they took us to this super fancy restaurant. We going eat together and I might even get to go visit their house!"

"She really is an idiot. Are you sure you're related?" Kaoru said.

"Yes… Well… I don't know, maybe?" Haruhi answered. "Why are you guys doing this anyway?"
"They've been treating you badly. Now, since she wants to see us again and you control whether or not she gets to, she'll have to be nice to you."

"Where would you come up with an idea like that?"

"Duh? We've been hanging around Kyoya for three years."

"Who, speaking of which, is going to be down here tomorrow. He's not going to like any of this."

"Want to bet?" Hikaru offered her his cell phone.

She dialed Kyoya's number. "What do you want Hikaru?" came Kyoya's voice.

"It's me," Haruhi said. "They're down here in Osaka and they're trying to get me kicked out of my aunt's house so I have no place to live."

"Well," he said in a mild tone, "it's not the optimal solution. But your aunt has proven completely unwilling to negotiate so I will consider the twins' plan as the next viable alternative."

"They said I have to live with them if they get me kicked out before the rest of you get down here."

"That part is not going to happen."

~oOo~

When they got back home, Hikaru reached into the girl's book bag, pulled out her magazine and a pen and signed his name next to Kaoru's picture. Kaoru signed his name next to Hikaru's picture then handed it to the girl who clutched it to her chest, star-struck. Hikaru leaned over and softly said "Remember to tell your mother that Haruhi's friends want you to skip school tomorrow and come to their modeling shoot. Ask her if she's ok with it." The girl scooted out of the car.

"You guys are jerks," Haruhi shook her head.

"Haru," Kaoru said quietly, "we really do want what's best for you, and this place isn't it."

~oOo~

Stupidly, the girl did ask her mom if it would be OK for them to skip school the next day. And predictably, her mom hit the roof. "What friends of Haruhi's suggested this?"

"The annoying redheads who came to my apartment," Haruhi said desperately trying to stop her cousin from showing her mom the picture of the twins with their shirts unbuttoned and eyes that said "come here, I want to seduce you."

Her aunt took a deep breath. "Haruhi, honey, I know you think these boys are your friends but trust me, your true friends would never encourage you to skip class. They wouldn't be making a spectacle of you by pulling you into a darkened car in front of your entire school and they absolutely wouldn't be making free in your bedroom."

"They didn't..." Haruhi protested.

"Even if they didn't," her aunt interrupted her, "they made it look like it. And the appearance is enough to destroy your reputation. Respectable girls will not want to be your friends and respectable boys will not want to go out with you. I know you have lived without any chaperoning for a long time so you do not understand that these wild boys are hurting you. But they are. I think it would be better if you never see them again."
"I know you have lived without any chaperoning for a long time so you do not understand that these wild boys are hurting you. But they are. I think it would be better if you never see them again."

She sat through probably the most uncomfortable dinner of her life. Her aunt glowered at her the whole time. Her cousin Kimi pouted the whole time because she wasn't going to be allowed to skip school. Her uncle was angry because Kimi was pouting. And her cousin the accountant very wisely said nothing and just stared at his plate. Once dinner was over and the kitchen cleaned up, the girls were sent to their room. To head off future disasters, Haruhi texted all the guys and told them not to come, that she was grounded. She barely hit the send button when she heard a sharp tap at the window. Followed by another one. Followed about a minute later with an actual knock on the window. The second story window. Haruhi and Kimi looked at each other, got up from their beds and opened the curtains. An uncommonly handsome face with violet-blue eyes and golden hair greeted her. "What are you doing here?" she hissed looking back over her shoulder, hoping nobody else in the house knew what was going on.

"We're here to rescue you fair princess," Tamaki said.

"Haru-chaaaaaan!" a sing-song voice called out from the street below.

"Honey?"

"Jump! Takashi will catch you!"

"I'm not jumping out the window."

"Have it your way," Tamaki said climbing into the room. He was immediately followed by the twins. He looked around. "Kind of small room for us all to have a party in though."

"We're not having a party! I'm grounded!"

Kimi was on the edge of hyperventilating. Both of the Hitachiin brothers and, impossibly, a boy who was even more handsome were standing in her room. She made a small noise drawing the boys' attention. "And who is this fair princess?" Tamaki asked.

"That's the cousin we talked about," Kaoru said.

"You told your friends about me?" Kimi said in a dreamy voice.

Yeah, Haruhi thought. But you probably don't want to know what they told their friends about you.

At that moment, Kimi's parents burst in the room. "What is going in here?"

"We're taking Haruhi clubbing," Kaoru said as Hikaru swept her off her feet and threw her out the window.

"Got her!" Honey called out from below.

The twins scrambled out the window as Tamaki turned back to the young girl. "And you my princess, would you like to come too?" Tamaki asked looking into Kimi's eyes. She nodded avidly but her mother grabbed her arm and pulled her back. "Alas then, it must be another time." Tamaki
swung over the window sill and slid down the ladder.

Mori set Haruhi on the ground in front of a limo where Kyoya was waiting. He gave her an unhurried but brief kiss. "I suppose time is of the essence?"

"Oh yeah," Kaoru came said as he came running up. "They're pretty mad."

"Then we should be off." Kyoya pulled Haruhi into the car behind him. The others all piled in.

Tamaki, the last out, found her cousin the accountant standing between him and the car. "Can I help you with something?" the cousin asked in an intimidating voice.

Tamaki grabbed his shoulder like an old friend. "No, we got this. But thanks for offering." He slipped around the cousin jumped in the car and slammed the door. The limo roared off into the night.

"Do we call the police?" The uncle asked.

"Mooooommomm!" Kimi wailed. "Why didn't you let me go?"

~oOo~

In the car, Haruhi glared at the Hosts. "What do you think you're doing?"

"We're taking you clubbing," Hikaru answered with a weren't-you-listening kind of look.

"I am not going clubbing," Haruhi insisted.

"Not dressed like that, you're not," Kaoru tossed her a little red dress. Emphasis on the word 'little.'

"Besides, who goes clubbing on a Thursday night?" She was still trying to get out of it.

"The club would be more fun on a Friday, but taking you to coffee on a school night just won't piss them off as badly," Hikaru said.

"There is a pretty good coffee place around here," she said, looking at Mori.

"Clubbing," the twins said.

"And they make this amazing cake."

"Cake?" Honey said.

"They slice up fresh strawberries with whipped cream and put it between the layers, but they don't do it until you order it, so everything is fresh and not mushy." Honey's eyes lit up.

"But I wanted to see Haruhi in the red dress!" protested Tamaki.

"I wanted to watch her put on the red dress," Hikaru added. Kaoru elbowed him in the ribs. "What?" Hikaru added. "You were all thinking it."

~oOo~

The waitress dropped off seven coffees - ranging from Heart of Darkness roasts for Kyoya and Mori to a salted caramel mocha froth that looked like it had more whipped cream than coffee for Honey - and seven strawberry cream cakes at the table. Honey's disappeared almost instantly. As
he flagged down the waitress for another piece, Haruhi looked at the guys. "Ok, I have to ask how you knew which room was mine."

" Seriously, Haru?" Hikaru rolled his eyes. "You have a cell and Kao has a computer."

"And we knew you were in the room because you sent out a text," Kaoru added.

"She did?" Tamaki checked his phone. "Huh? What'd you get grounded for?"

"Because you guys are bad influence."

"What did we do?" Kaoru asked.

"You mean apart from abducting me from my room to go clubbing on a school night?"

"Hey, you were grounded before we did that," and Hikaru protested.

"Wait, are you serious?" Kaoru put in. "You got grounded for going out to lunch with us?"

"No, I was grounded because my cousin told her parents she was going to blow off her last two final exams to hang out with you at a photo shoot."

"So how was it your fault that your cousin is an idiot?" Hikaru asked.

"At least finals are done tomorrow and since we're leaving on the trip next week, we can take you back to Tokyo," Tamaki said.

Haruhi shook her head. "I have makeup exams next week."

"You cannot possibly have failed your exams Haruhi," Kyoya said. "You haven't even finished taking them yet."

"My teachers didn't feel comfortable giving me a semester grade based on one week's worth of work, so they're making me take the midterm make ups."

"That's not fair!" Tamaki said.

"A lot of things in life aren't fair Tamaki," Haruhi said tiredly.

Silence filled the table for half a minute until Honey sighed at his empty plate and said, "like how this is the last piece of cake they had." He looked sideways across the table at the twins' plates.

"How much did you want to see Haruhi in that dress?" He said reaching over and grabbing the plates and sliding them towards himself. "They really did work very hard to make sure that dress was right, Haru-chan. It would be a shame if they didn't get to see it on you," he said with his fork poised above Hikaru's cake. When Haruhi cocked a cynical eyebrow at him, he pulled out his biggest, saddest Bambi eyes. "Fine," Haruhi snapped. "Go get the dress."

Even as fast as the twins teleported to the car and back, Hikaru's cake was gone before they returned with the dress and shoes. Haruhi snatched the dress out of their hands and headed for the restroom. Her tone of irritation was still infinitely preferable to what had been in her voice only moments before.

"Kyo-chan..." Honey said, putting his fork down leaving Kaoru's cake untouched.

"Yeah, I heard it." The resignation in her voice bordering on defeat when she said the world was unfair. All of Kyoya's timelines suddenly compressed.
Haruhi walked out of the ladies' room in the tight little red dress. All the guys stopped and stared.

"Mitsukuni," Mori said, "we're going clubbing tonight after all."

~oOo~

It was pushing one by the time they brought her back to her aunt's house. "What are you all doing?" Haruhi asked as they all got out of the car.

"You left the house without a key, Haru. We're making sure you can get in before we leave," Hikaru said.

"And if I can't?"

"Then we will take you to the hotel with us," Kyoya said. "You will sleep in my room and I will sleep in Tamaki's."

"You going to complain about the bed all night again?" Tamaki asked.

"It's a Suoh owned hotel. I'm sure your beds are adequate," Kyoya baited him.

"Adequate? I'll have you know..." But they got to the door before Kyoya found out what he was supposed to know.

The house lights were on but the door was locked. Haruhi knocked softly. Her uncle answered. He glared at her with palpable fury. "Get. In. This. House." He pulled her in and slammed the door in the boys' faces. Through the door, they could hear him berating her, allowing her to say only "yes sir" and "no sir" when he paused for breath. He pointedly marched her upstairs.

"Do you think we overdid it?" Kaoru said.

"It doesn't matter," Kyoya said. "We're not leaving her here when we go."

"You've figured it out then?" Tamaki asked.

"Not entirely, but I'm working on it." Kyoya opened the door and walked into the Inoue's house. After a brief astonished glance around the circle, they all followed him.

Haruhi's uncle came downstairs to shut off the lights and lock the door only to find six teenage boys sitting in his living room like they owned the place. "How dare you come into my house? Get out!" he said.

Kyoya nodded curtly. "Once we have spoken with you, we will leave. Firstly: there is no point in punishing Miss Fujioka for this evening. She neither instigated nor encouraged it. She has simply learned over time that once we set our minds to a course of action, there is little hope of changing it. Secondly: your treatment Miss Fujioka is unacceptable. In the last two months this lady has had a personal relationship ripped from her, has lost her last parent and been made an orphan, has been forced to vacate her home, had to be the chief - and to be honest - only mourner for her father, in the midst of which she was forced to take a series of grueling final exams, for which incidentally she still achieved the top grades in her class, then was immediately and without warning brought down here so she could duplicate the feat only this time with classes which she had not taken, upon the conclusion of which she is asked to take another set of exams to soothe the insecurities of a group of mediocre teachers. And through it all she has been treated with condescending distain by every member of this household."
"Is that how she described it?" Her uncle seethed.

"She has far too much class to complain about something so petty. I have other sources of information. But I doubt anyone here could have shown even one tenth the grace with which she has handled this. I will not see her subjected to repeated tests until she breaks under the strain. So when the next round of pointless exams is done, we will take her back to Tokyo with us and while she is away on her trip you may reevaluate her proper status in this household or relinquish custody to those who better appreciate her merits."

"You think a teenage boy can come into a grown man's home and dictate to him? After tonight, she is not going on the trip."

Kyoya cocked his head. "You work for a small pharmaceutical company. Their largest customers are the Ootori owned hospitals here in Japan."

The older man didn't flinch. Either he was a better negotiator than they gave him credit for or her didn't know.

"Inoue-san, allow me to introduce Kyoya Ootori," Mori said. "Majority stockholder these days?"

Kyoya shrugged non-committally, but then continued, "Your company also recently applied for a loan from Suoh Financials to upgrade their existing facilities, without which they become non-competitive and quite likely will be shut down by regulatory agencies."

"Inoue-san, may I introduce Tamaki Suoh?" Mori said. "Sole heir to the Suoh Group."

"Your wife works for an electronics components manufacturer. A small, but nonetheless important client is the Ootori Medical Technology division. A somewhat more important client buys 20% of their product for use in a hand-held gaming device. A product for which, by the way, there are multiple suppliers. That client is of course Perspective 180, owned and run by the Hitachiin family."

"Inoue-san, allow me to introduce Kaoru and Hikaru Hitachiin," Mori said.

Kyoya's voice took on a conversational tone. "It is possible that not all of us will be able to implement our threats, but are you really willing to bet that none of us can?"

"You lecture me on compassion but you'd destroy two companies and unemploy hundreds of people so that girl can go on vacation?"

"I doubt we'd have to take it that far," Kyoya said pleasantly. "I'm sure both companies would choose survival and profitability over the continued employment of a mid-level manager." He gave it a minute to sink in. "But if you were to give her a chance, if you were to see her as she is - an intelligent, kind, caring girl struggling through a very difficult time in her life and if you could find your way to show at least the compassion and empathy a normal person might show a complete stranger, then it would certainly be in Haruhi's best interest that you remain as you are: a financially stable, securely employed, reasonably prosperous middle class family. Now if you'll excuse me," Kyoya pulled out his phone as though he had lost interest in the conversation, "It appears one of my stocks has hit its target price and initiated an automatic sell order. I must contact the brokerage and let them know what to do with the funds."
Chapter 17

~oOo~

Back in the car, the twins high-fived each other. "That was awesome!"

"That was impressive," Honey agreed.

"That was disturbing," Tamaki said. "Would you really ruin that family to keep Haruhi with us?"

"Are you saying you wouldn't?" Kyoya responded.

"Uh, yeah Boss. You were all for Operation: Get Haruhi kicked out."

"That's different," Tamaki said. "That was her family choosing to walk away from her..."

"With a lot of encouragement," Kaoru muttered.

"...not being forced to, threatened into it."

"All I have done so far is require them to treat Haruhi better. I will not sit by while she gets punished for something she did not do."

Tamaki choked on the frustration of trying to express something he instinctively knew was wrong but could not put into words until the Hitachiin limousine pulled up in front of the Suoh owned hotel. "Has it occurred to you that maybe they think they are doing what is best for Haruhi? That you are using our power and position to force them into doing something they believe is wrong? How does that make us any different from my grandmother? Would you really destroy those people to get what you want?"

"I'd destroy a hundred people to protect someone I cared about."

"Then maybe I should count myself lucky I'm not one of the people you care about."

Kyoya gave him a very cold look but said nothing as he got out of the car and went into the hotel. Tamaki looked at the other hosts, who looked back at him with equanimity. "Tama-chan," Honey said carefully, "when you're not so angry, remind us to give you a list of the people Kyo-chan has fended off for you."

"What are you talking about?" Tamaki said.

"Um... Ouran Academy is one of the most elite, exclusive, and let's face it, snobbish schools in the country," Kaoru said. "And when you first came here, you were..." He looked at his brother for help.

"A bastard hafu with a head full of really annoying stereotypes about what it meant to be Japanese," Hikaru supplied.

"Yeah, that. You're popular now, but nobody would ever have given you the time of day if Kyoya hadn't made it clear that anybody that came after you would answer to him," Kaoru finished.

"Did you ever wonder why Princess Ayanokoji never came after Haruhi or the Host Club after you publicly threw her out?" Mori asked.
"The Club had considerable social clout by then," Honey said. "But she still could have caused a lot of trouble for us."

"He shut down Renge's film when it started to make you look bad, he stopped that school newspaper article when they were targeting you, the list goes on and on. But you get the idea," Kaoru said.

"Personally," Mori said, "I suspect the reason Yoshio Ootori approves of Haruhi is because for all the years Kyoya has spent defending his friends, she is the first one of his friends to stand up and defend him."

~~

Kyoya laid back on his bed. He loved his friend's idealism, but sometimes he wished Tamaki would have a face-to-face with reality. Kyoya had tried less drastic tactics. The day after Haruhi had left, he had called Rei Inoue.

"Mrs. Inoue? I am Kyoya Ootori. I am Miss Fujioka's fiancé. I wish to speak to you about her circumstances."

"Fiancé? Since when? My brother never mentioned it to me. You did not present yourself to me at the funeral. Surely my niece was not disrespectful enough to become engaged during her period of mourning?"

"I assure you Mrs. Inoue, Fujioka-san gave his permission and asked me to take care of her. In fact, the purpose of this call is to honor my promise to him."

"How old are you?"

Kyoya hated it when people judged him based on his age. "I am 18."

"And do you think at 18 that you are mature enough to take care of a 17-year-old?"

Frankly, he did. But out loud he said "I appreciate your concerns Mrs. Inoue. But I am certain that a mutually acceptable guardian can be found."

"And I am not acceptable?"

"It is your location that is a problem Madame. As you must know, Haruhi attends Ouran Academy, one of the most prestigious schools in Japan. Graduating from there at the top of her class virtually guarantees her acceptance into any university in Japan, and quite a few elsewhere in the world. Likely at a full scholarship that would include living expenses. Surely a sensible woman such as yourself sees the advantages in that. In fact, Ranka sacrificed a great deal in order that his daughter might continue there."

"'Ranka?' 'Ranka?' I think it's very clear that my brother Ryoji was not just eccentric as the family had assumed but emotionally disturbed. And it is to our great shame that we did not see it in time to rescue his daughter from that environment. However, water under the bridge, all we can do now is see to it that his daughter can spend her last year of high school in a normal household with a normal family leading a normal life. In the long run, that experience will serve her better than a piece of paper from a fancy school. And if she is as bright as you say, she can still get into the colleges on her own merits. And as to your other concerns, I AM her legal guardian, I don't need to be acceptable to you."
Kyoya had called Inoue-san every morning that week hoping that persistence might break down doors where persuasive arguments had failed. All it was doing was frustrating both of them, but Kyoya was not going to be the one to give up first. Fuyumi shook her head when he vented his irritation. "I can call her if you want," Fuyumi said, "but she seems pretty set on this. I'm beginning to wonder if Ranka didn't become a gay transvestite just to get her out of his life. Hmm. Maybe Haruhi should threaten that. She's already got the wardrobe."

*The eat-shit-and-die look Kyoya threw at her would have scared the hell out of her if she hadn't been laughing so hard.*

~oOo~

The next morning, Haruhi debated what was worse: skipping breakfast and being hungry during her exams; or going down to breakfast, getting yelled at, losing her appetite and still going hungry during exams plus having her head in a weird place. She sighed. They could just yell at her after school.

"Haruhi-san," Kimi said in a smug, derogatory tone, still miffed that she didn't get to go last night, "mom is holding breakfast for you."

So much for choices. She went down to a meal of natto and rice and instant coffee. The coffee at least made her smile. Figuring her aunt would have the most to say, she sat next to Kimi and across from her cousin the accountant to keep her distance from the parental units. She mumbled her thanks and began to eat, hoping to finish as quickly as possible.

"Young lady," her uncle began. So much for a fast exit. She stopped eating and looked at him. "As long as you are in this house, there must be certain rules. I would have thought they would be self-evident; but given your upbringing, apparently they are not. You will have a curfew of 9:30 on school nights unless it is a special occasion; 10:30 on other nights until you have settled in. School work takes precedence over running around with your friends. If your aunt expresses reservations about your companions, you will take that to heart. Your aunt and I will discuss the matter this evening and come up with a full and coherent list of rules for you. If you can abide by these, then we will begin afresh."

Her aunt and Kimi looked disappointed that Haruhi was not going to be punished for last night. "That said," her uncle continued, "who were those boys last night?"

"Just my friends from Tokyo," Haruhi said, trying to keep them from getting in trouble.

"Their names?"

Haruhi paused. Kimi knew who the Hitachiins were, so anonymity was not really possible. "The tall blond in the room last night was Tamaki Suoh."

"And what does his father do?" her uncle asked.

"He is president and CEO of the Suoh Group."

Her cousin the accountant sat bolt upright. "You mean Suoh Financial?"

Haruhi gave a noncommittal nod. "Investment and commercial banking is their primary focus, but the Group owns several other businesses as well, like private schools and hotels and other things they've acquired mostly from loans that defaulted but that they thought they could run effectively."

"The twins are Hikaru and Kaoru Hitachiin. Their father founded and runs a software company."

~oOo~
Their mother is the fashion designer Yahuza Hitachiin. Since those were the only ones her uncle saw up close, she hoped that would be enough to mollify him.

"And the others?" No such luck.

"The two outside the window were Mitsukuni Haninozuka and Takashi Morinozuka. The first is from a very old noble family. Like 500 year old nobility. Their primary wealth comes from land their family has held since the Edo period - I can't tell you how many thousands of acres they own around Japan. Including 10 blocks of downtown Tokyo. As a business, they train special forces and elite combat units. The second is his cousin. His family runs a private security agency. Much like the Swiss guards, they've never been bought, so their services are in very high demand."

"And the scary one?"

"That would be Kyoya Ootori. His family owns the Ootori Group."

Her uncle pursed his lips. So those boys were who they said they were. Haruhi misunderstood the gesture. "Look, I know they are headstrong and disruptive but they can also be very caring and protective. And annoying as it may be, if they act like they are the kings of the world that's because that pretty much is what they are."

~oOo~

After the girls left for school, the accountant looked at his parents. "Do you know who those people are?"

"We were listening, same as you," his father said.

"No, do you know who those people are? The Suoh Group alone accounts for nearly 8% of Japan's GNP. The Ootori Group controls nearly 30% of medical care and research in this country. And while it would be difficult to find a history book that didn't mention the Haninozuka, her weird characterization that they are somehow living on past glories... uh-uh. That family is full of kingmakers. Even now. Those people can make our lives or break them on a whim. I'm sorry mother, if they want Haruhi, we should give her to them."

Rei Inoue slapped her son. "I will not sell a family member for any price."

~oOo~

Kyoya awoke the next morning still a little disappointed that Haruhi's uncle had answered the door. The thought of taking her to the hotel had appealed to him. He would never embarrass her by publicly taking her into his room in front of their friends, but he figured he could manage 20 or 30 minutes alone with her at least. The whole evening the Hosts hadn't left them alone for more than five minutes. That'd only shared the one brief kiss. Funny thing, they had only been together a little over two months. He never thought he'd have her at all. And yet every morning he woke with an emptiness in his chest. This last week had been hell. Reading and rereading her emails that carefully didn't say anything. Reading and rereading the reports from her security team, even though Tachibana assured him there was nothing in there worth reading. At least he had the foresight to book two bedroom hotel suites for their entire trip. She would have her own room, but they would at least be able to share an hour or so in the evenings or in the mornings before the others invaded.

Kyoya rolled over in bed. He'd see her this afternoon, after she finished that pointless test. The ache in his chest eased just a little.
He phoned room service to send up breakfast, got up, splashed water on his face and threw on some clothes. Then he popped open his laptop. He moved the money from Stanley back into the OHC account at Suoh. He'd have to be careful with his bookkeeping; moving funds between his personal accounts and the Host Club investment pool could make the taxes a nightmare. But OHC didn't have the connections to get into the IPO and Kyoya needed to grow their funds before London. Then he looked at his British biotech. There it was again. Every ten days, at exactly 2:15 pm (GMT), someone bought a block of stock. There was another bidder going after his target company. The purchase amounts were unusual though, and varied. £41,000 - £43,000. He ran the purchase price for this week through a currency converter. €50,000. He ran the previous one through the exchange rate from two weeks ago. €50,000. Somebody on the continent was looking to expand their international medical holdings. My, my, he thought, adjusting his glasses. This suddenly had the potential to be fun.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. The waiter bearing the breakfast tray entered the room followed by a tall blond-haired teenage boy.

"Stalking room service are you?" Kyoya said dryly.

Tamaki shrugged. "Since I know you don't like mornings, I didn't want to disturb you. And since I know you hate all of humanity before 11 a.m., I knew you wouldn't go downstairs for breakfast. So I asked them to notify me when they sent your breakfast tray up."

"And they did."

"Well I do own the hotel."

"And that's not abusing your power?" Kyoya asked, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

Tamaki lifted the cover off the plate. Grilled fish over rice, some puff pastry balls and a couple slices of fresh melon. Tamaki picked up the chopsticks and started eating Kyoya's melon. "That's different," he said between bites. "No one is going to get hurt from what I'm doing."

"You're going to get hurt if you keep annoying me."

"I'm trying to make your life better...hm...ok, maybe not so different." He picked up the puff pastry ball and eyed it suspiciously. "What are you going to do if you ever wake up next to her?"

"Only hate 99% of humanity."

"Oh my god, these cheese puffs are good!" Tamaki polished off the first one and started on the second. Kyoya went back to his computer. Tamaki picked up the room phone. "This is Kyoya Ooteri's room. We need another order of the cheese puff things. And some more melon."

"I suppose I'm being billed for it," Kyoya said without looking up.

"Seems only fair. It is your room after all." Tamaki started on the third and final cheese puff. "Just promise me you won't hurt those people out of spite."

"There is no profit in spite."

Which, Tamaki figured, was as close to a concession as he was likely to get. "So what are we doing this afternoon?"

"We? There is no 'we'. Host Club rules. I get the second half of the date to myself."
"Yeah, but last night wasn't a date. Last night we were just hanging out. Besides, if you're sticking around till what, Monday? Tuesday? Whenever she finishes those stupid make up tests, that's five days. So we get to hang out through Sunday afternoon at least."

"You mean the days she actually has free time."

"Poor planning on your part doesn't negate the rules."

Kyoya glared at him. Or at least Tamaki assumed it was a glare, the light was bouncing off Kyoya's glasses again. "Have you really spent the last four years protecting me?"

God damn it, Tamaki could cut through any amount of Kyoya's anger like it was nothing. "Tamaki, you have the most uncanny ability to see right through to person's heart. To their soul. To what they really are, to what they want to be, to what they could be. But in between the core and the surface, there are a lot of things you tend to ignore. Like pride, insecurity, envy, fear. The demons that make us less are also sometimes the demons that drive us."

"So you're saying I'm a clueless idiot."

Kyoya chuckled. He could never remain mad at Tamaki for long. "Yes, you are a clueless idiot. But it's served you surprisingly well. Nobody but you could have ever convinced the twins to leave their private little world, or convinced Honey that his real personality was better than the facade he constructed to please his family, or me that friendships were not a waste of time. Or that a frumpy commoner could be the best thing that ever happened to any of us. Or that someone has been knocking at the door for the last 90 seconds."

"What? Oh." Tamaki opened the door to a waiter with cheese puffs, melon and Kaoru. "So what you're saying is I never did anything to help Mori."

"Mori's the only one of us who ever had his shit together."

"You had your shit together," Kaoru put in, nodding at Kyoya. "It was scary shit, but it was definitely together. What are we talking about, anyway?"

"Cheese puffs," Tamaki answered. "You gotta try these."

"Holy cow, those are good. Hey Hika! Try these," he said to his brother who was walking into the room as the waiter was walking out.

"Whoa! We need to order some more of those."

"Speed dial 3. Just bill it to the room," Tamaki said. "Better make it two orders this time."

"This trout is pretty good too," Hikaru said taking a bite off of Kyoya's plate. "Order me another one of those while you're at it."

"Do I get any of my own breakfast?" Kyoya asked.

"Hey, if you want food, you should order it," Hikaru said. "Anyone want something to drink?"

"Touch my coffee and you're dead, Hitachiin."

"Yeah, yeah. If you were going to kill us, you would've done it a long time ago."

"I'm setting it up to look like an accident," Kyoya said.
Kaoru ordered some more coffee just to be safe. "So what are you working on anyway?" he asked Kyoya.

"Our investment pool was going after a British biotech, but we seem to have another bidder."

"Anybody we should be concerned about?" Tamaki asked.

"Does the name Grand Tonnerre of France ring any bells?"

~oOo~

The downside of being 18, Kyoya reflected, was that no one was going to rent you a Ferrari. No matter what your credit limit was. And since he'd taken the bullet train down with the others, he was stuck using the twins' limousine. He could buy a Ferrari, he supposed. A two seater fast enough to leave the others behind. But then, where could he take her that wouldn't get her in more trouble than he could get her out of?

When school let out, the twins were still at their photo shoot, but the other boys were waiting. So was the uncle. Kimi saw the limo and started making a beeline for it. "Kimi-chan!" her father commanded.

"But dad..." she gestured towards the limo.

"Kimi-chan," he repeated, "get into the car. Haruhi-chan, 10:30."

"Yes sir," Haruhi responded.

"What's at 10:30?" Honey asked.

"My curfew."

"You gotta be kidding us..." Tamaki protested.

They took her to Osaka Castle to watch the end of the twins' shoot and after went on a tour of the castle where Honey and Mori started correcting the mistakes on all the little historical signs. They took her to play laser tag. Rounding a corner, Kyoya grabbed Haruhi, pulled her behind an obstacle, indulging himself in his long denied kiss. He took 237 shots to the back. Mostly from his own team. They took her to an amazing dinner and spent the whole time discussing cheese puffs. They took her on the giant Ferris wheel and watched the city lights spread out before them. "Do you really have to be back by 10:30?"

"I don't want them to hate me."

"We don't want them to hate you either, we just want them to kick you out."

~oOo~
"That's all you're taking?"

Haruhi looked at the small carry-on sitting on the bed in her old apartment next to the open, almost packed suitcase. It was odd; the apartment didn't quite feel like home anymore. Neither did Osaka. Maybe she didn't have a home anymore. The closest she'd come was when all six of the guys had dropped her off at Fuyumi's to spend the night then hung around to watch some old Humphrey Bogart movie called *The Maltese Falcon* that Tamaki assured them was awesome and would totally prepare them for going to San Francisco. It was a good movie but had nothing to do with the city. Still, sitting on the couch, surrounded by the guys while they threw popcorn and insults at each other ... maybe home wasn't a place. Maybe it was people. Hikaru poked at the carry-on like it was distasteful, bringing her back to the present. "Well it's a long flight and I know the seats are small and I didn't want all of my leg room to be taken up by a bag stuffed under the seat in front of me."

The twins rolled their eyes. "Oh Haruhi. That's just a joke on TV and in movies. Real airplane seats aren't like that. Trust us, we've flown a lot."

"And I didn't want to go over my bag limit."

Hikaru looked confused. "There's a bag limit?"

"There is according to the website," Haruhi said. "Look, you guys probably just never noticed. They probably just bill any fees to your credit card. But I don't have unlimited funds so I don't want to pay a bunch of money to bring a bunch of clothes that I'm not even going to wear while I'm there."

Kaoru looked up from his phone. "Huh, she's right. There is one. But it's like ten suitcases. Three before they hit you up for extra fees." He showed her the phone.

"And that's great for you rich bastards in first class..."

"You know the club paid for your ticket, right?"

"You know I can't carry three suitcases by myself, right?"

The twins looked kind of disappointed but sighed their acceptance. "Well OK, but if you're only taking one suitcase then we've got to be very picky about what you bring." They opened up her suitcase and looked in. "Ick, ick, no way, out of here..." With each comment, they picked an item of clothing from her bag, held it between the thumb and forefinger by the fingernails, touching it as little as possible, and dropped it on the floor.

"Hey, I like those," Haruhi said.

"They're hideous," Kaoru said.

"Yeah, but they're comfortable. And you're not the one wearing them."

"Haruhi, you're going to fashion week in Paris, which means everything you wear has to be designer. And since you're going as a guest of Yahuza Hitachiin, 99% of what you wear needs to be
Hitachiin. So unless you're bringing 100 outfits, you don't get any say in this," Hikaru said.

"He's right," Kaoru said. "You'll embarrass our mom."

Haruhi did like their mom quite a bit. She wouldn't want to embarrass her. She scrunched her lips over to one side, wondering if she just lost the argument when the doorbell rung. Reprieve. "But we won't be in Paris the whole time," she said over her shoulder heading for the door. "Don't take anything else out of my bag."

Haruhi opened the door to a pretty girl on a cell phone. "Are you sure this is the right address? Oh it is. Never made mind."

"Momoka," Haruhi blinked. "What are you doing here?"

"Kyoya asked me to come by and help you pack."

"No need," Hikaru yelled back. "We got it."

"Oh please," Momoka said, brushing into the apartment, "What would guys know about packing a girl for a trip?"

"Considering we're fashion designers and we're going to fashion week?" Kaoru said. "Probably more than you do."

Momoka walked into the bedroom and began fingering through the suitcase. "Is there a single comfortable thing in here?"

"Thank you," Haruhi said picking up one of her sweaters off the floor.

"But not that one," Momoka said. "They're totally right about that one." She went though the suitcase a little more thoroughly, pulling out a couple other items, but none of the things the twins had put in there. Then she started going through Haruhi's closet and drawers, touching the stuff less and less as she went. "You really don't have anything, do you? Hm. Well, nothing for it then, we'll just have to go shopping."

The look on the twins' faces went from annoyance to adoration. Haruhi's face on the other hand went the other way. "I appreciate all the help, but I really need to do this on a budget."

"Not a problem," Momoka said holding out a thin piece of plastic between two fingers. "Kyoya gave me his credit card."

"Really?" the twins said eagerly snatching the card from Momoka's hand.

"Except the first time we try to use, they're going to notice that none of us are Kyoya Ootori." Haruhi felt obliged to rain on their parade.

The twins' devilish grin's became even wider as they handed her a little black card with the platinum stripe and platinum letters engraved with the name Haruhi Fujioka.

"How did he get a credit card in my name?"

"It's his account," Momoka said. "He can put anybody's name on it he wants to."

~oOo~

They took Haruhi to a mall she didn't even know existed, one where all the stores seemed
abnormally clean and had very few items on display. Instinctively, she knew that everything in there was very, very expensive. The other three didn't notice. Or perhaps they didn't care because they were spending Kyoya's money.

"OK, first things first. Paris won't exactly be warm, but London and San Francisco will be really freaking cold. You need a coat," Momoka said.

"I have a coat."

"Yeah, I'm not sure a homeless person would wear that coat Haru," Kaoru said.

They bought her a sleek black trenchcoat, a cashmere scarf and leather gloves; then onto shoes with Italian names, five handbags. "I can only carry one at a time, you know!" Haruhi protested.

"Oh come on, Haruhi-chan," Momoka chided. "Nobody carries the same purse two days in a row."

"Damned rich people," Haruhi muttered under her breath.

The Momoka stopped dead in front of a window filled with satin and silk and little bits of lace. "Go have a coffee, guys," she said.

"What? Why?" Kaoru said.

"She doesn't need any of that!" Hikaru added.

"Every girl needs this," Momoka said dragging Haruhi into the store.

"No one's gonna see it!" Hikaru insisted.

"That depends entirely on who's luckier, you or Kyoya."

After a truly mortifying thirty minutes, the shop girl ran off to run the card. "You don't like them?" Momoka asked.

"They're lovely," Haruhi said. "They're just, you know, roughly the same price as a BMW."

Finally they moved on to some really comfy loungewear for the late evenings, which the twins couldn't object to because their mother didn't design loungewear. And then added on the most amazing, soft, silky... "Who the hell makes dry clean only socks?" Haruhi demanded.

~oOo~

She'd never seen anything like it. First class didn't have seats, it had little 7 ft. X 3 ft. apartments. There was ample closet space for her small carry-on, the seats reclined all the way into full length beds. She and Kyoya had the pair of seats in the middle, with the twins in front of them and Honey and Mori behind. Tamaki had the single across the aisle next to Haruhi. Surrounded by the club as she was, she thought noise might be a problem but when she slumped down below the walls around her seat, by some miracle of sound engineering, the background noise almost completely ceased. Luxurious but even so... looking at Kyoya she said, "it's kind of a lonely way to travel, isn't it?"

Kyoya smiled and pushed a button. The wall between their seats disappeared into the floor and her three-foot wide space became a shared six-foot wide space.

She had a meal with Kyoya that made her doubt everything she'd ever heard about airplane food, played some video games with the twins in their cube, and poured over tourist maps of London with Tamaki, Honey and Mori in the first class lounge before her adrenaline ran out. She half
apologetically informed Kyoya she was going to take a short nap, laid her seat back and was asleep before the fight attendant made it back with a blanket. As hard and fast as she went down, she wasn't getting up soon. Kyoya ran his fingers through her hair and was rewarded with a contented sigh. He hoped she'd let her hair grow out; secretly, he'd always loved it when Tamaki and the twins put the long wigs on her for cosplay. He went back to his research or at least tried. Every few minutes, he'd find himself looking back over at her.

"You shouldn't let her sleep so long," Tamaki said, gently sitting down on the edge of her bed so as not to disturb her. "The jet lag will be awful."

Kyoya smiled down at her. "She's so stressed, she could probably sleep the clock round and not get caught up."

Tamaki was not watching Haruhi but Kyoya, the way his face softened when he looked down at her. "You really love her."

"Yes."

"Have you told her?"

"She's not ready to hear it."

"So what happens at the end of summer, when you leave for America for college?"

"I'm not going," Kyoya said simply.

Tamaki's eyes widened. "What do you mean you're not going?"

"When Ranka asked me to take care of Haruhi, I spent the whole night thinking about what that really meant. The next day I sent letters to both Harvard and Stanford asking for deferred admission, telling them a family member had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and familial obligations would prevent me from starting in the fall. I'll take classes at Ouran University in the meantime."

"But your plan..."

Kyoya shrugged with an indifference he didn't quite feel. "Both of my brothers went to Ouran. I won't lose ground against them by going there. In a perverse way, it might even help. My father values loyalty very highly. It's one of the things that convinced him he could do business with your father. Real business, not the superficial stuff everyone knows about."

Tamaki blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," Kyoya said. "The night of the Ouran Fair last year, our fathers had a meeting. I have no idea what about, but after that my father did an unusual background check on yours. Not business. Not financial. Personal. Your father's first marriage was a disaster, but he didn't cast off his wife until she betrayed him. Then he found your mother and remained faithful to her all these years despite a myriad of obstacles. Then I found a file on my father's desk detailing the Suoh board of directors, who voted for what and what the voting blocks were. Who was willing to betray their business partners and under what circumstances. Interesting reading. But I couldn't put it together until this last weekend. Do these names look familiar to you?" He turned his laptop to Tamaki.

"Three of them are board members at Suoh. I don't recognize the others."
"This is the board of directors of Grand Tonnerre." Kyoya pause for a moment to let it sink in. "Now, I understand why a multi-national bank like Suoh would want a European financier on their board. And I understand why an international holding company like Grand Tonnerre would want someone familiar with the Asian markets on their board. But doesn't a three out of nine overlap the strike you as an awfully high percentage?"

Tamaki nodded. "Unhealthily high, but why would your father care?"

"Three and a half years ago, Suoh financed a new, very expensive, state of the art facility for the Ootori Group. Then two years ago, our pharmaceutical division had a new drug ready for release when the regulatory agencies decided they wanted additional testing. The delay reduced our projected income. Then there was that earthquake which not only knocked out the power plant that supplied one of our northern hospitals, but also knocked out the backup generators so when the emergency batteries on certain pieces of equipment died, so did eleven patients. Though it's hard to see how an earthquake constitutes hospital negligence, we settled out of court anyway to avoid the bad publicity."

"And between the lowered income and the unexpected expenses, Ootori renegotiated its terms with Suoh." Tamaki ran his fingers through his hair. "You think one of these three traded that confidential information for a place on the Tonnerre board."

"Either that, or your grandmother offered up Ootori Medical on a silver platter as incentive to the merger. She did after all try to marry you off to Eclair Tonnerre."

"Which never made sense. If she hates me for being only half Japanese, why would she marry me to someone who had no Japanese blood at all?"

"It gets you out of Japan so she doesn't have to be reminded of your existence," Kyoya said mildly. He'd meant it as a joke but it hit a little too close to home. "Sorry," he said more seriously. "It doubles the size of the Suoh Group, which makes for one hell of a legacy. And given how her only child and grandchild feel about her, she probably feels that's all she has left at this point."

"We have tried to get along with her, to make peace with her."

"And if she can't be charmed by you, she can't be charmed at all. But she is nonetheless a remarkable woman. She loved and married a wildly impractical man and served as his anchor to the possible until she was widowed in her 30s and was left with a teenage son and controlling interest in one of the world's largest banks. In an age when being a professional woman meant being a teacher or a nurse, taking control of a bank was unthinkable, but the board was more interested in running the bank for their benefit than the company's or the Suoh family's, so she did the unthinkable. And was successful at it. She then arranged a marriage for her son that should also have been quite successful but somehow fell apart spectacularly. You failed as a pawn when didn't hate your father for being an absentee parent or your mother for giving you up, nor did you close the deal with Grand Tonnerre. All of which taught her not to trust anyone. Her life has not gone the way she planned it."

"You admire her?" Tamaki was surprised.

"I admire her business acumen," Kyoya replied. "But that said, she hurt my best friend and threatened the woman I love. If I find out she was behind the attempted takeover of Ootori Medical, she'd better hope that time or our fathers take her down before I'm in a position to."

Tamaki glanced down, noticing Kyoya had put a protective hand on the sleeping Haruhi. She made a small noise and shifted, then shifted again ending up with her head on Kyoya's lap then settled
down again. His eyes went wide and he froze in shock. The cold, calculating Kyoya was completely undone by the sleeping girl. Tamaki smiled. "Credit where it's due, if my grandmother hadn't been so horrible, I would never have come to Japan and we would never have known each other. There would be no Host Club, and you would never have met Haruhi."

Kyoya considered. "Your father would have married your mother and you would have been raised in Japan. We would have known each other our whole lives." He left unspoken that even if they had still met Haruhi, she probably would have been Tamaki's, and not Kyoya's. His hand slipped up to Haruhi's, to finger the rings on her left hand.

"Why do you keep doing that? Afraid she'll take them off?"

"Yes."

Tamaki blinked. He'd expected some clever prevarication or deflection, not an honest admission of fear. Tamaki's glib denial died on his lips as he realized the longer he and Haruhi had been apart, the less danger she was in from his grandmother. At some point in the not too distant future, there would be no threat and Kyoya's rationale for why he was her only viable protection would evaporate. And if Haruhi ended it, Kyoya would have rearranged his life for nothing. Tamaki's guilt was made the worse because secretly a small part of him still hoped that something would change and he'd be able to get Haruhi back. "But your luck isn't that strong," Tamaki said. "You'll be looking at that horrible little ring for ages."

Kyoya looked at the ¥500 ring. The gold plating was almost completely worn off leaving it a peculiar shade like yellowed steel. "You don't think she'll let me replace it with a real one?"

"Not a chance in hell," Tamaki replied. "The diamond is a symbol of your love, but it's also a symbol of your wealth and prestige and influence, none of which she's really comfortable with. A major jewelry store opened after hours just so you could buy it. You spent more on that ring than her father earned in a year. Whereas the entire value of that crappy piece of costume jewelry rests in what the two of you share. Your only hope of getting rid of that thing is if she wears it so much the white metal breaks."

"Hey, what are you guys..." Hikaru turned around in his seat up on his knees looking down on the seats behind him. He stopped dead when he saw Haruhi asleep with her head on Kyoya's lap.

"We were just discussing Kyoya's abysmal taste in jewelry," Tamaki said.

"Yeah, that diamond's pretty boring. Why didn't you get her something bigger or fancier?"

"See? That's what I said," Tamaki chimed in.

As Hikaru's eyes lingered on the sleeping girl, a flash of jealousy flitted across his features. "You should wake her up otherwise the jet lag will be wicked."

"They are your friends, he reminded himself. They are her friends. They are trying to look out for her best interest. But goddammit, couldn't they just let him have this? Just an hour or two with her curled up asleep on his lap? "Tell you what," Kyoya said, deliberately baiting them, "if she wakes up at four in the morning, I'll find a way to entertain her until she gets tired again."

Both Tamaki and Hikaru stiffened with a sharp intake of breath but were rescued by Kaoru popping up. "What are you kidding me? You sleep so soundly that we could take you out of your bed, dress you, haul you in a car to a commoners' mall and leave you on a bench and you wouldn't wake up. There's no way you're going to wake up just because she does."
"Especially since were all in separate rooms," Hikaru added.

"Didn't I tell you?" Tamaki flipped back to his delighted demeanor. "I've got great news everyone! I've upgraded our hotel room. Instead of all those little suites we were in, I had us all put into a five bedroom suite so we can be together the whole time."

"What?" Kyoya asked.

Ignoring Kyoya's murderous look, Tamaki enthused to the twins "It's one of those where they combine a two bedroom suite and a three bedroom suite by opening a private passage, but since you two we're going to share a room anyway and Honey and Mori said they didn't mind, it means we can be together the whole time!"

"Fine but when we get to Paris, we are definitely staying in the George V," Kyoya fumed.

"Why?"

"Because they don't have five bedroom suites!" Kyoya growled.

~oOo~
"The night was dark, the jet lag was bad. The London fog closed in around me, its gray shades allowing me to elude my sinister pursuers."

"You haven't eluded anybody boss, we can still see the light from your cell phone screen," Hikaru yelled out.

"And would you stop dictating into your memos like some bad rip off of Dashiell Hammett?" Kaoru added.

Tamaki's narration continued. "Ignorant voices call out to me from the mists, clearly unaware that Dashiell Hammett wrote about American detectives; a land we will not see for days to come yet."

"Haruhi, could you talk sense to him? Because you're just about the only one who can."

"The dame slithered up to me, slinky as a serpent and about as trustworthy. I could see it in her eyes that she meant to derail me. Those beautiful, exotic eyes that marked her as trouble. But with legs like those, she could lead me down the garden path any day."

"So I'm a snake?" Haruhi sounded miffed.

"And since when do snakes have legs?" Kaoru added.

"Evidently the fools had never opened a book on evolution. Fortunately, there was a science museum around the corner and if I led the svelte woman there, the others would be inexorably drawn in. Passing by an alcove, I grabbed the dame as she passed and pressed her into the wall."

Haruhi eeped as he did exactly as he described.

"What do you say, brown eyes? I know the underground here. We can give them the slip for hours."

Haruhi's eyes widened as Kyoya appeared behind Tamaki. "The hand of death closed over his shoulder," Kyoya narrated. "And a sinister voice from behind said 'make one more move on her, and you'll find out whether this shape pressed against your back is a roll of change or the business end of a Walther.'"

"She was a trap, but then the beautiful ones always are. Fortunately, I knew that Walthers are predominately used by characters in a different genre."

Kyoya leaned in. "But my genre is at least a British thing, your genre is an American thing. Save it for San Francisco."

Tamaki blinked. "Good point. Oh hey! An all night cafe. Let's find out what commoners in Britain eat."

The guys had been right about Haruhi suffering jet lag but they were wrong in assuming Kyoya would never know. He directed his bodyguards to notify him if she left the room for any reason. He hoped it didn't qualify as stalking, but he knew those three idiots would try something, if only
to prove they could. As the rest of the hosts moved off, Kyoya pulled Haruhi aside. "I am sorry about the jet lag. I should not have let you sleep so long on the plane."

"Kyoya, I am so tired I could drop where I stand," she answered him. "But for some reason, I woke up and I just cannot seem to go back to sleep."

"Probably because it's noon in Japan," he answered her. "But if you couldn't sleep, why didn't you come get me instead of them?" He held his breath afraid of the answer.

"I didn't go get anyone. I was laying there awake and I heard a noise from the living room so I went out and there was Honey-san eating a cake. A whole cake. You know, Chika-chan might be right about him being a space alien. At any rate, we started talking. Then the twins came out and joined us. Then Tamaki suggested that if we went for a walk, the fresh air might help us sleep. Mori-san came out just as we were putting on our coats. We left you a note."

"Next time come get me," he tried not to let his exasperation show. He looked over towards the restaurant where the others were headed. "Shall we?"

"And wake the evil-low blood pressure lord?" She hesitated. "I left my wallet in the hotel."

"Why did I get you a credit card if you aren't going to use it?"

"Yeah, about that. It's probably maxed out. The twins and Momoka kind of went overboard buying clothes for me. But don't worry, I haven't taken the tags off so I can return them once we get back to Japan."

She so didn't get it. Kyoya shook his head. "Do you like the clothes? Do you look good in them?"

"That's not the point. They were five times more expensive than they needed to be Kyoya."

"Hikaru!" he called out into the darkness. "When we get back to the hotel, would you rip the tags off of all of Haruhi's new clothes so she can't return them?"

"You got it," the twins answered back.

~oOo~

Haruhi only ordered one egg and toast but her energy was still bottoming out before she finished even those. Well, the treatment for stress and exhaustion were pretty simple. "I'm taking her back to the hotel."

The teenage boys all looked down at their enormous half eaten breakfasts. "Oh… ok. We'll just..."

"Don't be silly. Finish your meals."

"Is it safe for you to walk back alone?" Tamaki said.

"We're not alone, we're together," Kyoya pointed out. "And we have security besides."

Mori made a noise indicating his lack of respect for Kyoya's security teams' judgement.

"It's ok. I'm done anyway," Hikaru said, tossing his napkin onto the table.

Kyoya gritted his teeth. Of all the possible chaperones, Hikaru was the one he wanted the least. Not just because with Tamaki out of the picture, Hikaru was his stiffest competition, but also because Kyoya genuinely considered Hikaru a friend and didn't want to hurt his friend by flaunting
Haruhi in front of him. They got back to the hotel suite and she promptly sat down on the couch in the office.

The suite consisted of two suites joined by a set by of double doors. The smaller of the two had a kitchen, dining area and a sitting area immediately dubbed "the office" by the guys. A short hall led to two bedrooms, the first for Haruhi, the second, Kyoya's. The larger suite boasted a much larger sitting room dubbed "the living room." In place of the kitchen was a glassed-in greenhouse filled with flowers and a door onto a verandah. The three bedrooms came off the living room.

"You all right Haruhi?" Hikaru said.

"Yeah, I'll get up in a minute." It was plain to all three that she was lying to herself.

Kyoya sat down next to her and pulled her over to lean on him. "Why aren't you tired?" she asked irritably.

Kyoya chuckled. "I am. But I'm used to keeping irregular hours. When the Asian markets close, the European ones open. The American markets overlap the European ones and when you throw in before market and after hours trading, they run right up to the Asian markets again. So I adjust my schedule according to whatever stock I'm watching."

"That's too much work." She snuggled a little closer, took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

An ill-concealed jealousy flashed across Hikaru's face. "She'd sleep better in her own bed." Kyoya started to snap back that he could take care of her but stopped himself. This was a man who'd bought her a cell phone and was still paying the monthly bills on it; who'd bought her noise canceling headphones so she didn't have to be afraid in a storm. Kyoya may have bought clothes for her, but this man specifically designed them for her. While Kyoya had paid for this trip and a large portion of her bills including much of her father's funeral and several other bills she didn't even know she had, he couldn't fault Hikaru for not also trying to take care of her. They each loved her for much the same reasons; the she only saw them as individuals, separate from their overshadowing backgrounds. If God had been kinder, He would have made her twins. But if she had been twins, she almost certainly would have wound up with the Hitachiins. So perhaps God did Kyoya a favor when He only made one of her. He bent down and kissed Haruhi on the top of her head making obeisance to a deity he only half believed in. "You can find another."

"The Hell I can."

Kyoya paused. Why did it have to be that the price of his happiness was everyone else's? "Are you free this afternoon?"

"Why?" Hikaru narrowed his eyes.

"Because Tamaki and are not, but you're right, if she sleeps all day, she'll never shake the jet lag. I'll cover it."

"Go to Hell." By which Hikaru meant that yes, he and his brother would take Haruhi out, and no, Kyoya wouldn't pay a brass farthing of it. If the British even still used farthings. Which they didn't. It was good to have friends you understood that well.

The next day they almost didn't make it out of the hotel though. Tamaki was practically vibrating with excitement and the entertainment value was just too high as he put on his business suit, put on his earpiece and tested it, put on his trench coat, put on his sunglasses...

"No dark glasses!" Kyoya said.
"But they wear them in the movies!" Tamaki protested.

"This is not a movie."

"But Tachibana wears them."

Kyoya was at a loss. Fortunately Honey rescued him. "Tama-chan, Tachibana-san wears them to blend into a crowd. You're far too handsome to ever blend in and trying would only make you stand out more."

"I suppose that's true." Tamaki reluctantly took off the glasses.

"I'm sorry," Haruhi said, "why are you doing this again?"

"Because we need an attorney here in London to handle contracts for us and if the financial world finds out that OHC Investments is comprised of a group of teenagers, they will refuse to do business with us. As long as they think the principal is an eccentric recluse who sends his assistants in to do the face-to-faces, no one will care. They'll only question as far his estimated net worth."

Tamaki gave one last wistful look at the sunglasses then left for the appointment. The twins seeing their entertainment was done went to get their coats when Tamaki's voice came back over Kyoya's feed. "The overcast London sky was a dismal gray, scarcely brighter than the eerie fog the night before…"

"Tamaki!" Kyoya shouted.

The fun wasn't over after all. The twins sat back down. Tamaki kept up his noir detective narration the entire way to his meeting driving Kyoya's blood pressure up and up and up.

"You know," Honey said sagely, "if Kyo-chan is going to keep doing business with Tama-chan, we're going to need to teach him some meditation techniques."

"Yeah," Mori agreed.

"The cast bronze plaque on the building indicated these guys were planning on hanging around for a while and said they had money and weren't afraid to flaunt it. I wipe the grime of the London streets from my shoes before placing my hand on the polished brass knob. I pause at the entry. The receptionist is a doll."

"Tamaki! I mean it! Don't you dare!"

Tamaki's voice dropped into a completely professional tone. "Good afternoon, I'm Tamaki Suoh from OHC Investments here on behalf of Mr K.O., Principal Investor. I have an appointment with Mr. Harris."

~oOo~

When Tamaki left the office, one of the other attorneys approached Harris. "So what is this? Take a teenager to work day?"

"Believe it or not, that's probably out chief contact with our new client."

"Is that a joke?"

"No doubt. But on whom? The boy is Tamaki Suoh, sole heir to the Suoh banking empire."
"You're telling me the client is Yuzuro Suoh?"

"Technically the client is K.O. But it won't surprise me to learn that Suoh's money is in the investment pool."

"K.O.? Never heard of him."

"That's just it. No one has. A year ago, Grand Tonnerre of France was staging a hostile takeover of some Japanese medical conglomerate. It looked like they had it sewn up but at the last minute this K.O. stepped out of the shadows said he owned controlling interest in the company and was not interested in pursuing that course of action. At first, everybody thought this was some crackpot but then he produced the votes and killed the merger. The thing is that nobody – not even the chairman of the board – knew that this man owned the company. And since then, he's done it to three other companies. But none of them had a noticeable buyup, so this man must have been acquiring shares for years. People are starting to wonder what else he owns. Hell, even Forbes can't figure out who he is."

~oOo~

Once it became apparent that Tamaki was going to play the interviews straight, Kyoya's blood pressure subsided and the twins got bored. They grabbed Haruhi and pulled her out the door. They ended up in someplace called upper Sloane Street. "Seriously? More clothes shopping?"

"Kao forgot to pack pajamas," Hikaru said.

"You bought five suitcases each!" Haruhi squawked. "How could you possibly have forgotten anything?"

The twins looked at each other. "Commoners are so cute."

They walked into the store and paused at the entrance to get their bearings. Haruhi heard a little gasp and turned to see a teenaged girl nudging another teenaged girl in the side and pointing. Haruhi held onto a fragile hope for a second then ... nope. Definitely pointing at the twins. "Come on," she said. "Let's just get your stuff and get out of here."

As they wandered through the store, the girls followed in their wake. Inexorably drawn in by the psychic bond shared by all teenage girls except Haruhi, the two girls became four, became six, became a flock, all twittering like little birds. Finally, a daring bird ventured forward. "Can I help you find something?" she said breathlessly.

Hikaru looked seductively at her over his shoulder. All the girls' phones came out, instantly flipped to camera. "My brother left his pajamas in Japan and refuses to sleep in the nude."

Kaoru looked demurely at his brother's shoes. "I told you Hikaru, it's too cold here at night."

The girls all caught their breath. Hikaru wrapped his arms around Kaoru and looked deeply into his eyes. "What if I promised to keep you warm?"

"Eeeexxxtttt!!"

No matter where I'm the world they went, the soundtrack was always the same. Haruhi grabbed a fuzzy set of pjs in light blue. "Here. These should keep you warm."

"Oh no," the daring little bird said. "The green ones will bring out the brilliance of his gold eyes." She held up a pair in deep forest green.
"No it won't," Haruhi said. "His eyes will be closed. He'll be asleep."

Hikaru took the green pjs from the girl, lightly brushing her hands as he did so. "Or maybe I'll wear these and make my brother sleep naked beside me..."

The squeals reached a pitch that hurt the ears of dogs all over Knightsbridge.

Kaoru rolled his eyes, but not at his brother. "Honesty Haru ... blue?"

She looked at the pjs in her hands. "I just thought, you know, it's the color of the Ouran uniform. You'd look good in it," Haruhi mumbled.

The brothers snapped their heads around. Suddenly, they both wanted the blue pair. But as Hikaru's hands were full, it was Kaoru who leaned over and took them from her. "It is a nice shade," he said. "I want them."

She was so surprised by the unusual sincerity in his voice, she never even heard the cell phone camera click.

~oOo~

The three of them got back to the hotel only a few minutes before Tamaki did. "Did you have a pleasant outing?" Kyoya asked.

"We went shopping," Haruhi answered in the same tone of voice most people use to mention going to the dentist.

"Did you get anything?" Kyoya asked pleasantly.

"She didn't want anything," Hikaru said.

"I don't have any room in my suitcase!" Haruhi said, wondering why she had to explain not spending money.

"We could get you a new suitcase," Tamaki said walking in the door.

"Would you guys stop trying to buy me? I'm not for sale!" Haruhi snapped at them.

"We know," Mori said. "You're probably the only person on the planet that isn't."

"Tell you what Haruhi," Tamaki said. "When you're a rich and famous attorney we promise not to buy you anything."

"In fact, we'll show up in sponge off of you," Hikaru added.

Never, thought Kyoya to himself. I will spoil you and give you the world, if you let me. Of course, so would the others, but Kyoya couldn't even bring himself to speak the lie aloud. "We should adjourn to dinner," he said before anyone could wring a promise from him he didn't intend to keep.

"And who's paying for that?" Haruhi asked testily.

"Why you are," Kyoya answered smoothly. He turned his laptop around. "The first uniform coat you ever wore as a host just sold for ¥400,000 yen. Not a bad profit for a piece of used clothing, I'd say."

~oOo~
After dinner they returned to the hotel and all agreed to call it a night. Honey and Mori were teaching martial arts classes in the morning, the twins were supposed to be meeting with some department store buyers although it was almost certainly going to turn into a publicity appearance, and Kyoya had some contracts to sign.

They entered the suite through the living room. As the five guys headed towards their rooms, Haruhi found herself wishing for a thunderstorm so she could ask them to stay with her. She just didn't want to be alone. But she couldn't bring herself to say anything and they disappeared. She passed through the double doors into the office with Kyoya heading for their rooms. But she stopped at the couch and sat down. Kyoya looked at her quizzically and sat down next to her. "Haruhi...?"

She didn't know how to answer the question he was about to ask so she kissed him to prevent him from asking it. He raised his eyebrows and surprise but returned the kiss. And the next one. By the third one he was taking the lead. After another, she slumped against him. He leaned her back into the corner of the couch and kissed her again. Then she stiffened and froze.

"Are you alright?" Kyoya asked carefully.

She swallowed hard. "Do you ... remember the last time we were like this?"

He hated it when women did that - asked an open-ended question to which they wanted a very specific answer. And heaven help you if you guessed wrong. The last time... the night he proposed and they were together by the fire when they'd almost ... or on the couch? "Your father walked in on us."

She nodded ever so slightly. He'd guessed right. And then she waited ... for what? A shared memory? Something, anything about her father? Some way to have him back even for just a minute? "He sent you to your room then in his first breath accused me of being a worthless rich boy only interested in his own pleasure then in his next breath asked me to take care of you."

"He knew when he asked what he was asking."

"Yes."

"Did you know?"

"Yes."

"And you said yes."

"I went home and thought about it first. I don't like making promises I can't keep."

"He asked me the next day if you'd walked." She blinked several times trying to stop a tear from overflowing her eyes.

It was unfair. She broken down the day Ranka died but since then...? She's had to remain composed through the funeral because convention demanded it. She'd remained quiet and sedate while staying with his sister because she didn't want to be a burden. She'd had to pretend to be grateful to that family in Osaka and pleased to be with them when she would have rather been home alone. And now they'd taken her on vacation and she was supposed to be enjoying herself when her heart was still hurting. Even now, even in the worst of her pain and loneliness she had a hard time leaning on others. "It's ok to miss him, Haruhi. It's ok to cry."

When he said that, she shook once and tears began to stream down her face. But still she made no
noise. Kyoya quietly rocked her in his arms and let her cry.

Tamaki came into the room, intending to get a bottle of water from the fridge in the kitchen. He sat down on the chair next to the couch. "What's wrong?" he asked his voice full of concern.

Immediately Haruhi stopped crying and froze again.

"Evidently," Kyoya answered for her, "my kisses are so bad they can reduce a woman to tears."

Haruhi shook again, this time in silent laughter.

~oOo~

In their room, the twins put on their new pajamas. Hikaru eyed Kaoru's blue ones with more than a little envy. Still, for fun, they took a selfie wearing their new pjs and put it online. It would play well with the fan girls, especially with the tag line thanking the charming young ladies who'd helped pick them out. About five minutes later, Kaoru's phone rang. "Kind of a late hour in Japan for dad to be calling." Hikaru glanced over as Kaoru answered the phone. "Hey dad, what's going on?"

"I believe that's my question. I thought Haruhi was dating your friend Kyoya-kun."

"She is."

"Then if this was some sort of publicity stunt, you should have warned your mother."

Kaoru blinked in alarm. "What happened to mom?"

"Are you anywhere near a computer?"

"I can be." He popped open his laptop.

"Google 'Hitachiin,' and bear in mind that your mother had her fashion show in Milan today. What should be coming up are her new designs," his father said drily.

"Ok, what am I looking for?"

"Oh, you'll know when you see it. If it doesn't come up in the first three entries, I'll be stunned."

It wasn't in the first three entries, it was the first three entries. In fact, it was the first six. His mother's press conference came in at number seven. Her new line of clothes didn't start until number eleven. "Oh shit," Hikaru said, leaning over Kao's shoulder.

There it was, the photo of Kaoru taking the pajamas from Haruhi, all of his love for her written on his face while she had that deer in the headlights look, surprised at his sincerity.

"Tell your brother to watch his language," their dad said. "Correct me if I'm wrong... are those the same pajamas you and your brother just posted a selfie in?"

"We'll take it down right now."

"Don't bother. It's already been retweeted fifty times and been picked up by three fan sites. Oh, make that four."

The twins started mentally scrambling for a way out. Fortunately, they were pretty good at it. "We'll go online now and make a statement that the photos have been misinterpreted, that we're
just friends and that we're still looking for that special someone. That usually mollifies the fan
girls."

"Which might have worked except for your mother's press conference."

The twins looked at number seven in the list. "I assume the short version will do?" Kaoru asked.

"Oh yeah," dad said. "But before you click on it, remember that your mother has been doing 60+
hour work weeks for the past month and living on five hours' sleep a night. And she was expecting
to be asked about her bold new designs."

They clicked on the link.

"So what can you tell us about the new Hitachiin Girl?"

Yahuza looked confused. "'Hitachiin Girl'?"

"That's what the media has dubbed the girl in the pictures coming out of London."

Yahuza glanced at her assistant. The man pulled up the image on his pad and handed it to her. She
cought her breath bringing her hand to her mouth. "Oh, did she finally accept him? He's been in
love with her for years."

"Kyoya's going to kill us."

"Screw Kyoya. Haruhi's going to kill us."

~oOo~
If the twins thought the romantic speculation would die down overnight, they were very much mistaken. Night in Europe meant afternoon in America and morning in Japan. The European paparazzi were calling her "the Hitachiin Girl" or "the girl he's loved for years." Some damned American gossip rag figured if the Hitachiin Girl wasn't famous, she was probably a schoolmate. So they ran the photo through facial recognition software then ran it against a hacked student database from Ouran Academy, which the twins were known to attend, and correctly came up with Fujioka, Haruhi; 2nd year; honor student. At least the article about how the twins preferred smart girls made Haruhi look good.

Kaoru tried to limit the damage by posting that there had been a misunderstanding; she was not his girlfriend. She was a very close friend which was why she was shopping with them, but she was in fact dating one of his closest friends so please don't mess this up for them. All that did was get some DJs to dedicate "My Best Friend's Girlfriend" and "Jessie's Girl" to him. And then the fan girl backlash kicked in as to how that horrible girl could ever hurt Kaoru like that (or possibly Hikaru, depending on the website you were on). To their credit, most of the Ouran students wouldn't talk to the media. The Japanese tabloids then took the next step and discovered she was recently orphaned and went to interview her new family. It was with extreme trepidation that the twins clicked on the link to the interview. Kimi, delighted at the attention, wearing a cheap knockoff of a Hitachiin sweater giggled at the twins through the monitor. "OhMyGod they are the sweetest, best looking guys ever - although that blond was really cute too - she hadn't even been down here a week when they came to see her and they met us after school and picked us up in a limo and took us on a double date to this really awesome restaurant and told me how caring and pretty I was and invited me to their house when they get back and signed my magazine and asked me to come to their photo shoot and climbed in our window to take us clubbing but my mom wouldn't let me go," she huffed.

"What about her boyfriend?" The interviewer asked.

"Boyfriend? What boyfriend? She doesn't have a boyfriend, I mean other than the twins."

"So she's dating both at the same time?"

"Well I think they both like her, but it's Hikaru for her, definitely."

"What about this photo of her and Kaoru?" The interviewer showed Kimi the picture.

"That's Hikaru in that photo," Kimi said with certainty. "I should know, they signed a photo for me." She pulled out her magazine where they had signed their names next to each other's photos. Kaoru had even drawn in a little heart next to his name.

Hikaru winced. "Well, so much for the idea that we like smart girls."

Their one saving grace was that Kyoya did not pay much attention to popular culture, so they had a few hours to find another solution.

~oOo~

It was rare that Tachibana requested a face to face meeting and doubly so that he do it on vacation, but Kyoya was not stupid enough to ignore the man's request. Tachibana bowed respectfully.
"Forgive me, Master Kyoya. I have failed you. When planning this trip, as you were bringing all three of your security staff and as Miss Fujioka would generally be in the company of yourself or one of your friends who either have security or are their own security, I thought that one guard would be sufficient for the lady. I did not foresee yesterday's events. If the lady is to remain in the hotel today, I can have somebody flown in from Japan or I can hire a local within a few hours, as is your preference."

Kyoya cocked an eyebrow. "What happened yesterday?"

Tachibana swallowed hard. It never occurred to him that he might be the one breaking it to his employer that the fidelity of his fiancée might be in question. "I do not wish to overstate anything. I would be easier if you saw for yourself." He took out his phone and pulled up the first article on the search.

Kyoya's blood went cold. He turned back and re-queried on his own computer, skimming over the first dozen results. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Tachibana. I will let you know." He pushed his glasses up to hide his eyes. "Haruhi, please come here."

"What's up?"

Kyoya turned the computer to face her. "Know anything about this?"

Her jaw dropped in surprise and her face went red all at the same time. "Kaoru! What the hell...?"

She stormed over to the other side of the suite.

"This is a switch. Usually it's me she's yelling at," Hikaru said gleefully.

"You could be more supportive," Kaoru said, "especially considering how many times I've bailed you out."

"What's all this crap about loving me for years?"

The twins looked at each other guiltily. "Slow news day?" Hikaru said hopefully.

"They got the 'best friend's girlfriend' thing right," Kaoru said as though that helped.

Kyoya came and leaned on the doorframe. The temperature in the room dropped ten degrees. "Retract it," he said.

"You think we didn't try?"

The other three came up attracted by the raised voices. "What's going on?" Tamaki asked.

Kyoya scowled. "These morons told the media that Haruhi is dating Kaoru."

"We didn't tell them any such thing! The media simply decided on their own that Haruhi should be dating Kaoru."

Tamaki glanced back-and-forth between the two. "And why would they do that?"

Kyoya handed him the cell phone with the picture. Tamaki's eyebrows went up. "Ah." He passed the cell phone to Honey who looked at the picture, then passed it to Mori who began reading the articles.

"I am really sorry about this Haruhi," Kaoru said. "But now the media's got ahold of this, there's nothing to do except ride it out."
"And what does that mean?" Haruhi asked suspiciously.

"You wanted to go away quickly? Go out with Kaoru for a couple weeks," Hikaru said.


"Have you ever seen a romance movie?" Kaoru asked. "It's all about how the girl and the guy get together. Once they are together, the story ends. The media loses interest."

"My fiancée has a right to her privacy. She does not have to play your publicly games."

"Yeah," Hikaru said, "but you don't get to make that call. The paparazzi do."

"Haruhi," Kaoru said trying to bypass Kyoya, "Go out with me, have a good time. We'll get dinner, catch a movie or a show. Don't get in a fight, don't make a scene. In a couple weeks they'll move on and you..." He choked a little bit. "...you can go back to Kyoya. If that's what you want."

"Or," Kyoya said, "I can just take Haruhi and disappear. We'll meet back up with you in Paris if this has blown over by then."

"Noooooo," whined Tamaki. "This is our family trip." With four of the seven graduated, maybe their last trip together, though no one wanted to say it. The building animosity backed down a few notches.

"It could be worse," Honey said. "If Hika-chan and Kao-chan were movie stars or rockstars, it would be totally out of control; but since you're just models - I mean you're 'A' list stars in Asia but you're kinda 'B' list in Europe and America."

"That's a rude thing to say," the twins said in unison.

"But since we won't be back in Japan for a couple weeks, we can find a way out of this before it really blows up." Honey chewed on his lip, thinking out loud. "Is this all from the one photo?"

"Yes," the twins said.

"No," Mori said. "There a photo of Kaoru wearing the pajamas Haruhi picked out for him."

"Hey, Hika's wearing the matching set the other girl picked out. No one's making a big deal out of that," Kaoru defended himself.

"The other girl didn't come up at the press conference," Mori said.

The twins supposed they should be grateful all Mori did was read the transcript privately and not play it for the room.

"Wait! You held a press conference?" Haruhi was about to explode.

"WE didn't. Some reporter ambushed mom after her show when she wasn't expecting it and she might ... have ... implied that Kao has a soft spot for you."

Mori gave them a sideways look. If Haruhi watched the press conference, their understatement was likely to get them in even deeper trouble with her. However, he wasn't the type to rat out a friend. He'd let the internet do that. Or not.

"And where would your mother get an idea like that?" Haruhi demanded.
"From reality?" Hikaru answered.

Haruhi looked like she was about to explode. But sometimes, Kyoya thought, her oblivious this could be made to work in his favor. "He cares for you deeply Haruhi. All of us do. There's virtually nothing we wouldn't do for you and I venture to say there's very little you wouldn't do for us. Do you think these kind of bonds form every day? Even I can see the twins are more concerned about how this will affect you than themselves."

Haruhi glared at the twins as she tried to process what Kyoya said. She supposed their friendship was unusually close. And given that the twins' mother was out of the country literally over a third of the year and spent the time when she was in the country managing one of the world's premier fashion houses, she had little time to share with her sons. It would be easy to misinterpret their friendship as something more. No, of course they didn't really love her. They just liked to bait lesser beings, only this time when the lesser being took the bait it had spun out of control.

"Haruhi," Kyoya said softly, "why don't we go out to breakfast ... alone..." he glanced meaningfully at the others, "...and we can decide what to do."

Kaoru couldn't help himself. Suddenly and unexpectedly Haruhi was within his reach and Kyoya was rapidly taking steps to remove her. "Isn't this her decision? Why do you get the deciding vote?" he said.

Kyoya adjusted his glasses so the light bounced off them obscuring his eyes. "You just told my fiancée that she should shamelessly and publicly cheat on me with you in front of the media who are going to run this story in Japan where my family is going to see it. Do you have your coat, Haruhi?"

"Do you honestly think you're going to be able to simply walk out of this hotel room?" Hikaru asked.

"Do you honestly think you'll be able to stop me?" Kyoya responded. He opened the door.

There were six photographers, two reporters and an audio guy holding a sound boom. Kyoya closed the door. The twins gave him a smug 'we-told-you-so' kind of grin.

Kyoya pulled out his cell phone. "Tachibana, Miss Fujioka and I are going out to breakfast. Please clear the hallways and the elevator and have a car waiting for us in five minutes." He returned the I-told-you-so smirk.

The twins each raised a we'll-see eyebrow. By the time Kyoya opened the door five minutes later, the halls were deserted and Tachibana was waiting at an open and empty elevator.

The twins blinked in disbelief. "We have got to find out who trained his security people," Hikaru said.

"We did," Mori said.

~oOo~

Using the kind of logic that only made sense to rich people, Kyoya took Haruhi from one five-star hotel to a different five-star hotel for breakfast. But like the hotel they were staying at, this one was also used to hosting rich and famous people and so at least managed to keep the photographers out of the dining room. And Haruhi had to admit, the full English breakfast buffet was amazing. Eggs served three different ways, thick bacon and sausage, kippers, grilled tomatoes, mushrooms, breads ranging from plain to fried to fancy French pastries, porridge, fresh fruit, an entire table of sweets
and cakes that would have Honey squealing in delight, four kinds of juice, five kinds of tea, three kinds of coffee (plus variants). He watched her as she ate and couldn't help contrast the stress around her eyes and the tension in her shoulders with how relaxed she been getting that massage at the resort - it seemed like a lifetime ago. He brought her on this trip to try and get her away from all of the stress and now those idiot twins had accidentally pushed her right back to the breaking point. He wondered if it was possible to mail order a pair of identical Beelzenef dolls.

Half way through the meal, she put her fork down and without looking up said "I don't know what to do, senpai."

He really wished she would drop the honorific and call him by a more intimate name but now was not the time to have that discussion. "Your choice is actually quite straightforward," he said. "The twins made this mess, you can let them clean it up or you can let me."

"You don't think I can do it myself?"

God, he loved this woman. Even backed into a corner, she still wasn't willing to just give up. "How you get out of it is entirely up to you, but if you think your friends are just going to let you weather this storm alone... no." He signaled to the waitress to refill Haruhi's juice before continuing. "The twins' plan is simple. Break up with me, date one of them, allow the media to follow you, photograph you, and invade your privacy until they either get bored or some other celebrity does something to steal your headlines. My plan is that we make a statement that whatever may have existed between you and the Hitachiins in the past, you are now engaged to me and have no intention of calling it off to pursue an uncertain possibility with one of them. The downside of my plan is that a number of their fans will be angry at you for hurting Kaoru's feelings. The downside of their plan is that a number of their fans will be angry at you for stealing one of them. The irony is there's probably a 50% overlap between the two sets."

The waitress did a double take. "Oh my God, are you the Hitachiin Girl?"

Haruhi winced. They should have had this conversation in Japanese. "No," she said quietly, "I am not the 'Hitachiin Girl.' We are just friends."

The girl at the table next to them turned to look at her. "How could you possibly break Kaoru's heart like that?"

"It was Hikaru's heart," the waitress snapped. "The picture was flipped, or didn't you notice the letters on the poster in the background were all backwards?"

"It was taken in front of a mirror, you stupid twat. I have that exact poster in my room."

Kyoya signaled for the maître d', who sent the waitress back to her station with a stern look and asked the other girl if she would like to be reseated. She did not, of course, but the threat was clear. She quieted down but glared at Kyoya for stealing the girl Kaoru had loved for years. Haruhi and Kyoya switched the conversation to Japanese. "On the bright side," she said, "I know you can't really marry me - I have no money and no connections. You only proposed to protect me from Tamaki's grandmother. It gives you an out."

He didn't want out. If anything, he wanted deeper in. "Be careful what you say," he cautioned her, "even in Japanese. People have phones, they can record it and get it translated." He paused to consider how best to explain it to her. She'd convinced herself that Tamaki didn't really love her – as wrong as it was possible to be. That none of them loved her, could love her, would love her. "Haruhi, what percentage of the population do you think is intelligent? I don't mean somewhat above average or generally bright, I mean truly intelligent."
"I don't know ... 20%?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "I was going to say around 10%, but we'll split the difference at 15%. And of that 15%, how many of those want to use their intellect to actually do something, as opposed to just skate by with an easy life? Maybe half, if the human race is lucky. So 7.5%, but we'll round to 8, because you're an optimist. And of the 8%, how many are actually good people. Kind people. A quarter, maybe a third?"

"That's kind of cynical, don't you think?"

"I live around these people all the time. I have a right to be cynical," he said. "And of that remaining 2-3%, statistically, only half are women. Now, let me be shallow for a minute."

"I think you've already had your minute, but go ahead," she said, amused.

"What percentage of people are truly beautiful? Not 'pretty' or the kind of cute that lasts until your late twenties, but the kind of classical beauty that makes a woman more beautiful at thirty than she was at twenty and as elegant at fifty as she was at thirty. Ten percent? Age is of course a factor. Too young or too old is creepy. At our age you get two years, plus or minus, for a five year age span. True, if I wait till 25, I can make that plus or minus five years but by then, a lot of the good ones are gone, with diminishing availability as time goes on."

"Kyoya, there are seven billion people on the planet. Even your five percent of ten percent of one percent still gives you..." she stopped to do the math in her head, "350,000 women. And even if you insist on someone in the top ten percent financially, which, by the way," she said batting her hand back and forth, "cuts me completely out, that's still 35,000 women who meet your criteria. Not exactly a bare marketplace."

She could follow the conversation, extend the argument and do the numbers on the fly. If he wasn't in love before, he was now.

"And don't you think you're being just a little bit picky?" She looked at him sideways.

He drew himself up. "I have a great deal to offer to a partner, I see no reason why I should settle for a woman who can't offer as much."

"So you actually expect you're going to get all of this?" she teased.

"Well that's why I left off the money. I have it, I know how to make more if I need it, so I can be flexible on that point."

"You're also trying to stop me from breaking up with you for some reason."

Well damn, she saw that. Of course she did. She was going to make one hell of an attorney.

"Let's put it another way," Kyoya said. "Let's say I give in to my parents, and I allow them to choose my spouse and they choose someone who is well off and connected," he said tipping his hands to her in acknowledgement of her contribution. "She is acceptably smart and tolerably good looking, and every morning I wake up and look at her and think but she's still not as bright as Haruhi. She's still not as beautiful as Haruhi. She's still not as compassionate and clever and even-tempered as Haruhi. What's that going to do to my marriage over the course of 10 years?"

The teasing smile froze on her face. For the first time it occurred to her he might be serious. She twisted the ring on her finger, the engagement ring this time. "Kyoya, I..." she didn't know what to say. "... And what happens after ten years of waking thinking she's clever enough but brought me
"How can I look at the most brilliant and sought after attorney in Japan and think you brought anything but merit to the Ootori name? How can I wake to find a Supreme Court Justice in my arms and ever think I married beneath me?"

"Supreme Court Justice? In ten years?"

"Twenty?" he said.

"Try thirty or forty," she said.

"Deal."

"What?"

"We'll give our marriage a thirty or forty year trial period. Although I will be bitterly disappointed if you blow your confirmation hearing."

She gave an exasperated snort. There really was no derailing him, was there?

He leaned forward and in a soft voice said, "Life with me will never be the constant party that it would be with the twins. It will not be the never-ending series of adventures that Tamaki wants to give you. I like those things and indulge in them from time to time, but in between there will be winter evenings by a fire reading a book, good food at restaurants where you can hear your dinner companion speak and theater that does not involve chainsaws."

"Occasional chainsaws?"

"If you insist."

"And here I thought Tamaki was the squeamish one."

"Haruhi," he sighed, "I'm from a family of doctors. I've sat through dinner conversations that would revolt a housefly. And I do like the suspense element, but if I want to watch somebody get disemboweled, I can go down to the hospital and watch one of the surgical residents do it for real," he said, pointedly slicing a sausage in half.

She chuckled despite herself.

"Yesterday, I had a lovely itinerary worked out that the twins blew off because they thought it was boring."

"And also because Kaoru forgot to pack pajamas," Haruhi interjected.

"May I take you today?"

"Is it going to be possible?" she said, thinking about the waitress.

"The teenage crowd will be in school until midafternoon and apart from the media, the adult world won't care about an 18 year old's love life. And if you're not planning on indulging Kaoru's fantasies, it's probably better to not spend the whole day locked in his hotel room with him. With both of them," he amended.

"Let me grab one more of those little cake things... oh, they're all gone." She settled for a fruit topped custard tart and a mini chocolate eclair, Kyoya taking note at every step of the things she
liked.

As they got into the car, Tachibana quietly told his young employer "With the staff I have, we can keep them away from you physically, but I cannot keep them from photographing you from a distance."

"Understood," said Kyoya. But right now, stopping her from "freeing" him was more important than his privacy.

She loved history: Japanese history, world history, all of it. They started with the British Museum. The best thing about seeing it on a weekday morning is that the galleries were nearly deserted, so they could see what they wanted without having to fight crowds or have Haruhi complain that he'd bought some kind of special treatment for them. They only had to dodge the odd group of children on a school trip. They wandered around at random until she stopped abruptly. "That's the Rosetta Stone."

"Yes," Kyoya said.

"No, I mean the actual Rosetta Stone."

"Yes."

"Do you know what they did with that thing?"

"As a matter of fact." Museums were so much more fun when the people you were with appreciated what they were seeing. All these things that for Haruhi only existed in books were suddenly right there in front of her. She stopped in front of every other exhibit to give him an impromptu lecture. He knew over half of it, but her eyes were alight and that's all Kyoya cared about. She gasped when they got to the Japanese rooms, looking at priceless object after priceless object. He paused in front of a suit of armour. "Notice the kumon?" He asked Haruhi.

Her eyes widened and she gasped. "The Haninozuka mon. Does senpai know it's here?"

Kyoya shrugged. "Probably. But they have several at their house and the British Museum does take good care of its artifacts, so no point in arguing ownership." He looked thoughtful. "Haruhi, what is your opinion on art in museums versus private collections?"

"I've never given it much thought. In a private collection, only the owners and their friends get to see them. So I suppose major artifacts with historical significance are better off in museums that have the resources to take care of them and where everybody can enjoy them. But I also know that major museums have boxes and boxes of stuff in the basement that only get brought out for occasional exhibits and sometimes not even then. At least somebody gets to enjoy them in a private collection. How's that for not answering?"

Kyoya smiled. They wandered back downstairs and through a lower gallery. "They have a Greek temple down here," she said, stating the obvious.

"Yes, they do. About a quarter of one, anyway."

"Wait, is that the Parthenon?"

"The better quarter." Haruhi looked at him. "They brought it here in the 19th century. The Greeks keep asking for it back, but their economy's a mess. They really don't have the money to take care of it. And meanwhile much of what was left in place is being destroyed by pollution and weather and vandalism. The marbles are better off here."
"Kind of unfortunate for the Greeks, though."

Kyoya placed his index finger on her chin and turned her face to his. "I don't know, I've always felt that rare and precious things should be in the care of those with the means and desire to do so." He bent down and brushed her lips with his. When she didn't pull back he slid his arms around her and pulled her into a light kiss, aware that in some ways this was their first real kiss; the first time she was consciously exploring her emotions, aware of his. As he felt her hands tentatively move along his back, he deepened the kiss just a little, grateful that this once there were no jealous twins, no Host Club chaperones, simply Haruhi and himself and a herd of little feet.

"Oooooooooooo!"

A third grade class entered the room and immediately dissolved into giggles and Haruhi along with them, even before they ended the kiss. Kyoya glanced at the smirking marble Olympians. "Can't any of you ever intervene on my behalf?"

With as much dignity as he could muster, Kyoya took Haruhi's hand and led her from the room through a sea of little Honey-senpais.

~oOo~

Kyoya pulled out his phone and summoned the car to the main entrance, then the two of them snuck out the back. She squinted when they walked outside; she'd completely lost track of time in the museum. "Hungry?" Kyoya asked.

"I am," she seemed surprised by her answer. "I suppose you have some super fancy restaurant picked out?"

"I have a place picked out, yes."

But it turned out not to be a fancy restaurant. He took her to a little shop where they bought sandwiches and crisps then walked across the street to a park.

"A picnic? Really?"

Kyoya sighed as though disappointed in himself. "Tamaki and Fuyumi keep hauling me off on their commoner dining adventures and I'm starting to like the damned things."

Haruhi tried not to laugh. The sun had come out and made the day comfortably warm for early spring. The chill would set in in a few hours, but for now it was pleasant. They sat and watched the old men flying kites and a group of women chatting amidst a mass of swirling preschoolers. "What are you thinking?" Kyoya asked.

"I guess I was feeling jealous of the kids whose mothers can take them to the park," Haruhi answered wistfully.

Kyoya cocked his head. "What makes you think they are the mothers?"

"Who else would they be?"

"The children are pretty well dressed. I presume they are the nannies."

It was her turn to study him as he surveyed the park goers looking for confirmation of his theory. "Did your mother ever take you to the park?" she asked.
"Hm? No. I was the fourth child. She was done with motherhood by that stage. There was no point in wasting her time on a triple redundancy." Seeing Haruhi's pitying look, he said "It wasn't that bad really. They made sure I had excellent nannies and accomplished preschool tutors."

"Preschool tutors. I guess neither one of us exactly had idyllic childhoods." She shook her head.

"What was wrong with yours? You had a father who adored you and a mother who certainly didn't abandon you by choice."

"It was good, as long as it lasted. But mom died when I was five. After that, dad had to work long hours to make ends meet and I had to take over all of mom's cooking and cleaning chores."

"Why is that, anyway? Your mother was the primary breadwinner, why was she also doing the chores?"

"Dad just wasn't very good at them."

Ranka was intelligent and skilled at other things. He could have become good at them if he'd want to. Rather than speak ill of her much loved father, he deflected "Well, no wife of mine - especially not one who has a career of her own - will ever do housework unless for some odd reason she chooses."

Haruhi's mouth turned up at the corners. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

Kyoya leaned over and whispered softly in her ear, "And if you decide to cook, someone else will do the dishes."

She shuddered in mock pleasure, but before he could follow it up, one of the children began to wail and Haruhi's attention turned away.

_Seriously?_ he thought. _Can't I ever get a break?_

One of the youngsters had been trying to get a kite up but it had come down five times in as many minutes. When the corresponding adult came over to comfort the child, at least they would get to decide nanny or mother. But no, one of the kite flying grandfathers came over. "Did you ever fly kites when you were young?" Haruhi asked.

"When I was _very_ young," Kyoya said. "But on those rare occasions when my father would come out with us, Akito would bring out a kite with razor line and cut my string."

"That's horrible. I assume you made him pay for that."

"I was six years old Haruhi. And to make matters worse, after everyone had gone in, he would apologize to me and say it was an accident but that he was afraid of our father so he couldn't say it out loud. And I was a little afraid of our father myself, so I understood... in hindsight, I pity him. He had figured out, as I had not yet, that it was all a competition for our parents' attention. He had an accomplished older brother, and a charming younger sister. And there in middle school, at the peak of his insecurity, he never found a Tamaki to shift his worldview. Determined to prove he had laser focus, he never join any clubs at all, let alone something as absurd as a host club. So he never made close friends. And he was certainly not fortunate enough to have the most amazing commoner ever born to knock over a vase at exactly the right moment."

"You know, I was going to say with all these people flying kites there must be a kite shop around here someplace but maybe we better skip that," Haruhi said.
"Ask me anyway," Kyoya said.

She picked out a simple £10 nylon kite printed with a pattern from a Tiffany window. Kyoya picked out an elaborate 3-dimensional kite shaped like a dragon for £150.

"Kyoya, how are you going to take that home? You can't put it in your suitcase."

He shrugged. "If I decide to keep it, I'll have it shipped. Or when we're done, we can just name the dragon Shizue and ram it into a tree."

Haruhi squawked at the proposed waste and destruction. In the end, he did neither. One of the children kept staring at it, the way it's wings beat and the tail undulated on the air currents, so Kyoya walked over to him, asked the child to hold the string for him, then wrapped his arm around Haruhi's waist and left the park.

~oOo~

Chapter End Notes

No, I have not forgotten about the media. Nor has Kyoya. More on them in the next chapter. But I have glanced at the gossip rag headlines in the supermarket and flipped around on the web and found that in fact the popular media does not harass supermodels as much as they do actors and musicians. So maybe Haruhi will get lucky.

Also, the order in which they view the exhibits in the British Museum doesn't really make sense, but I figured we're seeing highlights of a couple hours' worth of museum visit and I couldn't resist putting a Haninozuka artifact in the collection.

And for those who think the Elgin Marbles should be returned, bear in mind Kyoya is really talking about Haruhi when he talks about "rare and precious things being in the care of those with the means and desire to do so." Don't hate on him.
The elevator door slid closed behind Kyoya and Haruhi, leaving five guys feeling oddly bereft. "They'll be back," Hikaru said to comfort his brother and the mushrooming Tamaki, "as soon as they realize they can't get through the lobby."

"They'll get through the lobby," Mori said.

The twins looked over at him. "You don't realize what the paparazzi can be like."

"No one will get within 20 feet of them," Mori said.

The twins clearly didn't believe him but Mori declined to elaborate further.

Honey gave them a funny look. "Takashi is right, I'm not impressed by that 'B' team that Kyo-chan assigned to Haru-chan, but Tachibana-san and his group were trained in martial arts by the Haninozuka and in security by the Morinozuka. They're as good as they get. Even Sato-chan and Chika-chan would have a hard time getting past them..."

"Also, I told the MI5 guys we were training yesterday their homework assignment was to keep the reporters away from the new 'Hitachiin Girl' for 24 hours," Mori added.

"When did you do that?" The twins demanded in unison.

"When Kyo-chan handed us his phone," Honey piped up.

Tamaki's mushrooms were overflowing the couch and spreading across the room. "Why does everyone get to follow them except us?"

There was a profound moment of silence in the room.

"Going out to breakfast does sound like a date to me..." said Hikaru.

"Definitely a date," agreed Kaoru.

"You know, Takashi," Honey said, "it wouldn't be a very good homework assignment if no one was there to grade it."

"Hn," agreed Mori.

The lights in the briefing room dimmed ever so slightly, focusing attention on Colonel Robert Miles at the front podium. "Listen up team, we have an unscheduled exercise to test our ability to adapt quickly to situations for which we have no advanced warning. This is a graded exercise and we will be evaluated on it." He flashed an image of a young woman with brown hair and enormous chocolate eyes up on the screen behind him. "This is our principal: 'the Hitachiin Girl' a.k.a. Haruhi Fujioka. Seventeen year old Asian female." He put up the pajama shopping photo. "Approximately 16 hours ago, she was photographed with teen idol Hikaru Hitachiin ..."
"My daughter says that's Kaoru," called a voice from the back of the room.

"Hikaru, possibly Kaoru, Hitachiin," the colonel allowed. "Because she was heretofore unknown, the media has gone into overdrive. They will be everywhere. For the purposes of this simulation, we are to regard the media as potential assassins, their cameras as weapons and our principal as their target." There were scattered chuckles around the room. "If they speak to her directly, that is scored as a kill. Every photo uploaded to the internet counts as a wounding shot. Five wounding shots count as a kill. Potential complication: The principal will likely be found in the company of this man." Col. Miles flicked another image up onto the screen. "Kyoya Ootori, youngest son of Japanese billionaire Yoshio Ootori, and as such he has 24/7 security. Their primary is not your problem. The media can photograph and harass him to their hearts' content. However," he flicked a picture of Team Kyoya up onto the screen.

"Jesus Christ, is that Seizaburo Tachibana?" said one.

"What the hell is he doing guarding a teenager? That man has done high-risk extractions and presidential details," said another.

"Ootori pays better," the colonel said dryly. "Although it's worth noting that Ootori must value his youngest son very highly. Nobody else in the family has this caliber security. Not even himself." He shuffled his papers. "Now, because the best intelligence services go undetected, neither the principle nor the media are to know what we are up to. If we are spotted by anybody, we will be deducted two points for each incident. And we will be deducted five points if we have to make open contact with Tachibana in order to complete the mission."

"So we are starting off with a five point penalty then," one of the men said.

~oOo~

"You sure they're in there?" Tamaki asked in the lobby outside the dining room.

"Well, their cell phones are both in there," Kaoru said. "And it's kind of a pricey restaurant so if they got pickpocketed, Kyoya lost his wallet too."

They surreptitiously leaned around the doorframe. "I don't see them," Tamaki said.

A voice wafted around the corner. "Oh my God, are you the Hitachiin Girl?"

"It hurts that you don't have faith in us," the twins said.

Whitby's eyes darted around the lobby. "Primary located, three hostiles in the lobby." Through his earpiece, he could hear Burke's response. "One more at the window."

"How could you possibly break Kaoru's heart like that?"

People in the dining room began to look up.

"Wait, are we responsible for just the professionals or do we have to deal with every idiot with a smart phone and a YouTube account?"

"It was Hikaru's heart..."

"Shit. Jam the building," the colonel ordered.
"Huh," Kaoru said. "The connection just went dead."

Tachibana tensed when his earpiece went to static. He and his team had military grade equipment; better than most militaries, actually. It never simply failed. He made eye contact with Hotta, who tapped his ear with his index finger exactly once before turning to scan the room for threats. Aijima gave him a questioning frown and sharp nod towards the window where a shadow dropped suddenly from sight. Tachibana unbuttoned his suit coat, just in case.

Burke decided to take the one at the window first; for one thing, he was a clear threat; for another, you were less apt to get in trouble than if you took down a civilian who wasn't actually involved. He quietly came up behind the photographer, wrapped one arm around the man's neck pressing the carotid artery until the man dropped like a stone. After making sure the photographer was unharmed, he did a quick check to make sure the camera had no internet capability then took the memory card, erased the buffer and pulled the batteries for good measure. He'd mail them back tomorrow. "Window clear," he said.

Three in the lobby and just himself, thought Whitby. He needed to even the odds. The reporter and one of the photographers were by a pillar in the lobby, planning their attack. Whitby sidled up to the far side of the pillar back to back with them, turned off his earpiece and said "The duchess and prince made it through the lobby without incident. Are the body doubles in place in case they need to go out later?"

The reporter spun around in time to see the elevator door close on a slender woman in a tailored linen suit. His head whipped back and forth, torn between the celebrity of the moment and royalty, then he and the photographer headed off in the direction of the elevator. It wasn't really the Duchess of Cambridge of course; some poor woman was about to find the media camped outside her hotel room for no reason. But who knew? Maybe she'd get a kick out of it. He switched his earpiece back on. "One left in the lobby."

No matter how well rehearsed, you didn't shut down your own communications unless you really had no option. Tachibana set his ear piece to scan for open channels.

Because the maître d' was still dealing with the problem customer, the pouty waitress headed up to the front of the restaurant to help with the group that just arrived. "Welcome and good morning," she said. "How many in your pa – – ah!" Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

The twins each put a finger to their lips. "Shhh," they said. "That girl over there, she's just a little bit crazy."

"Yeah, I knew she was trouble the minute she started talking," the waitress nodded avidly.

"Is there like a quiet table in the corner where it'd be hard for anyone to see us?" Hikaru asked.

"Preferably one where we could see her coming?" Kaoru added on.
The waitress nodded. "I can even take you in through the kitchen so that girl can't see you pass through the dining room."

"Our fans are the best," the twins both said in the direction of Tamaki but for the waitress's benefit.

Work in the kitchen slowed as five very handsome young men entered. Only four of them made it through. The short blond moved slower and slower as he passed the pastry chef's area and finally he stopped. Mori's hand reached back and grabbed Honey's collar pulling him forward, but not before he somehow acquired a tray and fifteen samples including an entire tres leches cake. It made their exit from the kitchen not entirely stealthy. Though neither Honey nor Mori were the ones the media and fan girls were looking for, there was someone who noticed them. "The schoolmaster is in the house," Burke informed the others.

The static on Tachibana's earpiece abruptly ceased and a clear voice came through. "The schoolmaster is in the house." He quickly scanned the room. The only sight of interest was Morinozuka-san dragging Haninozuka-san and a tray of sweets to a table tucked discreetly into the corner. In and of itself, there was nothing unusual about that but he knew where those two had gone yesterday.

"Then keep sharp people. But the mission is still the same," answered back a voice from the past.

Tachibana gave a sideways smile. "So tell me Miles, what's it feel like being schooled by a 19 year old?"

A hush fell across the line as they realized there was an unauthorized user on the channel.

"Tachibana-san!" The colonel answered genially. "Well damn, I just lost five points. How'd you tap our channel?"

"Stay away from my primary," Tachibana said, ignoring the question.

"Not after your primary."

There was a pause. "My secondary?"

"If you mean the cute little brunette, we're on the same side this time."

"You'll forgive me if I don't find that comforting," Tachibana said dryly.

"Hey, I made you no promises in Jakarta."

"I beg to differ. You promised me a beer if I didn't roll over on you."

"I'll buy you that beer after we get off tonight."

"You'll buy me two. After ten years, there's interest on that debt."

Another voice came on the line. "I hate to break up the reunion colonel, but the first picture is up."

"How did they get around our jamming?" Colonel Miles asked.

"I have no idea sir."

"Physically," Tachibana said. "He walked outside the building to post it when the signal in here
went dead. If your men didn't see him go, they deserve to be schooled by a nineteen year old."

~oOo~

The five hosts clustered in the great court of the museum. "Seriously?" Hikaru said. "London is one of the coolest cities in the planet and he takes her to a building full of carved rocks?"

Three of the five gave him withering looks. "He's like a leaf that doesn't know it's part of a tree," said Mori.

"There are people who like carved rocks, you know," Tamaki added.

"I'm just saying this city has music, theatre..."

"...the Rosetta Stone...

"...the Rosetta Stone..." Hikaru said, echoing Haruhi's exclamation from around the corner.

"Hey, there's a new photo up," Kaoru interjected. They all looked. Haruhi and Kyoya at breakfast, taken right after Haruhi had admitted she didn't know what to do, her eyes downcast and uncertain as Kyoya leaned forward to lay out her options. The caption read "Is this the other man?" The photo was accompanied by the obligatory fan girl commentary.

Luv-4-2: That's what she prefers to Kaoru?

Hot4Hika: She's not in love with him. She's barely even looking at him.

HitchiiFan: I don't see it myself.

SweetK: I dunno. He's kinda cute.

The next fifteen posts should probably have been edited.

"They've started a poll whether she should end up with us or him..."

"It's not a fair poll," Mori said. "It's your fan website. It's a foregone conclusion you'll win."

"Who should the Hitachiin Girl date?" Honey read aloud. "Hikaru, Kaoru, both of them, the other guy."

"Both of them?" Tamaki screeched. "Your fans are as perverted as you are!"

Tachibana was getting a headache. While it should have been helpful to have five MI5 agents in the vicinity, they weren't under his control. And he didn't know them. He vaguely recognized Whitby, but the only one he really knew was Bob Miles who was not physically on site and who, when push came to shove, had left him hanging in Jakarta twelve years ago. Given Miles's mission and the package he was transporting, Tachibana didn't blame him, but it had been damned inconvenient and showed a want of character on Miles's part. Then Miles has gotten married and transferred to domestic security and Tachibana had gone private for much the same reason. They hadn't kept in touch. The short version was that his one-time and possibly still friend had a squad of potentially armed and definitely dangerous men in close proximity to his primary on an unverified mission.

The media kept popping up as well. They were more of a nuisance than a threat but they made
As Kyoya and Haruhi moved through the galleries, the Hosts tiptoed behind, ducking behind artifacts, dropping to their knees to blend into crowds of schoolchildren (except Honey, who didn't need to). As the pair headed towards the stairs, Hikaru started to lag behind. "Coming Hika?" Kaoru said.

"I'll catch up," he said. Answering the others curious looks he nodded towards the restrooms. "Too much coffee this morning."

He didn't go to the restroom of course. He wandered back to the Great Court entry and into the souvenir shop. He wasn't looking at anything. He just wanted to be alone.

When Kyoya had suggested he and Kaoru bring Haruhi to the museum yesterday, they were sure he was setting them up for the Most. Boring. Date. Ever.

Ever.

But she was having a splendid time. Looking at carved rocks.

How did Kyoya know that about her when he and Kao didn't? They even had history class with her. Kyoya'd never had any classes with her.

Ever since Karuizawa, he'd been trying so hard to be more aware of her. Favorite foods, what concerts she liked, which clubs she'd had the most fun at. She hated ruffles and lace so he designed clothes for her that were soft and flowing and feminine without being frilly. She hadn't cut her hair since being outed as a girl. She even wore makeup occasionally; not much - with that flawless skin she didn't need it - just light eye makeup making those stunning brown eyes completely heart stopping. She might say that a person's sex didn't matter but it did to her, at least a little.

Hikaru passed by a shelf of reproduction sculptures. Ranka was dead. No matter what people might think privately, there was nothing to be gained by humiliating a dead man. Everyone knew Haruhi was a girl and surprisingly no one hated her for it. Shizue Suoh's biggest threats had been neutralized. In large part, due to Kyoya's actions.

Underhanded, duplicitous, successful. Very Kyoya.

Haruhi was going to be the first student in years to make it through on the academic scholarship. The school now had a vested interest in her succeeding. They weren't going to pull the scholarship.

Kyoya had made sure she would remain and finish at Ouran.

Shizue could still mess up Haruhi's college scholarship, but would she bother? The Hitachiins weren't old money. As nouveau riche, she wouldn't expect them to be properly selective. There really was no reason anymore for Hikaru to let Kyoya have her without a fight.

Kyoya had known she would love the museum.

He found himself standing in front of a spinning rack draped with keychains. One of them had a
Rosetta Stone fob. He held it in his hand for a moment before taking it to the register. He wasn't sure how he would give it to her without her knowing that he had followed her around the museum, or even if she would understand that this was his promise that if she liked carved rocks, he'd make sure she had all she ever wanted, but he wanted her to have it, just the same.

He clutched the keychain in his fist and went over to the cafe, still not quite ready to rejoin the others. As he sipped his sparkling water, he flipped the miniature stone over and over in his hands when a woman walked up. Her clothes said 'human being,' but her demeanor said 'media.'

"You're one of the Hitachiin brothers."

"Yeah." There didn't seem to be any point in denying it.

"Are you the one in love with that girl?"

Hikaru snorted. There was a guaranteed answer no matter whom she asked it of.

"They're here in the museum today. Are you planning to confront them?"

_Hoping for a video for your tabloid, are you?_ Hikaru thought nastily. But aloud, he said, "Have you ever cared for someone so deeply, you'd rather get your heart broken than risk losing their friendship?" He wasn't entirely sure if he was talking about Kaoru or Haruhi, but the pain was intense enough he wasn't sure it mattered. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go find my friends."

~oOo~

One more picture of the girl and two of the boy made it onto the web. Whitby rubbed his chin in contemplation. Extending professional courtesy wasn't quite the same thing as blowing your cover, right? He walked over to the security guard, pulled out his wallet and flashed his MI5 credentials. "You're the head of security for this floor?" The man's eyes bugged out as Whitby snapped the wallet closed. "I'm not here on official business for the museum but I couldn't help noticing that man over there has a very high-res camera for your average tourist and the photos he's taking aren't quite centered on the art. You might want to check and see if there are any others like him around. I'm starting to suspect he's casing the museum." Ten minutes later, word went out to the security guards and docents that photography was prohibited for the rest of the day and a select group of patrons were politely escorted off the premises.

From the next room over, the hosts heard Haruhi exclaim over some beautiful ivory and gold figurines. Tamaki was seized by panic. "Quick men, we have to stop Kyoya before he can embarrass her. Honey-san: create a distraction to get Haruhi away from Kyoya."

"On it!" Honey saluted and moved towards a crowd of school children.

"Hm. Where can we talk in private?" Tamaki glanced around.

Haruhi felt a tug on her sleeve and look down into the enormous eyes of a first grader. "Amy's shoe came untied. Could you tie it for her?" A little girl asked innocently. She pointed back at a second girl whose green eyes were overflowing with tears of tragedy at her floppy shoe laces.

"Oh, um, OK," Haruhi said and started to move in that direction. Kyoya turned to follow but was prevented when a large hand closed over his mouth and another around his arms and dragged him
backwards into a dark space. As his eyes adjusted to the lack of light he saw the faint outline of the
door and a sliver of light glinting off golden hair and a pair of identical red mops. Mori’s hand
dropped from Kyoya’s mouth. “What are you idiots doing?” Kyoya hissed.

“We're trying to stop you from embarrassing Haruhi,” Tamaki answered.

“Of all the people in this broom closet, I am the one least likely to embarrass her,” Kyoya retorted.

Tamaki ignored the comment. “You mustn’t offer to buy those figurines she liked.”

“Tamaki, this is a museum, not a mall,” Kyoya said.

Mori's deep voice filled the darkness. “Are you saying if she really liked them you wouldn’t try to
get them for her?”

“What a crappy boyfriend you're turning out to be,” the twins chimed in.

“Exactly my point,” Tamaki went on. “She’s used to seeing us buy anything we want, so a
commoner like her might not appreciate difference. And if she asks you and you have to explain
why you can’t, she might be embarrassed by her commoner ignorance.”

Kyoya mulled it over. “This is Haruhi we're talking about. She has never once asked any of us to
buy anything for her.”

Tamaki blinked. “Hm. Good point. Carry on.” They shoved Kyoya out of the broom closet and
slammed the door behind him.

Haruhi looked around for her missing companion, turning just in time to see him appear in front of
a closing door. “Did you just come out of the janitors'...”

“Yes.”

His clipped tone and the way the light was bouncing off his glasses made her think it might be
wiser to not ask why.

Kyoya kept looking at her discreetly. It was easy to forget that Haruhi was a commoner. She’d been
with them so long. She never asked for anything, she never cared that they had money. Indeed, she
seem to find the twins' and Tamaki’s constant excesses tiresome. Maybe he should rethink lunch
and find someplace a little less ostentatious than the five-star restaurant he had picked out. He'd ask
one of the docents. They worked around here, they were bound to know someplace good.

Then there was the other matter. They were idiots of course, Haruhi clearly knew that museums did
not sell their collections but if she really liked something, he knew several art dealers who could
locate virtually anything for him. But would she want to own it? “Haruhi, what is your opinion on
art in museums versus private collections?”

~oOo~

“A commoners' sandwich shop? Kyoya?” Tamaki was genuinely puzzled. Then he gasped in
horror. “Somebody substituted in an evil robot!”

“I don't know about evil,” Honey said. “The robot seems kind of nice.”
"Yeah," Mori agreed. "Let's keep the robot."

"Yay robot! Yay robot!" the twins chanted.

"No, no," Tamaki said. "It could turn dark and evil and dangerous at any moment."

"This is Kyoya," the Kaoru pointed out. "Who would notice?"

"No, milord is right," Hikaru said. "We need to find a way to test the robot."

"My thoughts exactly," Tamaki said, beginning to pace. "But how?"

"Robots short circuit when they get hit by water," Hikaru said. "We could see if that toy store over there has any water balloons."

A winning smile and a pair of sparkling violet-blue eyes meant that the toy store clerk let them fill their water balloons in the store's restroom. They each walked out carrying a shopping bag of balloons, except Honey, who'd found a convenient bakery and was carrying a little white bag full of sweets.

"Now, we don't want to hit Haruhi and since we don't know which side she'll be on, we need to split into teams."

"Right," Hikaru affirmed. "Kao and I will be on one side of the door, you be on the other."

"Yeah," Tamaki said. "I'm not falling for that again."

"Really?" the twins said. "You couldn't fall for it just once more, for old times' sake?"

"Hikaru, you're with me. Kaoru, you're on the other side. And we have to be careful not to hit their lunch either. Commoners can't afford a lot of food, so they get very upset when you waste it."

"You don't think Kyo-chan paid for their lunch?" Honey said.

"He is turning out to be kind of a lame boyfriend," the twins said.

"You really think getting her lunch hit by a balloon is what's going to upset Haruhi?" Mori felt obliged to ask.

"It's for her own protection," Tamaki said dismissively.

Hikaru pulled out a balloon, weighed it in his hand and tossed it up about two feet, catching it easily.

"What are you doing?" Tamaki asked.

"Testing the balance," Hikaru answered. "You said we needed to be careful not to hit Haruhi." He tossed it up about four feet this time.

"Good idea," Tamaki pulled out a balloon of his own.

Hikaru's six foot toss came down on Tamaki's head. "Hey!"

"Oops, my bad."
"You did that on purpose!"

"No, on purpose would've looked like this," Kaoru said throwing a balloon square into Tamaki's chest.

The next 45 seconds looks like three tennis ball launchers gone mad. Honey and Mori serenely looked on, Honey munching on his cake. The balloons were gone; the three were totally soaked; and Kyoya and Haruhi walked by oblivious and unscathed. Thirteen pictures of the twins in their wet shirts (and five of Tamaki) went up on the web.

Final tally for the day: 11 pictures of Haruhi, 8 pictures of Kyoya, 1 video of them both having a picnic and flying kites, 22 pictures of the twins, 1 heart wrenching interview with Hikaru (237 offers by fan girls to console him), 9 pictures of Tamaki, 3 each of Honey and Mori, a new fangirl website dedicated to the Hitachiins and their incredibly gorgeous friends, and 3 beers billed to an MI5 account that would probably never be audited.

~oOo~

Chapter End Notes

I had thought about including the bar scene with the British colonel and Tachibana, but then I thought that the most interesting part would be Tachibana's opinion of his young employer and I don't think he would be indiscreet enough to voice it aloud, even though it's favorable.

Thank you to all those who commented on the story thus far and for the kudos. They make my day.
Chapter 22

~oOo~

Kyoya had considered it to be a successful day. She had enjoyed herself. She had finally come to realize that he wasn't just dating her for form's sake. And there were enough photos taken of the two of them that it should at least partially negate the 'Hitachiin Girl' label. Then, almost as soon as he got back in the hotel room, his cell phone rang. This was a phone call he really did not want to take.

"Ohayō konbanwa, Father. How may I be of service?"

"Kyoya-kun," his father said without preamble, "as you know, I do not generally interfere in the private lives of my sons as long as they do not embarrass the family..."

That was rich. The old man did nothing but try to control their lives.

"... But do you mind telling me why your fiancé's name is being publicly linked to two other men?"

"That has been a misunderstanding in the media, Father. It is being cleared up."

"See that it is. Or I will withdraw my blessing." The old man hung up the phone. No point in wasting courtesies on a lesser family member.

"Shiturei shimasu," Kyoya said to the empty line.

~oOo~

The couch and chairs in the office area of the suite were arranged around a coffee table filled with popcorn, chips, cake and sodas. Hikaru flopped back onto the couch, irritated. "It's that stupid kite flying video."

"What kite flying video?" Tamaki said, handing Kyoya a thick stack of papers newly arrived from the attorney's office.

"Somebody got a video clip of Kyoya and Haruhi flying kites yesterday. At the end of it, Kyoya gives his kite to some little kid who looks like Cinderella must've looked when the fairy godmother gave her a ball gown," Honey said.

Kyoya affected to not hear the conversation as he made notes in his black notebook.

"So?" Tamaki said.

"He's currently polling at 36%," Mori said.

Tamaki glanced back and forth between the fuming Hikaru and the seemingly indifferent Kyoya. "That's still a long way from half."

"The remaining 64% is divided three ways."

The corner of Kyoya's mouth quirked up just a bit.

"Where is she, anyway?" Kaoru asked.
"I sent her to the spa for a facial and massage," Kyoya said.

"How's you get her to accept a present?" Hikaru was curious. It was so hard to get her to accept anything from them.

"Told her it was included in the room price and no one else was going to use it."

"Good thinking," Tamaki nodded. "Commoners can't stand to miss out on free things."

"And why are we here?" Kaoru asked.

"We need to have an investors' meeting," Kyoya said bringing his black notebook over to the conversation pit.

"Bor-ing!" the twins opined. "We're going down to get a massage with Haruhi."

Kyoya sighed. "If we're going to declare this trip as a business expense, we need to conduct some actual business."

"Fine," Hikaru said. "I move we leave Kyoya in charge of the money. Everybody agreed? Good. We're out of here."

Mori moved to block them.

Kyoya tossed a pen and pad of paper in Kaoru's direction. "You can be the Secretary."

Kaoru shot a meaningful look at Kyoya's black notebook that said get into this century, please, and popped open his laptop. Hikaru grabbed the bowl of chips and crunched one loudly, hoping that if he was annoying enough, the Shadow King might let them out early.

"Now then, in order to include Haruhi in this trip, I took all the remaining Host Club funds and put them into the pool. That makes her an investor, albeit at 2/7 of the smallest share."

Tamaki cocked his head at Kyoya. "3/7," he corrected. "If you can assign your part to her, I'm assigning mine."

Honey and Mori looked at each other. "5/7," Honey said.

"Do we even have to say it?" the twins added.

"You not only have to say it, you have to put it in writing," Kyoya slid five papers across the coffee table. They each picked one up as he moved on to the next item. "Now we need to discuss how we're splitting the profits."

"Isn't it by percentage?" Tamaki said.

"Of course, but we all bought in to the pool, then I moved half the money into an investment, then I put Haruhi's money in, then the investment paid back. So do we include her in the profit split?"

"Duh," Hikaru said, crunching on a chip for emphasis.

Kyoya's face remained impassive but his index finger began to tap. Hikaru was deliberately pushing Kyoya's buttons. Tamaki decided he should probably intervene before Hikaru got the reaction he was after. "I second Hikaru's motion that profits and losses should be divided proportionally in accordance with investment percentages at the time said profits or losses occur and not by date of investment."
"Thank you," Kyoya said to Tamaki. Sometimes it was good to have a banker's son on your side.

"So why was that necessary?" Kaoru asked.

"Because Kyo-chan can't just give his girlfriend money out of our investment pool. That would be embezzlement," Honey explained.

"How much money are we talking anyway?" Kaoru said.

"Well since all of you signed over your Host Club funds, Haruhi's cut of the profits just went up to ¥250,000."

The twins snorted in derision. "All this fuss over that little? The Ouran school uniform cost more than that!"

"And Haru doesn't have it," Mori said.

"She does now, we just gave it to her," Hikaru said under his breath.

You knew it was bad when Honey gave you the raised eyebrow look. "So now Haru-chan can buy her first ever brand new school uniform instead of having to take hand-me-downs from us or Kyoya's sister."

"For our next order of business, the paperwork for our special purposes corporation has come through. The purpose of the corporation is to buy, sell and hold shares in other companies for us, but the company will need an officer…"

\~oOo\~

The soft music, the light scent of the blackberry and vanilla candle, the way the massage therapist's hand gently worked loose that knot in her shoulder. I could get used to this, thought Haruhi.

No! You cannot get used to this, a harsh voice answered in her head. Don't even start. This is their world not yours. They are bringing you into it because it amuses them. But as soon as it stops amusing them, it will all end.

As if to emphasize the point, the massage therapist stopped abruptly. "Did I hit something?" she asked, noting that her client had tensed up.

"Oh, no. Sorry about that." Haruhi forced herself to relax, but the voices continued in her head.

You don't think he meant it? He seemed pretty sincere yesterday.

Well maybe he did mean it. But you thought Tamaki meant it too. And then he didn't, and you spent a week crying yourself to sleep every night. Even worse, you cried on Kyoya's shoulder. Literally. It's 11:30 and the spell ends at midnight. The simple fact of the matter is that Kyoya will go off to one of his expensive, exclusive colleges and will meet one of his 35,000 and you'll spend another week in tears. Then what? The twins can put you back together and then break your heart in turns. And by then you'll be in college. Maybe Mori can make a clean sweep of it. Contempt all the way around. Or maybe, if you don't let them buy you off, if you don't let yourself become their toy or their pet then maybe you can walk out of this your self-respect and theirs, and still be friends, even after the clock strikes 12.

Well, friendship was all she ever wanted from them anyway.
Haruhi found the guys all sitting around the coffee table in the area they had dubbed "the office," surrounded by the ruins of pizza boxes and mostly empty bowls of chips and popcorn. Given the last 48 hours, their conviviality was almost as alarming as the Cheshire Cat grins on the twins' faces.

"What?" she said.

"We need you to do us a favor, Haruhi," Kyoya said.

"And that is...?" At least this time it was a specific question.

"We need you to run a company for us."

Of all the people in the room, she was the least qualified to run a company. "I don't know how."

"Just do whatever I tell you to," Kyoya said.

"Why not just save time and do it yourself then?"

Kyoya smiled that scary, devious smile of his. "Because there's only so many ways I can hide my identity."

"We need someone who will not be easily recognized by the business world," Tamaki elaborated. "Someone that's not easily traceable."

"I'm all over the web thank you." She glared at the twins.

"That works in our favor," Mori said. "If anyone Googles Haruhi Fujioka, they'll assume they can't find the one they're looking for because of all the tabloid crap."

Oh well, she thought. If she could do them a favor, maybe all the clothes and haircuts and contact lenses and phones and meals and trips might feel a little less awkward. "What's this company do?"

"It doesn't do anything. It's a shell corporation," Kyoya said. Which didn't explain a darned thing.

"It's a holding company," Tamaki said. "A special purpose entity whose primary function is to buy stock in other companies."

"Why don't you just buy the stock on your own?" She squinted one eye. The financial world made no freaking sense.

Kyoya tried to keep the patronizing tone out of his voice, but it was so close to his normal tone, he wasn't having much luck. "People buy and sell stock all the time. But if one person buys too much of one stock a rumor gets started at a buyout is in the works and the price goes up. We want to buy as much as possible at as cheap a price as possible. So if the investment pool buys some stock and your company buys some stock, it looks like there are two buyers even though in reality there's only one."

"Huh," she was sorting through the implications of it. "And the stock we're buying is that British biotech you've been after."

Kyoya smiled inwardly. It was like falling in love all over again.

"What do I need to do?" she said.
"Sign this employment contract." Kyoya slid the papers towards her.

"Why do I have to sign a contract?"

Tamaki tilted his head to one side. "Because it's illegal for you to spend a company's money if you don't work for them."

"You might want to consider taking some business law courses, Haruhi," Kyoya put in.

She gave him a sour look and started reading the contract. Names, dates, job description, title: President, MR3 Holdings. "President? Do I get business cards?" she snarked.

Kyoya shrugged. "Hikaru, design her a logo. We can have them printed tomorrow." Hikaru picked up the pad of paper that Kaoru had tossed aside and started doodling.

She read down a little farther. Employee will, to the best of her skill and experience, perform all duties and responsibilities ... comply with employer policies, rules and procedures both written and oral... Standard obey us or your fired stuff.

Compensation: ¥10 million per year.

She froze. ¥10 million. Her father had only made ¥4 million a year. They were trying to buy her. "What is this?" she said in tight voice.

"What's it look like?" Kyoya said. "It's your salary."

"¥10 million." Here she thought she was doing a favor, playing along with their little investing game when in reality, they were just trying to put her back in their debt. They'd own her forever if she signed this. Roll over, bark on command and we'll give you a treat.

"Hey, I told them it should be ¥100 million, but Kyoya got cheap," Hikaru said.

She threw the contract at Hikaru. "I'm not for sale!"

"You're the president of an investment corporation," Kyoya said. "That's at the low end of what they make."

"How is this any different from when you offered me ¥600,000 to sleep with you?" She stormed into her bedroom and slammed the door.

Without missing more than a heartbeat, Kyoya went after her, flinging open her door. He didn't yell exactly, but his fury was palpable. "Stop being such a stubborn idiot! No one is making you an indecent proposition." The hosts all became very tight lipped. On one hand, this was not a conversation they should be eavesdropping on. On the other hand, there was no way in hell they were going to miss this.

"When your father told me there was an insurance policy, I thought fine. It's not much but I could get you into reasonably safe investments with an acceptable return that could support you through school. But then he went and talked to some estate planning moron who tied up the money in a trust. And they didn't plan on a getting you through a year at Ouran, they planned on high school plus college. Which means your monthly payout is only slightly more than your apartment rental. You can't afford to eat, or buy clothes or anything else. I've talked to attorneys about breaking the trust but they said the legal expenses would eat through the funds and you'd be left with nothing. My sister offered to keep you for the next year - she even offered to let your aunt retain control of the money as long as she had custody of you. Hell, the Hitachiins even offered to let your aunt
keep all of the money outright if she would just relinquish custody or let them adopt you, but your aunt won't budge. She's consumed by some weird guilt that maybe if she hadn't turned her back on her baby brother maybe he wouldn't have turned into a transvestite nightclub worker. The only reason you still have things in that apartment is that your father had a year long lease and my attorneys argued it made no sense to pay rent on the space and not use it. But that lease is up three weeks after we get back. The only option I see is to get you emancipated, but that requires that you have an income. Now I am out of ideas Haruhi, and we are out of time. So sign it or don't. But know what it is you're throwing away."

The other hosts all snuck out of the room before Kyoya could catch them listening in. They went to other suite, softly closed the door behind them and all sat in the living room area.

"Wow." Honey said.

"No kidding," Mori added.

"When did he offer her ¥600,000 to sleep with him?" Hikaru asked.

"Really? That's what you took away from that?" Kaoru looked at his twin in disbelief.

"Hey, you're all thinking it."

"Our daughter is poor," Tamaki lamented.

"That's not exactly news boss," Hikaru said.

"I thought we were past the daughter thing already," Kaoru added.

"I had a dream years ago. I thought it was just a nightmare but now I know it was a PREMONITION! Haruhi was living in a condemned shack, going without food for DAYS in order to buy CUT RATE sushi and drinking weak tea out of CHIPPED rice bowls."

Kaoru looked over at Honey and Mori. "OK, the boss has gone bye-bye. You guys got anything?"

"I could call Reiko and ask her to read Haru-chan's future," Honey suggested.

"Absolutely not!" Tamaki shrieked. "Then it would be set in stone and we couldn't change it."

"Boss, it's not going to happen," Hikaru said. "One: Kyoya would never let it happen. And two: if he ever did let it happen, we'd show up, kick his ass, kidnap Haruhi and fix it."

"You'd kick his ass?" Tamaki said, momentarily back in touch with reality.

"Well OK, we'd ask Honey and Mori to kick his ass but we'd still kidnap her and take care of her."

"You wouldn't have to ask," Mori said.

~oOo~

Right now, she hated him. She hated everything about him. She hated his arrogance and his high handedness. She hated that he was always three steps ahead of everyone else in the room. She hated that he loved it. She hated that he had been the first person to know she was a girl but hadn't said anything while the others struggled to figure it out. She hated that he had trapped her with a debt because it amused the others. She hated that he had set up a special boys' clinic for the school physical to make sure the other students would never discover the secret. She hated that he watched the others with their moronic solutions before revealing that the problem was never really
a problem. She hated the way he made friends with her father. She hated that her father had asked him to take care of her. She even hated him for saving that old lady from buying fake pottery. She hated the way he hid behind those glasses. She hated even more that when he took them off, he was probably the best looking of all of them. She hated the way he slipped into a room with lethal grace and upended everything she thought she knew. She hated the way he went back to his room and closed the door with such finality. But most of all she hated that she didn't hate him half enough.

Kyoya was still in his room. Through the closed door she could hear his keyboard clicking. The others had retreated to their half of the suite. The door between the conjoined suites was cracked open a finger's breadth, in a timid invitation to the other two.

She went back into the office and picked up the pages of the employment contract, scattered from where she had thrown them at Hikaru. What happened to her composure? She never used to blow up like this. Oh, who was she kidding? The twins and Tamaki had always been able to turn her into the third demon of the Host Club. She read the pages over and she put them back in order. Her salary for the next three years was to be placed in an escrow account at Suoh Bank, so even if the company was closed, she was still guaranteed her salary until her age of majority. The salary, which at first seemed ridiculous, amounted to her father's salary plus tuition at Ouran. Even if she screwed up and lost her scholarship, she would still be able to finish school. The twins' (and no doubt Tamaki's) suggestion had been excessive as usual. Kyoya's had been carefully calculated to do the least amount of damage to her pride. Almost the least amount. "Screw you, Ootori. I'm not losing that scholarship."

She crossed out the ¥10 Million, wrote in ¥4 Million, initialed the change and signed the contract.

She hated that she owed him an apology. Probably owed him an apology. Well, maybe owed him an apology. She knocked on his door as she opened it. He looked up from his computer. "I signed the contract," she said.

"Thank you."

Silence.

"You'll need to initial the changes," she said.

He merely arched an eyebrow.

He folded up his laptop and held out a hand to her. She came over and his hand very gently closed over hers. When he pulled her down on the bed beside him, it was more of a carefully phrased invitation than a demand. However, he wouldn't - couldn't let her hand go. His other hand lightly traced across her shoulders, up her neck and behind her head, holding her in place while his lips brushed against hers.

God, he wanted more.

But he couldn't take it. He hadn't realized how much the offer in Okinawa had wounded her. She had been correct about his motives and the lesson he had been trying to teach her, but not entirely correct. A part of him had meant the offer and if she had accepted...

She had seen through it, seen all the layers of offer and intention. Of course she had. He couldn't hide anything from her. She was like Tamaki without the manic explosions.

So there couldn't be any implication that intimacy was in any way connected to the money she had
accepted tonight. He shifted position so she was curled up in his arms. Companionable peace rather than romantic invitation. Actually, he had no idea what she had accepted. He hadn't seen the contract. He held her until her breathing slowed indicating she was drifting toward sleep. He carefully leaned her against a pile of pillows then slipped off the bed and went to the office to look at the contract. The corner of his mouth twitched upwards. She had knocked her salary down to what her father had made. Fortunately, Ranka had been a well paid bartender. Specialty club he thought, and chose not to examine it any further. But Haruhi had neglected to cross out the paragraph for end of year and performance bonuses, awarded at the board's discretion. Kyoya would make sure there were lots of those and he's make sure they were put forward by Tamaki or the twins so she could get mad at them for taking care of her instead of him. He initialed the changes and went back to his room. Not surprisingly, her eyes were open when he got back.

"Are the terms acceptable?" she said.

"You're worth more than that. If nothing else, because you kept Tamaki and the twins' insanity focused on you, I didn't have to kill them. That alone saved me ten million in legal fees."

"That covers one year. What about the other two?"

"Ten million each," he assured her. "It would have been a very messy murder."

She smiled and kissed him. Ok, he couldn't seduce her, but if she seduced him, that was totally different.

~oOo~
"Kyoya! She signed the contract!" The door burst open and Tamaki bounded in only to be stopped dead by the sight of his best friend with his arms around Haruhi in what was - now - an interrupted kiss. "Oh, I see you already knew that."

Haruhi went beet red. Kyoya pulled her face to his chest to hide her embarrassment and glared at the interloper. "Don't you ever knock?"

"The door was ajar, so I thought..." Tamaki said weakly.

Haruhi pulled away. "I need to get back to my room anyway. I need to ..." She couldn't think of what she needed to do.

"Get ready for dinner?" Kyoya suggested. "We're taking you out to celebrate your new job."

She nodded like that was what she was going to say.

Kyoya held out a piece of paper. "But since you did accept, I need you to log into this account and purchase 5000 shares of stock. The instructions are all there."

She nodded again and made her escape.

"Sorry," Tamaki said after she was gone.

Kyoya shook his head. "It wasn't going anywhere tonight anyway. She's still bothered by what happened on Okinawa." And it bothered Kyoya that he hadn't realized it.

"What did happen on Okinawa?" Tamaki asked. The scene was forever etched into his brain: Kyoya sitting shirtless on his messed-up bed. Haruhi, in her flimsy dress, curled up in a ball, slightly closed in on herself, an obvious tension between them.

"I offered her ¥600,000 to sleep with me," Kyoya said matter-of-factly.

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I wanted her to hate me."

"Why?"

Kyoya's answer came out in a soft whisper. "Because I didn't hate her. And it seemed like the easiest way to restore our proper places."

Whatever answer Tamaki was expecting, this wasn't it. Suddenly, Kyoya found himself babbling like Tamaki. "If she accepted, even though I never would have told any of you, she and I would always know that she was a paid whore. And if she turned me down, she would despise me for trying to make her one."

Tamaki's blood went cold. Haruhi had never despised Kyoya. "So what happened?" He was unable to stop the words from coming out.

"She saw through it, of course. She turned me down because it wasn't what I really wanted." He ran a hand through his hair leaving it mussed and unruly."I can't be in love with a commoner."
"But you are."

"But I am. And when I'm with her, I don't give a damn about all my plans and ambitions, I just want to be with her."

"You like gaming things out," said Tamaki. "Game this one out. Ignore all the other considerations; just date her. It will work out or it won't. If it doesn't, then you dated a girl in your teen years for a while. So what? If it does work out, then you stay with her. And you stay with her. And eventually, you marry her. Because if you try to turn her into your mistress, the rest of us will turn you over to Kasanoda's goons. But your father wants you and your brothers to keep working for him, to keep giving him your best, so he is not going to name an heir until he's ready to retire. He's in his forties. That's twenty years from now. You're telling me - given twenty years- you don't believe Haruhi can impress him as much as she impressed us in mere days?"

"She already impressed him, enough for him to give his consent. Then those idiots screwed it up."

"It wasn't intentional," Tamaki reminded him.

"Perhaps the initial incident was not, but their response was calculated." Kyoya said. "Their damage control efforts only brought more attention. Their solution was that she should leave me for them."

"So Kaoru saw an opportunity and took it. How is that different from what you did? How long after I told you that I had ended things with her did you start making plans?" Tamaki didn't mean to let the bitterness come through, but he couldn't stop it. Actually, that was to the good. If he'd kept it to the casual tone he used when speaking of his parents and grandmother, Kyoya would have known he crossed an unforgivable line.

"That was different. You had ended things." Kyoya stopped himself. Self-deception was a dangerous addiction. He had known he would hurt his best friend when he made a play for Haruhi. But the thought of missing out on her twice... he'd been willing to stand aside for Tamaki. In some indefinable way, they just made sense together. Like Cupid and Psyche. But if that was not to be…

Tamaki took a deep breath. "Look, I know that you paid for that funeral, and you can't even say it's because you're family. You weren't engaged at the time. I know you held her together in a million different ways through all of that. I know you were Ranka's favorite and that if he could've picked one of us, he would've picked you. I know that if it wasn't for you, she'd be in Osaka at this very moment living with the only alchemist in history who wants to turn gold into lead. But I also know that it would be a lot easier for her to be a Hitachiin than an Ootori. They'd want her to live up to her potential because it will make her happy, not because it will add to the legacy of seven generations. If you become the Ootori patriarch, she'll have to live under a whole set rules and restrictions that she wasn't raised with, whereas the Hitachiins only have a matriarch because it's easier to let the old lady boss them around than to argue with her."

"So you're saying you would rather she wind up with either or both of them?"

"Those twisted doppelgängers who can only be counted on to cause chaos?" Tamaki squawked.

Kyoya tilted his head to one side and waited for Tamaki to work it out.

"All I'm saying is… we are family… don't…"

"Cause a rift over something I would have done myself had our situations been reversed," Kyoya finished for him. He sighed in resignation. "She is an intelligent woman. They need to respect her
decisions."

Which Tamaki took to mean *'I'll forgive them if they knock it off.'* Who knew keeping a family together was so much work?

"Why don't you and the others go decide where we want to take Haruhi for dinner tonight? And while you're at it, you can vote her hiring bonus and let her treat us."

"Oh, she'll like that." Tamaki said.

"No more than ¥1 million," Kyoya added.

"Spoilsport."

"She freaked out over ¥10 million. Don't push it. Oh, and have Kaoru copy that contract and file it so she can't change her mind, tear it up, and deny it ever existed."

Kyoya rubbed his chin as he watched Tamaki go to tell the twins they could give her more money. He really was going to have to deal with the situation soon. It was a pity that Princess Ayanokoji turned out to be a bitch. She really had been perfect for Tamaki. She had family and money. "Princess" had not just been an appellation of Tamaki's, she really had been royalty. And if he had married royalty, it would've been enough to erase the stain of bastardy in his grandmother's eyes. She was beautiful and smart and crazy about Tamaki. But she hadn't handled jealousy well. And that was when she still thought Haruhi was a boy.

In the short run, he needed to distract them all. They were finished with the business he needed to be in London to conduct. They could move onto Paris early where the twins would have all of their time absorbed by fashion week. And Tamaki, well he was pretty sure he had something that would distract Tamaki.

~oOo~
There was a time when there were only two people in the world. Everybody else was just noise and toys. Even our parents. Then a blond idiot came out of the noise and asked us to join a club. At first, we weren't interested. But then we thought it was another way to play with our toys, so we joined. Then a strange thing happened: the other club members turned out not to be idiots. Well, mostly not idiots. Then one day there was another circle - US, the four friends and the noise. The friends were kind of fun, in a way that the rest of the toys never had been. Then the strangest thing of all happened. A toy found its way into our room. It was an ugly toy in a baggy sweater and thick glasses. If it had any brains it would have known it was too ugly to be out in public. We were ready to throw it back, but the friends wanted to play with it. So we went along. Then, when we were playing a cat and mouse game with the toy, it suddenly stopped being a toy and became a person. It knew us. *She* knew us. And not just as an US. As separate individuals, but also as the us. And she became the most important person in the world other than my brother. But by the time we realized it, she had given her heart to the blond idiot. But as he had been the first one to want her (although he'd been the last one to know why), we came to terms. Besides, he was the one who'd brought us all together. We never would have even met her without him.

Then they ended. And another had stepped in. It hurt to watch them. Not just because I wanted it to be me, but because after my brother and her, he was my best friend.

My brother holds the blond idiot as his number three, though he'd probably rather commit seppuku than admit it. The blond idiot who styled himself as the father of our little family. But when we really need parental advice, we know where to go, and it isn't to him. I find myself standing at the correct door, wishing he was not sharing the room with his best friend. But right now, I need wisdom more than I need my pride.

~oOo~

Misukuni Haninozuka sat cross-legged on his bed finishing the last bite of cake while watching his cousin finish the last moves of his kata when Kaoru came into the room without warning and knelt on the floor much like he was kneeling on the mat at the dojo. "Senpai," he said lowering his head. Ever since Honey and Mori had graduated, the others had tried to address them as --san, but there were times when you just needed your senpai. Takashi went to parade rest along the wall and silently observed. Mitsukuni sat still and waited. Somewhere in the back of his brain, Kaoru was infinitely grateful for his elders' ability to go from amusing friends to senseis and sages in the blink of an eye. Kaoru swallowed hard. What he was going to ask wasn't fair.

"Is he really so much better for her than I am?"

Mitsukuni thought long and carefully before answering. "If Ranka-san had lived another two years, I would have said no. Haru-chan has lost a great deal recently. More, I think, than any of us realize. She has lost more than any of the rest of us have ever had. We are the only family she has left that love her as she is, that want her with us. And as much as she needs reminding that life can be beautiful and fun, even more she needs someone who can take care of her and protect her, who can formulate a realistic plan and make it happen without her ever knowing. Because she's been the strong one since her mother died, and now she's afraid to be weak. She doesn't know how to ask for help. In that respect, she's no different than she was on Okinawa." Outnumbered by bullies, putting herself between the girls and the threat, six guys within shouting distance, two of them quite
literally world class martial artists, and she couldn't bring herself to call for help. "And when she
did finally start to trust us, Tama-chan broke her heart. He did it for the right reasons - he was
blindsided by his grandmother and it was the best way to protect her - but he lied to her. If she's
going to learn to trust us again, it's going to have to be someone who can see all the threats coming
and head them off. Or at least someone mean enough that you'd have to be seriously stupid to
screw with him." Honey shrugged. "For what it's worth, if your parents had adopted her, my answer
would be different. They could provide the security and stability, and you could provide the love
and laughter."

Kaoru knelt in silence, absorbing Honey-senpai's answer. Kyoya wasn't actually mean. He didn't
enjoy destroying people, but he wouldn't hesitate to do so if he deemed it necessary. Anyone could
see Kyoya Ootori was the most dangerous man in the room. In any room. But anyone was wrong.
The most dangerous man in the club was surreptitiously sucking frosting off his fingers when he
thought his student wasn't watching. Kaoru had a hard time picturing what would happen if
Mitsukuni Haninozuka decided to take somebody down, but he instinctively knew it would be
thorough and terrifying beyond anything Kyoya would come up with, and what Kyoya could come
up with boggled the mind. It was perversely comforting to know that Kyoya was outclassed at
something.

"Would you protect her?" Kaoru asked quietly.

"With everything I had, if she needed it. But she doesn't need it from me because Kyo-chan is
taking care of it."

Kaoru meditated on it, on all of it, then nodded. "Thank you, senpai." He returned to his own room
where Hikaru was transferring his doodles onto the computer to render the logo for Haruhi's new
business cards.

"Hika? Did you know that mom and dad offered to adopt Haruhi?"

"It was news to me, but it did make me wonder. You think mom and dad would make the offer
again if we asked them to?"

"That woman turned them down once..."

"Before or after Kyoya made his threats? 'Cause you'd have to be really stupid not to know that
man was serious. I mean tigers are endangered and you want to protect them and all, but that
doesn't mean you want to get up close and personal with one. Make a wrong move and he'll destroy
you."

"Kyoya or the tiger?"

"Take your pick."

They both gave a quiet snort of amusement then fell into silence.

"I don't want to lose her, Kao."

"I don't either, Hika. Everybody else has graduated and is leaving us. I don't even know why we
bothered making friends with them. She's our last, best reason for even having friends. If we lose
her too..."

Hikaru ran his hand across the back of his neck nervously. "I was thinking about it. You can break
up with your girlfriend, you can divorce your wife, your friends can graduate and leave you, but
you're stuck with your family. You never get rid of them. Holiday dinners. Family reunions."
"And given that most of his family are a bunch of assholes, we'd probably get all the good holidays," Kaoru said thoughtfully.

"And his family is another point in our favor. You remember when dad said if one of us was a girl we probably would have had to marry Kyoya?"

"I'm still having nightmares about that, thank you."

"But the thing is dad is not old money. He's a self-made billionaire. Marrying for alliance isn't likely to occur to him. Which means that the Ootoris came up with that. It means that the Ootoris would not consider marriage to a Hitachiin to be beneath them."

"They can't treat her badly," Kao said putting the pieces together.

"Which means they can't treat her badly," Hikaru confirmed. "And if he does screw up and lose her..."

"...we'd be right across the hall," Kaoru finished. "It's not quite how I wanted to bring her into the family..."

"It's not how I wanted it either, but I can't be without her, Kao."

"I can't either."

~oOo~

When Haruhi was sure everyone else had gone to bed, when she wouldn't be seen, she took the picture of her dad and a stick of incense into the greenhouse room where the plants would hide the fragrance. The moon was showing through the glass roof and reflecting off the leaves giving an ethereal glow to the space. She lit the incense and knelt on the floor. She hadn't wanted to do this in her room, afraid the scent would attract attention, which was stupid. She was still in mourning for her father. This is what she should be doing. She shouldn't be here. On a trip. Having fun. She was silent for a long while, watching the incense burn. "Hi Dad," she said at last. "I hope you can hear me all the way from England. I know I haven't been a very good daughter, haven't honored your memory as you deserve. I hope your lover has been better than I have, which makes the next thing I'm going to say strange, if not unforgivable. But I hope you and mom are back together, as happy as you were in life. I know how much family meant to you. I know how much it hurt when your family cut you off and I know how hard it was to swallow your pride and go begging them to forgive you enough to take care of me after you were gone. They are trying in their own way. Kyoya said he promised he'd take care of me too, and he has. But he wants me to do something now that will completely destroy everything you spent the last couple months setting up. He wants me to file for emancipation from Aunt Rei. If I try and I don't get it, I'll have to live for the next few years with people who know I spat on their generosity, and they'll hate me. If I do get it, then I will have cut myself off from all that's left of my family. And if I don't try at all, then I have to give up everything I've worked for for the last five years. All through middle school I studied and worked hard so I could get the Ouran Scholarship. All through Ouran, I worked so I could get a college scholarship. And now that I've almost got it locked up, I'm forced to choose between family and personal ambitions. But I've watched my friends, Dad. I've watched their families. When faced with that exact choice, they chose their ambitions and destroyed those they should care most about. Kyoya's family has instilled ambition in all their sons, knowing that for one to succeed, the other two must fail. And the brothers hate each other and resent their father as a result. Tamaki's family - they take the cake. Ambition to control the company has made one mother and
son barely speak to each other while the other mother and son are forbidden to. A man chose his company over the woman he loved so she lives in poverty and loneliness, her only child stripped from her by that same ambition. The Haninozukas were willing to crush their oldest son until he fit the desired mold. The Morinozukas are the same - they've chosen the best friend, hobbies, college and career for both of their sons all to keep the family where they want it to be. And the Hitachiins - they may be the worst. Those parents put their own ambitions so far above their children Hikaru and Kaoru grew up alone. If they were monsters, I could dismiss it; but they're not. Each one of those people was a decent and intelligent person who had to choose between personal goals and the people who cared about him. And it just brought misery and pain to all involved. I don't want to be that person, Dad. But I'm not sure I want to be the person Aunt Rei wants me to be either. I don't know what to do. Please Dad. Please help me find a way out. I don't want to choose between what I want to be and who I want to be.” She didn't say anything more. Merely watched the incense burn down until the damp soil of the plant extinguished it and she was left with the scent fading into the roses, jasmine and gardenia.

Out in the hallway, Kaoru slowly backed away from the conservatory. He hadn't meant to listen in, he'd been passing by on his way to get a cup of tea from the kitchen to center himself before trying to sleep. Habit he'd picked up from Honey. He crept into the bathroom, closed the door, and, leaning his head back against the wall slid to the floor. She was wrong about their parents. It wasn't their parents' doing. He and Hika had shut their parents out to punish them for making the same choices that Haruhi's father had. Ranka could have picked a job that would have let him be home with Haruhi instead of being gone on nights and weekends. Could have picked a job that would not have gotten her ostracized at school. Could have picked a job that would have made him miserable. Kaoru's parents had also chosen jobs they loved. They just made more money than Ranka had. Instead of becoming responsible and withdrawn as Haruhi had, they had become spoiled and petulant. A childish coping mechanism, but they had been children at the time. An older Kaoru could see how forced to choose between two things you want when one of them is now-or-never and the other could be put off for a short while it would be easy to make the wrong choice - and a short while became a long while and a long while became almost too late. It was true, sometimes there was no easy solution; there were some choices that had to be made that would destroy the person who made them. Which is why, sometimes, you made decisions for the people you loved. The lovely soul that was Haruhi must not be hurt by the ugly choice before her. He pulled out his cell phone. "Hi, Dad? I know Hika was planning on talking to Mom when we get to Paris, but I don't think this can wait that long..."

~oOo~

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Another introspective chapter. Don't worry. Stuff will start happening again soon, I promise.

And thanks for all the support everybody! The kudos and comments make my day.
Chapter 25

Warning: brief teen material late in the chapter. Also, it's a very long chapter (not so much a warning, just a heads up).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~oOo~

Rei Inoue was just finishing the latest production report when her phone rang and the company president's secretary summoned her to the president's office. She'd never even met the man. A thousand reasons popped into her head why she might be called, none of them good. "Why?" She blurted out inadvertently into the phone.

"Because he requested it," the secretary said.

She gave herself a quick once-over in the mirror to make sure her appearance was tidy and professional, then hurried to the executive hallway.

She arrived to find the president, two of the senior vice presidents and a fourth man waiting for her. "As promised, Hitachiin-sama," the president said to the stranger.

Hitachiin. Hitachiin. Why did that name sound familiar?

"How is it you know each other?" one of the vice presidents asked.

Rei Inoue started to deny it, but the man gave her a businesslike smile. "My sons and her niece are classmates. We only met once briefly at your brother's funeral. I do not expect you to remember me as you were mourning your brother, but it seemed discourteous to be here on an inspection and not pay my respects."

"I do recall meeting you," she said, though she didn't. In fact, he hadn't even been there, but if she was aware of that, there was no way she would call him on it in front of her company execs. "It is an honor to see you again." She bowed.

The president looked pleased. "Is there a place you would like to go for lunch?"

"My sons recommended a restaurant to me. I believe they took Mrs. Inoue's daughter and niece there."

As the president led Hitachiin-sama to the door, one of the vice presidents leaned over and said to her, "He is one of our most important clients. You must do what you can to encourage him to place larger orders."

She did actually get to make some comments about their newly upgraded production facilities and their ability fill larger orders, which pleased her company execs. At the end of lunch, Hatchiin-sama asked if he could have a word with Mrs. Inoue privately. He took her out onto the patio and regarded the city for a few minutes before speaking. "I would like to apologize for my sons' behavior when they were down here. I understand it was excessive."
"Excessive behavior is a hallmark of youth," she said, trying to be gracious. But privately, she thought his sons really were out of control.

"Indeed. But I daresay you will get used to it."

"Used to it?" She looked alarmed.

"Your niece is my sons' best friend. You can count on them being down here every weekend."

"Every weekend?" Inoue-san repeated.

"And school holidays. I can ask them not to come, but they will not listen. I will however ask them to not cause too big of a scene when competing with the local boys."

"Local boys?" Inoue-san was becoming more than a little disturbed by this stream of news.

"It is curious. For all that Haruhi-kun is quiet and unassuming, when she is around, it is like all of the other girls cease to exist. She had only been at Ouran for a few weeks when all the most popular boys in school were falling all over themselves for her. I will spare you the tales of the extremes they went to to try and keep her for themselves. I am sure your daughter is as lovely as you are, I can only hope she is a sensible as you are. Most young girls would be bitterly unhappy to discover that all the boys had forgotten them. Let alone to watch them buy the other girl presents and take her on trips all the time while she herself gets passed over. As I said, I will ask my sons to limit themselves. Hopefully, their behavior will have a similar effect on their friends."

Rei said nothing. Kimi had been pouty when she wasn't permitted to go clubbing and impossibly sulky since Haruhi had gone on this around the world trip. The notion that this could go on for an entire year...? Or longer if Haruhi went to a junior college or trade school. The girl didn't have the money to go anywhere else; she could only afford those if she was living at home. Which meant three years watching Kimi's self-worth erode. It was incomprehensible how Haruhi would be so popular with the boys, but Rei had watched this group of wealthy, good looking boys make a fuss over her niece, only including her daughter as an afterthought. Family loyalty was well and good, but no loving mother would subject her daughter to that long term...

"You think those other boys will be down frequently too?" And watching us and judging us and threatening us? she added mentally.

"Just her friends. I think that yakuza clan head is generally too busy between school and work to take many weekends off."

"A yakuza clan head?" Hitachiin had to wonder if the woman was going to hyperventilate on him.

"The Kasanoda clan, I believe. He had a bit of a crush on her his first year, my sons said. But not to worry, the Ootori family will not want their name linked to his and so will probably discourage the connection. Of course, I understand that the Ootori family is not entirely pleased with their son's choice of a bride and so may encourage Kasanoda-san so as to have a reason to terminate their son's engagement. A very Machiavellian family.

"They don't think my niece is good enough for them? Being smart and attractive isn't enough for those snobs?" Whatever her niece's failings, the girl was bright.

"They are one of the wealthiest families in Japan. Neither she nor you have money or connections to tempt them. They're probably embarrassed by the whole situation and so will want little to do with you. Sweep you all under the rug - which having worked with them, I assure you is a blessing. Just say and do exactly as they instruct when the media comes to call and there should not be any
unpleasantness."

"The media?"

"You saw what happened when your niece was dubbed 'the Hitachiin Girl' - I apologize for that by the way, that sort of thing seems to happen a lot around my sons - you can just imagine the feeding frenzy that will ensue when they find out that she's dumping my sons to marry a wealthier man. But as I said, the Ootoris do not like that kind of publicity, so by limiting your contact with the upper echelons of society, they can prevent your family being labeled 'social climbers,' which would no doubt be highly detrimental to your own children."

"I suppose..."

As if he read her thoughts he said "Yazuha was deeply disappointed that you would not let us adopt Haruhi, but I agree with you that although her unconventional upbringing has given her a unique perspective on life, she will benefit from a few years in a household with a father and a mother and siblings. As with your family, my wife and I both work, so committing your limited free time to helping your niece adjust, well, I admire you for making the hard decision. I understand that her inheritance is insufficient to see her through school so you will be paying the shortfall. Most generous considering that you have children of your own to support. My boys will no doubt keep me informed of your kindness and I will in turn make sure your bosses are aware of how giving you have been. It is so difficult to put a child's welfare above your own considerations, especially since it is the child and not you who will benefit."

Rei Inoue swallowed hard. "Is that Ouran school as good as they say?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "Even being the top student for her first two years should guarantee her admission to any university in Japan."

"And a scholarship?" Rei pressed. "Admission does no good if she cannot afford it. I have a son in school now and a daughter who will start soon. I do not have unlimited resources."

Hitachiin-sama bowed to her. "And yet you are the kind of woman who will always make the best choices for the children who look to her." He smiled in benevolent approval. If Yazuha approached her again, the woman would likely be much more receptive.

~oOo~

The trip from London to Paris was short, much more so than Haruhi expected. Maybe because the history books made it sound so central or maybe because she was used to Asia, but she kind of thought Europe would be bigger. It was, however, just as beautiful as she thought. "So what are our plans in Paris?"

Kyoya gave a small but intense smile. "The twins are here to work fashion week, but apart from keeping an eye on your new business, you and I are free. Once we get to the hotel..."

"Great news everyone!" Tamaki interrupted. "I upgraded our hotel!"

"You what?" Kyoya said in clipped tones.

"All those big hotels all look the same so I wanted to take Haruhi somewhere more picturesque." He looked at her excitedly. "It was an 18th century mansion that was converted into a hotel. There's only eighteen rooms total and I booked all six suites for us!"

"Six?" Kyoya's eyebrows arched.
"Yeah, the boss put Kao and me into the two bedroom suite," Hikaru said with an almost straight face.

"We don't mind at all," Kaoru added helpfully.

"Which means everyone gets their own room and we have the entire floor to ourselves!" Tamaki added. "We don't even have to lock the doors!"

"Haruhi," Kyoya said in a soft voice, "can I dock your salary ¥10 million?"

~oOo~

Kyoya privately conceded that it really was a beautiful mansion - the floors were inlaid in intricate patterns, the staircase was marble with blackened and gilded wrought iron railings, the fireplace mantles were elaborately carved with the coat of arms of the former owners. Apart from a single portrait, the oldest things in the house dated from the French Empire. Anything older had been looted during the revolution.

The brickwork of the exterior had been recently cleaned and restored, the work so well done one had to study it carefully to spot the replacements from the original. The garden had been lovingly tended for decades. In the corner, a flowering cherry tree was just starting to bud. Pity it wasn't a few weeks later so they could view the cherry blossoms. Not quite hidden by the not quite blooming hydrangeas was a small marble pagoda ornament, the kind used by Westerners to add an exotic accent to their gardens. Kyoya suspected that the former owners had gotten a pretty penny for the place when they sold it to the hoteliers.

Since Tamaki had made the reservation and spoke the most fluent French, he took care of the check in, but as they laid the keys out in the desk, Kyoya asked the woman in rapid French if any of the rooms were adjoining. He quickly snatched the two affirmative keys, handed one to Haruhi, pocketed the other and left the remaining keys on the desk for the other hosts to squabble over.

The bedrooms were similarly luxuriously appointed. Kyoya unlocked his side of the door that led directly to Haruhi's suite, then went next door to try to convince her to unlock her side. He found her rooted in the center of the floor, a full 2 meters from anything else in the room. "What's wrong?"

"Is everything in this room a real antique? Because I can't afford another vase."

"The mattress is new," Kyoya gestured at the bed helpfully.

Haruhi dropped her head and made a groaning noise.

"I'm kidding Haruhi," he said taking her hand. "They are reproductions. No one is going to leave a ¥1 million Biedermeier chair in a room with a random hotel guest."

"Oh," she said relieved, sinking into the indicated object. *They might however leave a ¥700,000 Biedermeier chair in a room with a random hotel guest if the hotel is exclusive enough,* he thought. The chair of course was real. But she didn't need to know that. He made a mental note to tell the others not to let the truth slip. He just hoped Tamaki wouldn't be offended by the ruse. But there was no point in making Haruhi uncomfortable when Tamaki had gone to such lengths to show her something special.

Having settled into their rooms and explored the hotel, the group stepped out into the mild
sunshine. "What now?" Haruhi said.

Kyoya produced a piece of paper. "I've drawn up a map of sites around Paris that you might want to see."

Tamaki produced another. "And I have a map of all the best restaurants so no matter where we go we can always grab something to eat."

Honey pulled out another. "And I have a map all the best bakeries!"

Mori handed her a flyer. "River cruise to get your bearings."

The twins were unnaturally silent. "Nothing to add?" Haruhi asked.

Hikaru shrugged. "We need to meet up with mom to work on the fashion show."

"Wanna come help?" Kaoru offered.

She thought about it for a second. "Sure, sounds fun."

"But...but...cake!" Honey wailed.

Hikaru snatched Honey's map out of Haruhi's hand. "We'll be passing by this one and this one and this one. We can just stop on the way."

"Yay!"

"So pick which one you want to hit."

"One?"

The hall could have been described as a swirling mass of chaos except that everyone in it seemed to know what they were doing and where they were going. The twins waded fearlessly into the mob and when Haruhi hesitated on the edge, they grabbed her arms and towed her in with them. "Hey Mom! We're here!"

"Aaaaiii!" Yuzuha Hitachiin dropped whatever it was she had been doing and rushed over to hug her boys. Kyoya looked away. It was unbecoming for an Ootori to be jealous of the relationship between a mother and her children. But just once, it would have been nice to have been on the receiving end of that kind of affection. He looked at Haruhi wondering how she would greet her own children someday. He was saddened to see a wistful look on her face. Not something she had never known, but something very dear that she had lost. He reached out to her to squeeze her hand to comfort her but never quite got the chance.

"Haruhi!" Yuzuha swept the girl up in an enthusiastic hug. "Oh Haruhi, sweetie, I am so sorry about Milan. When they showed me the picture, I just misinterpreted it. The boys called and explained everything though."

"I know it was a mistake. I'm just not sure how you got that idea."

"Wishful thinking?" Yuzuha said. "You're the nicest, smartest, most down-to-earth girl they ever brought home. A mother would have to be stupid or mean not to hope."

Kyoya contrasted Yuzuha’s greeting with his own mother's. Goddamn it, he'd brought Haruhi to
Paris to keep the twins away from Haruhi, not to reinforce their bid. *You don't miscalculate often, Ootori, but when you do, it's spectacular,* he thought.

"I hope it didn't mess up your show too badly," Haruhi said, worried.

"It meant all the attention was focused on the name and not the clothes, but there's no such thing as bad publicity. Sadly, my friend Armand was completely overshadowed. He does shoes and accessories for my show while I do clothes to fill in the gaps at his. Actually, he did an amazing necklace. If you'd be willing to model it..."

Haruhi shook her head frantically. "I'm not a model."

"No kidding," said a woman with iron-grey streaked hair as she brushed past disdainfully. "You're too short to be a model."

"Not for print," Yazuha called after her.

"For anything besides children's clothes," the woman shot back.

The twins and their mother all looked at each other and burst out laughing. "Well, you're officially spared a life in high fashion," Hikaru said. "Hitachiin Girl or no, if Nina says you're out, you're out."

"Who's Nina?" Haruhi asked.

"The show's producer," Kaoru answered. "She stage manages the show and she's very good at what she does."

Though Haruhi had no interest in high fashion and Kyoya would hate to see her brilliant mind squandered on something so shallow, he nonetheless bristled at Haruhi being told she wasn't good enough for something. Anything.

A short, excitable looking man came running on over. "This is the Hitachiin Girl? You did not tell me she would be here!" he said in French with a heavy Italian accent.

"I didn't know if she would come," Yazuha said.

The little man discounted the designer. With the back of his fingers, he slapped the underside of Haruhi's chin until her head went back. He studied her throat. "Yes, yes. We want this neck."

"You want what?" Kyoya said.

"They want to shoot a picture of her wearing Armand's new necklace," Hikaru explained.

"And whichever one for the romance angle," he said fluttering his hand generally in the twins' direction.

Honey pulled out one of his bakery bags and began munching with on the cookies as though they were movie snacks and leaned on a pillar to watch what came next.

"How much does it pay?" Kyoya asked.

"Kyoya, I screwed up his fashion show, I'll do it for free," Haruhi said.

"They screwed it up," he said pointing at the twins, "and you have to make a security deposit on an apartment in metropolitan Tokyo when we get back," Kyoya said to her before turning back to the
little man. "How much does it pay?"

"And you are?" The little man challenged him.

"Her fiancé."

"Unimportant," the little man waved him off.

"Also her business manager."

That got the little man's attention. "€1000 for the shoot."

"5000."

"She has no experience."

"She's the celebrity du jour with over 200,000 hits on a candid photo taken in a freaking department store posted less than a week ago on a minor fan site. Use her in your ad and you'll get six times the normal views and unsolicited media attention on top."

The man appeared to think about it. "OK, 5000. But I get pretty boy as a prop," he waved his hand generally in Kaoru's direction.

"Pretty boy?" Kaoru squawked.

"Better than interchangeable boy," Tamaki said.

"He can negotiate his own contracts," Kyoya said. "Hair and makeup?" He said to Yazuha.

"You're not supposed to be selling your own fiancée," Haruhi hissed at Kyoya in Japanese.

"It's not that different from the cosplays we used to do," he answered mildly, "only instead of paying off your debt to us, you'll be setting aside money for an expense you have not incurred yet."

She looked to Honey and Mori for support, but Honey continued to munch on his cookies and look at her with enormous guileless blue eyes and Mori just blinked. With an exasperated sigh, she let the Hitachiins drag her off. During her manicure, between the filing and the polish, Kyoya presented Haruhi with a document to sign.

"A contract to be my agent? A bit late for that, isn't it senpai?"

Kyoya merely shrugged and presented her with an authorization for another stock purchase.

~oOo~

Haruhi hated fashion. They stripped away her clothes and stuck her in a bathrobe so as not to mess up her makeup and hair when she changed. They remarked on how perfect her skin was and how she almost didn't need makeup, then proceeded to cover her skin with makeup anyway. They said it was a shame her hair wasn't longer then put it up in a French braid that would've hidden the length if she had it. About the time they finished putting those fancy pins with crystals and rhinestones into her hair (at least she hoped to God they were just crystals and rhinestones) Hikaru came up wearing tuxedo pants and a silk dress shirt. "I thought I was shooting with Kaoru," she said.

He gave her the little devil grin. "You are. I'm his backup."
"Do I have a backup?" she said, wondering if she could break her ankle really quickly.

"Nope," he said. "You're the star attraction."

"Damn."

"Here, put his on." He handed her a piece of fabric that felt like satin and looked like liquid gold. "I can't put it on, it's a piece of cloth."

"Yeah," he said

"Not clothing. Cloth. There's nothing to put on."

"Wrap it around you like a towel. Armand doesn't want anything to distract from the hair ornaments."

"I AM NOT TAKING A NUDE SHOT!"


Kao came up in time to hear his brother say "Please, this is for a mainstream publication not a Page 3 girl." The photographer choked "I do not do page 3 anything! I take art shots for museums! I take cover photos!"

"And the occasional centerfold shot," Kaoru put in, not sure if he was baiting the photographer or the hosts or just getting his brother in more trouble. But he did feel bad when he saw Haruhi's expression. "But on this case," he said holding out a hand, "I promise it will be ok. Do you trust us? I mean on the really important things?"

She rolled her eyes but took his hand. But Kyoya couldn't help but notice how her other hand tightened around the cloth keeping it close to her. This should have been the simplest solution to everybody's problem. She would be earning money on her own to cover her upcoming expenses and not having to take it as a gift. This Armand designer would get his photo shoot with a high-profile model, the Hitachiin quid pro quo would be settled. And Kyoya could tell his father the whole tabloid thing was all an empty publicity stunt in order for her to earn that money. And best of all, the kind of fame and notoriety Haruhi would get was the kind that would fade as soon as she quit and she could return to her preferred anonymity. And somehow the twins had messed it up with Tamaki-like brilliance. As she passed, he said in a low voice "if you want out of it, let me know."

"I guess I kinda do need the money."

"Sit sit sit!" The photographer gestured. He rearranged her drape and began waiving the light meter all around her as though it were some kind of magic wand. Then he pulled out the camera and focused and said "now, give me a faraway look..."

That's a stupid statement, she thought. The wall is only 5 meters away. How far can I look? If I didn't need the money...

"Yes! Exactly!"

Come to think of it, I'll not only need money for the apartment, I'll probably need a deposit for power and water.
The camera began swirling around the back of her head catching the jewels from all different angles then slowly made its way around front showing more of her face with every successive shot.

And Internet.

"She is brilliant, no? The depth of her thoughts shows on her face!" The camera clicked away madly.

And food. The cans and the drygoods would still be fine, but I'll definitely need to shop for fresh milk and meat and eggs...

"Clearly a philosopher!"

...And fruit. A slight smile crypt over her lips. So far on this trip the hotels and restaurants had had amazing fresh fruit every day. She would never tell the guys that, but the strawberries alone would be enough to make her do this trip all over again.

"And just that with hint of love! Bellissimo! Perfection! Cannot be beat. Let's do the white now."

"Wait, what?" She looked around the room confused.

"They want to change you into a white dress now," Hikaru explained.

An actual dress beat a gold sheet she thought. It was a simple, elegant dress. Then they snapped on a bracelet sculpted into a platinum peacock. The earrings were peacocks as well, each with a tail of three dangling teardrop sapphires. As they draped her right arm across her left shoulder she looked down and saw the little sapphire eyes winking up at her. The sculptor had given it an almost sly look. She smiled back at the bird.

"Yes yes yes!" The photographer enthused. "More of that!" She glanced at the photographer, not sure what he was asking. "Yes! Now, change it into an inviting look like you would give your lover if he had just come in to the room."

Involuntarily her eyes went to Kyoya, her demeanor softened and her eyes glowed. The photographer squealed in delight. Then the smiled faded and her eyes slipped away. Kyoya followed her gaze to the direction of Tamaki and Kyoya's stomach twisted. Suddenly all the photographer's ecstatic noises had become annoying. "Now, let us set her on fire!"

"What?" Kyoya rounded on him.

"He means put her in the red dress," Hikaru explained.

As they led her off, he heard the photographer say to Yazuha "Is there an angle from which this girl does not look good?"

"If there is, I've never found it."

The photographer was right. Fire was a better description of the dress. The red silk graduated into orange and yellow where the fabric licked her chest; at the bottom the red faded into a smoky black base; when she moved, the whole dress came alive shifting colors as the light hit it, enveloping her in the heat generated by every man in the room. Kyoya's eyes slid to the hem, just brushing her toes. Fashion show my ass, thought Kyoya. This dress was designed for Haruhi. The twins were talented designers, no question. But if this is what their mother could do, they still have a long way to go. The gold, topaz and ruby earrings looked like embers escaping the flames. Kyoya didn't wonder that Yazuha liked working with this jewelry designer; he wondered that Mr.
Hitachiin didn't explode with jealousy. 

"You! Hair parted on the left," the photographer gestured at Kaoru.

"Hair on the left?" Tamaki said delighted.

"Yeah, yeah," Kaoru's resigned tone indicated this was nothing new.

He walked up behind Haruhi and draped himself across her left shoulder. The camera began clicking away madly again.

"What?" she said suspiciously as he leaned in.

The photographer zoomed in to catch it as he seductively whispered in her ear "Fancy tuna..."

Her eyes lit up. She turned to face him then leaned back laughing. Click click click. No one would ever look at that picture and doubt that she loved Kaoru. It would make his planned claim that this was all a publicity stunt harder to sell. Kyoya began calculating how to end this when the photographer did it for him. "Necklace now."

Yes, by all means, stop this chain of events.

Someone handed Kaoru a velvet box. Haruhi gasped when he opened it. Another bird. This one a golden phoenix. But where the peacock had been mischievous and coy, this was a vibrant creature screaming out feminine defiance. Kaoru slipped behind her, draping the necklace around her throat. The effect was instantaneous. If the gown had looked like fire before, it was now clear that it was the phoenix rising from its own ashes that had set it aflame. This, Kyoya thought, this was the dress he wanted for their engagement party. Strong, bold, undefeated. A phoenix, an ootori. He didn't care how much this ensemble cost. And it was going to cost a lot.

Kaoru finished snapping the clasp closed and, still leaning over her shoulder, looked down at the necklace then up at her. Haruhi gave him an undaunted look during his inspection. "Well?" She said upon completion.

"It suits you."

"It would suit anybody."

"Not like it does you," Hikaru said as he came up on her other side. Kaoru's arm was still wrapped around her shoulder when Hikaru's slid around her on the other side effectively trapping her between them. Kyoya didn't think it was possible for the photographer to shoot any faster than he had been, but apparently Kyoya was wrong. He gritted his teeth.

"You OK?" Tamaki said.

"I promised this wouldn't happen to her anymore."

Tamaki looked over at the twins. "Yeah, promising the twins will behave is a bit like promising it won't rain on her birthday. There are some things simply beyond the control of mortal man."

"Besides," Honey said coming up, "she's a natural at this."

"Which is good," Mori said. "Because she's a terrible actress." Coming from Mori, that was a high compliment. The thing he loved the most about her was her complete and utter honesty.

Kaoru ran a finger over the line where the necklace met her neck, then down her shoulder and
followed his finger with his lips, pressing a kiss to the bare skin. She gave him that sideways look of ever so slightly irritated but amused tolerance.

Hikaru breathily whispered into her ear "You should get Kyoya to buy you that necklace."

"Somebody has to buy it for me? I can't buy it on my own with all this money I'm earning modeling?" Haruhi said tartly reminding them that she needn't always be the recipient of their generosity.

The twins cracked up. "Haruhi, that necklace cost €200,000."

Simultaneously her hand flew to her chest just below the necklace now afraid to touch it, her eyes went wide, her jaw dropped and the twins on either side of her came in and kissed her cheeks. "Money shot!" the photographer crowed.

"You guys are screwing with me," she said, her head zipping back and forth between them.

"Maybe," Kaoru said.

"And the earrings are worth another 20 grand," Hikaru said.

She'd had it with their taunting her about money. No one would pay that much for a necklace and certainly not for earrings. Not even the kind of idiots who were paying her a full month's salary for a single afternoon's work. She put a hand on each of their chests, shoved them backwards and stalked off. "No THAT - that is the money shot!" the photographer breathed. Four Hosts leaned over as he flipped his camera to view the shot. It was all there: petite, delicate, angry, powerful, determined. The look on the faces of the men she'd pushed away saying they wanted her; the look on her face saying she didn't need them. Forget teen magazines; this one would be in news magazines, business magazines, billboards. Armand and Hitachiin would be everywhere for the next three months.

"Sorry, sorry," Hikaru said, grabbing her hand and pulling her back. "One more piece of jewelry and we're done."

She glared at him suspiciously. "What jewelry?"

He gestured towards Kaoru and stepped back out of the shot, which should have told her to be on guard. She turned around and there was Kaoru, down on one knee with a ring in his hand.

She went cold. "I already have a ring."

"Yes, but small," the photographer said. "Can Photoshop out."

Her right hand moved over her left, as if she could protect the ring from its virtual fate. It was too much for Kyoya. Angrily, he strode forward to put himself between Haruhi and Kaoru. But not before Kaoru took her right hand and kissed it, looking up under his lids at Kyoya.

"Enough," Kyoya growled.

Kaoru let go of her and stepped back. "You know this was just a photo shoot, right? It's cosplay. It's not real." Then he turned to Haruhi. "I'm sorry if we upset you. I thought you knew we were just pretending for the camera."

"Seriously. You'd have to be milord to want to give a girl a ring that big," Hikaru said.
She took a closer look at the ring. It really was gaudy and overly large. The twins smirked. She smirked back. The twins backed off, shaking their heads.

Kyoya gently touched her face. "I didn't know it would go that far."

"It's alright," she said, shaking it off. "Do you think they got anything usable?"

They were going to have a hard time finding anything that's not usable, Kyoya thought. "I imagine they did." He leaned in to kiss her. Click click click. Well, Kyoya hadn't signed a photo release. To use any of the photos of him, they would have to pay a very handsome fee. To Haruhi. He gave her a tender smile.

"Good shoot," Nina said walking by. "Still too short."

~oOo~

As stunning as she had been in those gowns, it was clear she was happier and much more comfortable in the jeans and sweater she arrived in. Cosplay time was over, they all thought regretfully. "What now?" Haruhi asked.

"Well now the real work begins," Hikaru said knowing she would never consider modeling to be real work no matter how much it paid. "All the models will be coming in for fittings and we have to make sure that all the clothes look like they are perfectly tailored."

"The models have to try on the clothes with the designated shoes so we can make sure the hems all hang right," Kaoru added. "And they have to try the accessories to make sure everything goes. This is our last chance to tweak anything."

"And some of Armand's shoes are very haute couture this time, so we need to make sure they fit the models' feet," Hikaru said.

"And because some of the models are in multiple shows, those have to be fitted as soon as they show up," Kaoru said. "Nina will let us know who to work on next. Mom will let us know what to work on next."

It became apparent that the homegrown sewing skills that Haruhi had acquired from her father and Misuzu and Mai were wholly inadequate to the professional environment. Weirdly, she was actually a little jealous of the twins' skill at alterations. She looked around to see Honey barefoot, bouncing on tip toes. "Like this," he said. "If you don't keep the weight on the balls of your feet your fall off those shoes every time." Haruhi looked at the offending shoes. They weren't shoes. They were 's' shaped soles of leather held up by drinking straws. She'd fall off them every time. Another reason not to pursue a career in modeling. One of the stylists called out to Haruhi "You! You! Bring me the green scarf." Haruhi did and the stylist screamed. "Argh! I said green, this is teal! Are you colorblind? You!" She indicated Tamaki. "Can you recognize green?"

Tamaki came back with something not even remotely green. "Wouldn't this look better?" He held it up to the model in her dress. The stylist considered for a moment. "Yes. Yes much better."

"Seriously? I come back with blue-green and get yelled at, he comes back with orange and that's OK?"

"Tangerine, not orange," Tamaki said. "Orange is darker and has a little more red in it."

"Finally, someone with an eye!" the stylist said approvingly.
"Oh please," she said under her breath as she rolled her eyes and stalked off looking for Kyoya, perversely wanting his general distain for inanities. Which is why she didn't notice the six-foot-tall plus stiletto heels with perfect skin, hair and a bag that let out a startled yelp when she ran into it.

"Oof!" Haruhi looked up startled. "I am so sorry..."

"You should be, you idiot," the woman said coldly. "You crushed my dog."

Haruhi frantically looked on the floor for the animal she must have stepped on when she noticed the woman's purse was growling. She peered into the purse and nearly got her face bit off by a snarling ball of fur and teeth. The woman gave Haruhi a nasty look of triumph then walked to the center of the room and held her arms wide. "I'm here."

Three stylists came over immediately. One gingerly took the bag trying to keep as far from the foul tempered dog as possible, another took her coat and a third pulled out a tape measure.

Hikaru came over the Haruhi. "You all right?"

"Is that another damned rich person or is she just stuck on herself?"

"Both," Hikaru said. "But the money's new." As if that explained it.

"Your dad's money is new, he's not like that." Haruhi supposed that since all her best friends came from this world, she really should try harder to understand it.

"Ah, but he's not temperamentally that way," Yazuha said joining them. "And his money is a result of his brilliance and hard work. Unless he makes a mistake, he'll stay on top. Naomi can make no mistakes and her career will still be over in three to five years, because there comes a point when no amount of makeup and Botox can keep you looking 22."

"Harsh," Haruhi said.

Yazuha shrugged. "It's no different from being a professional athlete or dancer. You know going into it that it's not forever."

The dog let out another angry bark.

"So what's the monster's tally this time?"

Yazuha snorted. "The witch or the bitch?"

Haruhi blinked. **So that's where Hikaru got his personality from.**

"The dog bit two at Versace, one at Gucci, and peed on Oscar's purse. The owner bit the head off her stylist at Channel and made the new editor's assistant at Vogue cry."

"Would you guys keep it down?" Kaoru whispered. "If that dog ever stops growling, she'll hear you."

"If you guys don't like her, why do you work with her?" Haruhi wondered aloud.

"She's one of the top ten models in the world. She sells." Yazuha said practically.

"Enough to cover the lawsuits from the dog bites?" Haruhi asked.

"That's why we have insurance," Yazuha replied.
Mori finally emerged from whatever stock room he was in in response to a long string of agitated yips.

"Aaaghhh! Stop him! He's not an employee, if he gets bitten, my insurance won't cover it!"

The twins looked at their mother. "Mori attacked by a dog? Are you kidding us?"

Mori walked over to the model's table and looked down. The dog growled again and let out three furious barks. Mori cocked his head. The fourth bark had somewhat less conviction and the fifth bark was almost a question. Mori held out his hand. The dog sniffed it, then licked it, and then promptly plopped over on his back offering his tummy. Mori obligingly gave it a thorough rubbing. The second he stopped, the dog sprang up and balanced on its hind legs begging to be picked up. Of the two dozen people who witnessed this, there were exactly six who were not utterly astonished. "That one will be my assistant," Naomi scanned the room daring anyone to contradict her. No one dared. Mori gave a half nod; he would put up with her for the sake of the dog. For a second, she almost looked ashamed at her behavior.

The twins glanced around the room. There were three other models, two tailors, a stylist and a photographer's assistant all melting as they looked at Mori and the dog. Hikaru nudged Kaoru. "Hey, you don't suppose Milord was right about women being attracted to men who are irresistible to small animals, do you?"

Kyoya, meanwhile, was seated at a small table in the corner frowning at his phone absentmindedly sipping a cup of coffee. "Not going to help?" Haruhi asked him, joining him with her own cup.

"I am the type of person who underwrites these shows, not puts them on. Besides, while I appreciate the artistry and craftsmanship that goes into creating these garments, I cannot imagine anything less appealing then spending the day catering to the vanities of a group of women whose primary value to society is that they can wear a dress for five minutes."

"You know, after this morning, I could fall into that category," she felt obliged to point out.

"If you decide to switch over from law, let me know and I will reevaluate."

"Me or the profession?"

"Which will I need to?"

She gave a small laugh.

"And not incidentally," he added, "I have actual work to do. It appears someone is taking a decided interest in our biotech. We may have to move on it sooner than I had planned. Do keep yourself available, President Fujioka."

~oOo~

"What do you mean the Hitachiin girl did my shoot?" The screech penetrated the entire workroom.

"She was here, you were not," Armand said coldly. "Next time, don't show up five hours late."

"I'm late because that monster over there knocked me over and broke the heel of my shoe which meant they had to change shoes and re-hem everything," the model spat. The monster in question was currently flopped out over Mori's lap, a picture of canine contentment. "Where is this Hitachiin
Haruhi slumped down in her seat clutching her cup of coffee close to her chest. Kyoya looked on in amusement. "Is this the woman who publicly berated my father at a school festival and fearlessly waded into a crocodile filled jungle to search for a missing friend?"

"No, this is the woman who quietly fished her books and wallet out of a fountain after Princess Ayanokoji threw them in. And I seem to recall you refusing to get into it with a certain football team captain."

"There was no profit in that," Kyoya said, unruffled.

"Yeah, there's no profit in this either."

"Especially considering she is no doubt an established model who could end your career before it ever begins," Kyoya taunted.

"Are you trying to get me to pick a fight with her?"

Kyoya gave a small laugh. "I could care less if you fight, Haruhi. But a future attorney, as well as a future Ootori, cannot allow herself to be cowed by the short temper of an obviously unprofessional woman."

Haruhi looked over her shoulder and thought about it. "I have already done the work and I will be paid for it, not her. There is nothing to be gained from rubbing her nose in it."

He gave her a genuine smile. "Have I ever told you how perfect you are?"

She considered for second. "No, you have not."

Naomi glided up to the outraged model. "I wouldn't put up with that if I were you. I'd leave right now."

"Making you the biggest name in the show? You love that wouldn't you?" She stalked over to get herself a cup of coffee.

"You know," Haruhi said under her breath, "that temperamental woman could probably use a little less caffeine in her life."

"Probably," Kyoya agreed. "But given that models are basically not allowed to eat this month, she has to keep going somehow."

Haruhi felt a surge of pity for the model, and if it had dawned on any of the hosts what she was likely to do next they would have grabbed Haruhi and pinned her to the chair. But honest straightforward Haruhi acted before any of them could think. She walked right up to the model and said "I'm sorry about your photo shoot. I didn't know they had someone else lined up for that job."

"And you are...?" The model sneered down at Haruhi.

"I'm the Hitachiin Girl."

The model snatched the coffee cup from Haruhi's hand, splashed the coffee all over her, handed the empty cup back to the dripping Haruhi and stormed off.
The guys all rushed over to Haruhi. "Are you ok?"

"Yeah, the coffee was cooling off."

Even Honey gave her an exasperated look. "They're not worried about the wasted coffee Haru-chan."

"Oh," she said.

The twins gave the model an evil look. If she had thought that dog was the devil, she had no idea what she had just unleashed.

"I'll take her back to the hotel so she can shower and change," Kyoya said.

As they departed, they heard a strange conversation begin. "Did you notice that poor model never did get her coffee?" Hikaru said.

"I did notice that," Kaoru said. "Did you notice that the salt container and the skinny and sweet container have exactly the same shape to them? If it wasn't for the label it would be so easy to get them mixed up."

"Huh," Hikaru said. "Then we better keep them away from hot beverages because steam will cause the labels to peel right off." He said as he stuck some tea water into the microwave to get it extra hot. "The only worse mix up I can think of would be if that temporary hair dye got mixed in with her hairspray."

"Ok, that's taking it too far," Tamaki objected. "You'll be messing up her job."

Hikaru looked him dead in the eye. "You think she checked the temperature of the coffee before she threw it on Haruhi?"

"Just because she's a crappy person doesn't mean you should be."

"We are famously crappy people," Kaoru said.

"In fact we're out of practice," Hikaru added. "You've been bad for us."

"You know, the dog already hates that woman," Kaoru said to Mori. "I don't suppose you'd..."

"No," said Mori.

"Would you consider just looking the other way while the dog goes off on its own?" Hikaru asked.

~oOo~

In the hotel room, Haruhi sighed. "I really liked this sweater," she said looking down at it. "I hope it doesn't stain."

"If it does, we'll get you a new one," Kyoya said lightly.

She looked at him sideways. "Is everything disposable to you?"

"It's clothing, Haruhi. It's not intended to last forever."

"It's expensive clothing, it should last more than one wearing."
"It's no flaw in the sweater if it doesn't. You can't blame inanimate objects for the failings of the people around them. It would be like blaming this house for lasting longer than its owners' ability to keep it."

She looked around her hotel room. "Do you wonder what became of them? The owners of this house?"

"The de Grantaines?"

Haruhi's eyes went wide. "What?"

"That's their coat of arms on the fireplace mantle." Kyoya waved his hand in that general direction.

She looked around taking it all in anew. "This was Tamaki's house?"

"His grandparents', more likely. They would have sold it when their fortune collapsed. But I'm sure he stayed here as a child, played in the garden. If I interpret my European architecture correctly, this floor was the family quarters. Which is why he made sure we all stayed in it together."

"It must be tearing him apart to stay here."

"I can't see why. It was purchased by an exclusive French chain of boutique hotels that was subsequently acquired by a Japanese conglomerate."

"Chairman Suoh bought this so he can give it back to them someday?"

Talking about Tamaki always made Kyoya feel like his connection to Haruhi was so frail. "Go and get cleaned up and change into something comfortable. Then why don't we order room service? They're just going to be grabbing sandwiches to eat while getting ready for the show, and I'm kind of companyed out tonight."

She went off to shower. He tried to distract himself by checking their stock price but the London market was closed. He heard the water come on followed by the hideous, flat, off key, tuneless noise that was Haruhi humming in the shower. It made Kyoya absurdly pleased. After an indulgently long shower, she came out wearing the very comfortable loungewear that Momoka had picked out. They ate in companionable silence. It was so nice after weeks of being inundated by those idiots to just have a quiet moment. She had to be feeling the same. Like him, she was a private person, a quiet person. The only question was would she want to share her private time with him or would she really want some alone time? He caught her studying him. A half smile turned up at the corners of his mouth. He pushed his plate away from him and then reached out and lightly touched her hair.

"You don't have to do this Kyoya," she said.

"Do what?"

Her half smile echoed his. "I know you're not really interested. You don't have to pretend you are."

"Not interested?" His hand stilled.

"It's ok. I'm not offended. You can't choose who you're attracted to. It's just that I'm really attracted to you so it took me a while to figure out that it was one sided. But it's obvious. We haven't really been together since that night at the resort. And whenever we are together, it never seems to go anywhere. I thought maybe the night you proposed ... but then you just stopped. And you keep
telling me I can say no. It just took me a while to realize you wanted me to say no."

Kyoya's stomach dropped. He'd offered her the out because he didn't want her to feel pressured because he was the one standing between her and disaster. But what he'd intended as a sign of respect had come across as indifference. He was losing her.

"And the other day at breakfast, when you described why I was suitable, there was no mention of passion or love, it was all merit." Her off hand started playing with the ¥500 ring then moved away like she couldn't bear to take that one off. He breathed a little easier. Then she started playing with the engagement ring and his heart stopped. He was losing her.

"The thing is, no matter how much I love you, I don't want to be the only person in a one sided relationship." She'd said she loved him in the same sentence that she said she was leaving him. He watched in agony while her hand slowly closed around the engagement ring and started to slide up. He heard her say "I think maybe..."

She couldn't be allowed to finish that sentence. He grabbed her hand to prevent her from removing the ring then found almost to his surprise that he'd thrown her onto the bed and pinned her down. Their gazes met in a moment of surprise as they had on that bed in Okinawa so long ago.

"Kyoya..." she started. His lips came crashing down on hers. If he didn't let her speak, she couldn't end it. A part of his forebrain was screaming at him not to do this, but his hindbrain didn't care. If she was going to leave him anyway, it didn't matter. He pressed his body down against hers, pinning more than just her arms. But she still didn't feel close enough. He raised her arms above her head to grasp both her wrists in one hand. His free hand opened and closed compulsively kneading her flesh as it slid down her body and encircled her waist positioning her hips more tightly against his own. He rolled his hips against hers while he hungrily consumed her lips. It still wasn't enough. He moved his hand up and grasped roughly at her breast in a motion a little too hard to be called a massage. Her breath hitched and her muscles tensed. His hand moved up, his palm firmly caressing her cheek, turning her head so his tongue could penetrate deeper into her mouth. She made a small noise, though in protest or pleasure his passion fogged brain couldn't decide.

He froze.

He couldn't do this. It did matter what she thought of him. It did matter how they ended things. He broke the kiss and turned his face away from her so he wouldn't have to see the loathing no doubt building in her eyes. After two years, she would finally hate him as she should have all along. His other hand released her wrists and he waited for her to push him away. Five or six heartbeats passed before her hands moved down towards his chest. Then, something unexpected happened. Instead of pushing him away, she turned his face to hers. She studied him, trying to figure out which part of what just happened it was real. Was he admitting to himself that he was not attracted to her or was he very attracted to her and ashamed of it? She kissed him experimentally. He almost didn't respond. She studied his face and kissed him again. This time, his lips answered hers. "Tell me the truth," she whispered.

"I want you," he answered. "I want you in every way it's possible for a man to want a woman. I want your companionship. I want your voice in my ear telling me our friends are all damned rich people. I want you telling me when I'm wrong and I want you telling my father I'm amazing. I want you in my life and I want you in my bed. I want to go to sleep with you in my arms and wake up in yours. And yes," he said, running his hands over her body, "I want you that way as well."

"Want is not love, Kyoya."

"I love you." He was surprised at how easily those words came out. And so, evidently, was she.
"You were asking about desire, not love."

"Kyoya... I..."

He sat up and raised her up as well. "I love you, Haruhi. Now get it through that stubborn head of yours that this is not just friendship; nor am I some sacrificial lamb chosen to keep you in the group. Being with you is the most selfish thing I have ever done and I have an extensive record of self-serving behavior."

"Not when it comes to us. You wouldn't hurt any of us," she said with that calm conviction that undid him once before.

"Five minutes ago..." Kyoya started.

"...you stopped yourself." She pushed back to give herself some perspective. "You are not nearly so mean as you want the world to believe."

"No," he smiled. "But I am also not so nice as you think."

"The old woman buying pottery...?"

"Are you going to hold that over me forever?"

"Yes."

"At any rate," he tapped her nose with his fingertip, "I promise I will not ever put my ambitions above your needs." He kissed her tentatively, unsure of her reaction after what he had almost done. She cautiously kissed him back. "One half hour?" she proposed.

"You think that's necessary?" The way she stiffened indicated it was. "Those idiots will be back any time now and the first thing they will do is run up here to make sure you're ok. By now they will have convinced themselves you've been hauled off to a burn ward."

"Oh come on. They're not that overprotective of me."

"Want to bet?"

~oOo~

Tamaki paced the floor. "Kyoya didn't call when they got home. Maybe the coffee was hotter than we thought. Maybe he had to take her to a burn ward!"

"But if he's not answering his phone, we have no way to know which hospital," Hikaru said.

"Maybe they left word at the hotel," Kaoru comforted his brother.

"We should go check right away," agreed Hikaru.

"Oh Takashi!" Honey wailed, tugging on Mori's sleeve, "Haru-chan is in the hospital!"

"Probably swathed in bandages, unable to move," Tamaki elaborated.

"Aaaaagghhh!" Honey cried.

Mori considered for a moment. "Wouldn't Kyoya have called us?"
"He's too distraught to think straight," Tamaki said.

"Hm," Mori acknowledged the possibility.

~oOo~

They lay side by side on the bed, barely touching, almost as if Kyoya was doing penance for his earlier behavior. Which was a pity, Haruhi thought, as she'd been a little turned on by Kyoya's losing all self-control, even if only for five minutes. But he was back in control now and he was torturing both of them. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed each finger: the first was simply a kiss, on the second his tongue ran over the skin, on the third his teeth gently bit down, she shuddered on the fourth even before he moved down and sucked on her palm. She gasped. His fingernails lightly raked up her forearm priming the nerves for the kisses that followed.

When he finally made it up to her shoulder, she caught her breath. She should be slowing this down not encouraging it she thought as her fingers curled through his hair. Only an hour ago, she had resolved to end this affair and break her own heart. It had already shattered twice in rapid succession, once more and it would be beyond healing. She could go back to being detached as she had been before she ever came to Ouran. Insulated, isolated, apathetic, alone. Safe. Her father was gone. She lost two more of her friends to graduation. Most kids look forward to their senior year of high school when they would be on top, but if Haruhi could have frozen time she would have picked her first year when they were all together. The decision not to replace Honey and Mori signaled the realization that it was the people, and not the club itself, that were special. And it was all slipping away. She gradually became aware that Kyoya was no longer kissing her. She turned to look at him and found him studying her. "Where are you?" he asked.

She paused before answering. "Somewhere between here and there."

"Come back to me."

"...I'm lost senpai. Come find me."

He gathered her in his arms, mentally shifting gears to give her a slow kiss, one of comfort not passion. Kyoya found himself wishing he had Tamaki's uncanny ability to know what a person needed, or Mori's calm stolidity, or Honey's occasionally preternatural wisdom so he could be what Haruhi needed him to be. God, fourth most qualified out of six. How very un-Ootori like. He gave her a soft smile then ran one hand down her chest in acknowledgment of that which was not going to happen tonight. She let out a quiet moan in response.

"OH MY GOD, DOES IT HURT THAT MUCH?" Tamaki's voice cut through the moment.

"WHAT?" she said, sittingbolt upright.

"Is the burn that bad? He's barely touching you and you're crying in pain!" Tamaki rushed to the side of the bed.

"Twenty eight minutes, Fujioka. You lose the bet," Kyoya said mildly.

"Do we need to get you to a hospital? Let me take a look."

Whap! "Get your hands off my shirt!" she said, slapping him away.

"The boss is a pervert! The boss is a pervert!" the twins chanted in unison.

"Hey look Takashi! They have a movie channel."
"I am not a pervert! I just wanted to make sure our little girl was ok!"

"What's on?"

"Do you know where you are now?" Kyoya asked her.

"What? She has some burn-induced delirium?" Tamaki pressed his hand to her forehead to check for a fever.

"In the den of insanity," she answered Kyoya. "Cut it out, Tamaki-senpai. I'm fine."

"Oh I don't like this movie."

"Scoot over, Ootori, you're hogging the bed."

"Who gave you control of the remote?"

~oOo~

Chapter End Notes

A/N: the name Ootori means phoenix. One might almost suspect the Hitachiins of designing that outfit just to squeeze a few million yen out of Kyoya.

I hope this chapter wasn't too long. The previous two were a both short because they didn't work mashed together; this one, I couldn't find a good place to break. Hope you enjoyed it.
Haruhi awoke to an unaccustomed warmth surrounding her. A slight shift told her Kyoya lay next to her, his arm possessively draped across her. Tamaki lay on the other side, his hand almost apologetically touching her hair. She cracked one eye open just enough to discover Honey was the warm weight curled up at her feet. She craned her neck a bit to find the twins on the floor, snuggled up in a mound of blankets and pillows looted from Kyoya's bed in the adjoining room and Mori sprawled on a chair. Her boys. Her friends. Her family. They had come to rescue her from the dark place she had been going. And they wouldn't leave her alone until she was safely back with them. She wondered if they had any idea how much she loved them. From Kyoya's getting her out of there before more trouble could happen to Tamaki's admittedly overblown but deeply sincere concern for the well-being of everyone in his little family. Especially her. Though it annoyed the snot out of her to admit it, he had correctly identified her as the most exposed and weakest of them all, without physical size or strength or wealth to protect her. From the twins making it clear that anybody who went after her would face their wrath, to Honey and Mori's quiet reassurance that anyone who successfully made it through the other four would deeply wish he had not, these were the people that cared about her. The ones she cared about. And the fact that the universe was about to make another attempt to tear them apart only made what they had more precious. She smiled and settled back down only to be immediately jolted by Hikaru's voice.

"Oh my god what time is it?"

Tamaki rolled over to look at the gilded clock. "A little after eight."

"Shit! We're late."

"Late for what?" Kyoya asked. "The show is not until this afternoon."

"Do you have any idea how much stuff has to be done before then?"

"Fine," Kyoya said, "But before everyone scatters I need you all to be back here first thing in the morning. We are going to stage a dawn raid on the biotech."

"Dawn raid?" Mori said, sitting up, looking interested.

"Can we wear trench coats and dark glasses?" Tamaki asked.

"And those cool long scarves that old time pilots used to wear?" Honey added.

"Silk scarves," Hikaru clarified.

Kyoya rolled his eyes. "It's a financial term. We're going to be sitting in a hotel room around a bunch of networked computers. I assume you can take care of that?" He looked in Kaoru's direction.

"Oh yeah, no sweat," Kaoru said. "Red or white silk?"

"I meant the computer networking." Kyoya sounded exasperated.

"That too," Kaoru said.
"And none of this leaves this room. You can't talk about it to anybody," Kyoya said emphatically.

"If it doesn't involve silk scarves and cool looking coats, who'd want to?" Honey said.

"I'm sorry, what is a dawn raid?" Haruhi asked.

"I'll explain it in more detail later, but the short version is that as soon as the market opens, we buy as much of the target stock as we can as fast as we can. The idea is to take over the company before anyone knows we are making our move."

"And where do the silk scarves fit in?"

Five guys beamed at her. Kyoya looked like he was about to blow a gasket. "Aren't you morons late for something?"

"We can make up the time. We'll call downstairs so they can get breakfast ready while we're getting dressed and we can eat on our way out the door," Tamaki suggested.

"Haruhi and I will meet you there," Kyoya said.

"Wait, what?" Haruhi turned her head, suddenly missing something.

"I have not showered yet and you will take longer to get ready."

"Why would I take longer to get ready than the rest of you guys?"

"Because you're a girl," Tamaki said as though it should be self-apparent.

"Who spent two years dressed as a guy. I don't need all that makeup and frilly stuff."

"You kinda do," Kaoru said. "You're not just a girl, you're the Hitachiin Girl. You'll be photographed and followed around when you get there. It's important for mom's line that you look good."

"Kyoya, go take your shower," Hikaru said. "Kao, go pick out an outfit for her to wear this afternoon. I'll do her makeup before we go."

He went and got a warm washcloth, a towel, and her meager makeup bag. "Close your eyes," he said.

"I hate makeup," she said grumpily. "It feels weird on my face."

"Then I won't use very much since you don't know how to touch it up anyway." He brushed back her hair and tenderly washed her face. "Is everything OK between you and Kyoya?" he said as he patted dry her skin. "I know you weren't really burned, but you did look like you were about to cry last night."

"I'm a mess and I don't even know why."

"Seriously Haru? How dumb are you? Hey, don't scrunch your face up like that..." He massaged out the stress lines under the guise of putting on moisturizer. "Let's see, Milord dumped you, your dad died, you're dating Machiavelli, and you've been told you have to leave the best school ever to live with a bunch of lead weights. If you weren't a mess, there would be something majorly wrong with you. There. I'd say you're gorgeous but you were before I started."

She opened her eyes. Apart from her eyes having a little more sparkle and depth, she looked
perfectly natural. Emphasis on perfect. "You didn't use any foundation."

"Your skin is flawless. You don't need it. But the eyeliner and mascara will smudge no matter what the packaging says so don't rub your eyes or you really will end up looking like a tanuki."

"You know what the best part about not wearing foundation is? That I can do this without messing up your shirt." She pulled him into a tight hug and nuzzled into his chest. If she had been wearing makeup, it would have left a huge smear on his shirt.

Hikaru stroked her hair. "You know we are here for you, right? In any way you need us: as your friends, as your brothers, and if you ever get smart and dump that loser, we'll be your dates for the school festival ball. Which reminds me, I have something for you." He reached in his pocket and pulled out the keychain.

"The Rosetta Stone!"

"Yeah," he said. "I picked it up in England. I figured it was perfect for you. You're as dense as granite but your value is beyond all price. And somehow you translate the rest of the world in the something meaningful for us."

She clutched to her chest as though it were the most valuable thing ever. Kyoya came in. "What's going on?"

"He gave me a keychain," she said, her voice filled with affection.

"Did you need a keychain?" Kyoya asked confused.

"I didn't know it until now, but apparently I did."

~oOo~

If yesterday was hectic, today was doubly so with the addition of hairstylists and makeup artists. Whereas yesterday models came and went from their preliminary fittings, today nobody left and the hall got more and more crowded. The little dog vigorously defended his one square meter of table space, not that anyone was actually challenging him for it. Nevertheless, when the guys arrived and let out a whistle, the little dog abandoned his hard-won territory for the much preferable space inside Mori's sphere of impenetrable calm. He made his way over to Naomi, the dog trotting at his feet, to let her know where her dog was. She looked at him for a second, unable to think of a way to thank him for taking care of her adored and spoiled dog. "I need an espresso," she said at length. "Make it a double, with just a slight touch of foamed milk."

Mori gave a slight nod and headed off with his furry shadow a step behind. Much to her surprise, the coffee was exactly as she had specified. "You should be my assistant."

"I'm not now?"

"I have four more shows this week. Whatever Hitachiin is paying you, I will double it."

"The Hitachiins are my friends. I'm not being paid."

Naomi blinked. "What do you mean you're not...? Yuzuha! Why is this man not being paid? Probably so he can tell you to stuff it and quit when he gets tired of you, Yuzuha thought. But out loud she said, "He didn't ask." She turned to Mori. "Do you want to be paid?"
He considered. "Give Haruhi the dress."

"Alright."

Mori looked back at the model. "I'm being paid now."

~oOo~

"Why don't they want me?" Haruhi asked. Kyoya started to deny it, but she overruled him. "They didn't argue with you when you said I wasn't going. They would never just go along with that."

"Haruhi, they do want you. But the closer it is to showtime, the harder it becomes to replace a model and the next six months of sales are heavily dependent on this show. If forced to choose, they'd rather have you, but that model can go down their runway and you can't."

"I didn't start that fight," she said.

"I know that Haruhi and so do the Hitachiins. I'm sure they'll ruin that woman's career after the show."

"They don't need to do that."

"Would you stop having sympathy for people that don't deserve it? Armand made the decision to use you for that shoot, the twins made her life miserable, you apologized and yet she's going after you because she thinks you are the easier target."

"Well I'd be mad too if I lost out on €5000."

"If she's one of the world's top models, it was probably more than 5000." Then he leaned over and in the disturbingly familiar tone of voice that he always used to tempt her into doing something insane said "I'll tell you what Haruhi, I'll convince them not to ruin her career if you let me buy you that necklace."

~oOo~

"Why do models always look so angry and unhappy?" Tamaki said gazing across the room at a trio of hard faces.

"Tamaki, please don't fix my mother's runway models."

Hikaru went back to adjusting the fit of the dress. But he couldn't help look over when he heard the models start to giggle. Tamaki had the three of them in various stages of ... he didn't even know what it was. Their composure was slipping, their eyes were starting to sparkle. Tamaki leaned over and whispered something in one of the model's ears and she dissolved in the giggles. Kaoru blinked. The woman was a four-star bitch and she was eating out of Tamaki's hand. "How the hell does he do that?"

"I don't know," said Hikaru. "But he's right, they do look prettier when they're smiling."

Yuzuha came up behind them. "They do at that." Her look became calculating. "Lara," she called out to the bitch, "walk for me. I want to make sure the dress moves right."

The model attempted to drop into her customary icy expression but couldn't fully suppress a little smile when Tamaki sighed. Her walk became just a little less business-like and a little more sexy. "Lilith," Yuzuha called out. That woman had even less control. The way she spun to face Tamaki
at the apex of her walk made you want the take the dress off her. Not a buyer in the room would miss that effect. "Wonder if we could bottle that," said Hikaru under his breath.

"We could give him a front row seat in the audience," suggested Kaoru.

"Put him on the stage, use him as a prop," Yuhuza said. "Kaoru, find him a suit."

"Wait, you're serious?"

"He's not going up there unless mine is," Naomi stated flatly. Yuhuza looked over at Mori, still holding the little high-strung dog, now a limp, happy mop. A couple of the other girls were eyeing him as well.

"Fine."

~oOo~

Kyoya and Haruhi strolled down by the river, looking for a cafe to catch their fancy for breakfast. They browsed through the stalls of booksellers along the left bank and paused to watch an artist paint the soft morning light reflecting on the Seine. "Not going to get it?" Kyoya asked as Haruhi started to turn away.

She shrugged with a sad smile. "As you said, I have to make a deposit on an apartment when we get back."

Kyoya's eyebrows came together thoughtfully. "Did you buy any souvenirs in London?"

"No."

"Nor any in Paris," Kyoya observed.

"As it happens, I have an unusual number of photographs to remember this trip by."

"You don't want one that you chose?"

"Why? Are you going to buy it for me if I don't get it myself?"

"Hell no. You earned €5000 yesterday. You can buy your own damned souvenirs."

"Maybe I will," she huffed in mock indignation. "Oh, never mind."

"What?"

"I don't actually have any cash."

Kyoya pulled out his wallet and handed Haruhi a €50 bill. "I'm charging you interest on this."

"Just tack another 1% onto your agent fee."

As they sat down to breakfast Haruhi said "I am sorry you're having to babysit me."

Kyoya looked at her sideways trying to figure out what she was talking about now. "Haruhi, I have at best a marginal interest in women's high fashion; I have no skills at clothing alterations and no desire to acquire such; and I refuse to be anyone's errand boy. You cannot honestly think I would
rather be there than here with you." He regarded her for a moment. "But you can and you do."

"Are you saying that if I hadn't got myself kicked off the work crew that you wouldn't be there right now?"

"Are you asking if you were there would I choose to be there with you?"

Her lips scrunched over to one side. One of these days she was going to say something that would spin him in circles.

"We have a few hours, Haruhi. What would you like to do?" he asked, pulling out and studying a tourist map. "The cathedral is right here and it's definitely one of the marvels of Europe. Or there are some museums within easy distance. Or we could catch a cab down to the Eiffel Tower."

"Or we could just go back to the hotel and neck."

Kyoya's head snapped up just in time to see her triumphant smile fade into a look of pure innocence. She leaned over and said softly "You can say 'no.' "

"You can say no, Takashi," Honey reminded his silent cousin.

Mori looked around the hall filled with talented designers and beautiful women. "Yeah."

Honey beamed up at his cousin. Under his carefully composed exterior, Takashi Morinozuka was a passionate, fun loving man who enjoyed absurdities and adventures. Though he'd initially joined the Host Club to support Mitsukuni, in some ways, he got more out of it than any of the others because it gave him the freedom to explore his playful side. And an afternoon on a Paris runway would be an excellent addition to a silly list. "'Kay! I'll be in the audience cheering you on."

One of the stylists came over and timidly took his hand (although perhaps more in fear of the dog or his owner, it was hard to tell) and led him over to be measured.

Haruhi and Kyoya strolled hand in hand along the river, heading down toward the larger hotels where a cab would be easier to find. She was surprised when he squeezed her hand of his own accord, she looked up at him and smiled as she squeezed back. A slight breeze blew her bangs in front of her eyes. Kyoya reached out and brushed them back, marveling at the rich chestnut shade as it slid across his fingers.

The hairdresser gasped at the brilliant gold of Tamaki's hair and immediately called over the lighting expert to confer on how best to accentuate it in contrast to Mori's dark perfection.

If Yuzuha had even one day she would have designed something for each of them, something that would make women swoon from ten meters. Or rather ten meters farther than they already tended to. As it was, she'd have to take the pieces she had on hand and put them together in a new way so as not to be perceived as recycling something during fashion week. She privately conceded that those two could dethrone her sons from their spot on the teen heartthrob list, which, given recent events, might not be a bad thing. Or maybe the Host Club idea was right after all. They each
appealed to a different type of girl. It was just a shame that the same girl appealed to all of them. Turning her attention back to the problem at hand, she surveilled the racks of men's clothes available to her. Fortunately, both Tamaki-kun and Mori-kun were both of model height, so it was merely a question of lateral tailoring to emphasize their lean youthful frames and of color to emphasize Mori-kun's penetrating dark grey eyes and Tamaki-kun's striking violet-blue ones so it wasn't possible to be unaware of their presence. She supposed it might be sexist, but these women liked being noticed or they wouldn't have gone into modeling. She picked out some clothes and sent them to the dressing area for the boys to try on.

The clothes and accessories Kaoru had picked out for Haruhi lay neatly across her bed. Given Haruhi's complete lack of fashion sense, it was probably better to leave them undisturbed until they were needed. Kyoya led her to the door that adjoined their rooms.

Haruhi paused at the threshold, suddenly shy as she looked at the bed. "This is just kissing, right?"

Kyoya turned back to face her, still holding her right hand in his left, softly caressing her face with his free hand and touched his lips lightly to hers. "It's whatever you want it to be."

"Don't you have any preferences?"

He gave a low chuckle. "My preferences would take a lot longer than the two and a half hours we have left to us."

"You want to make a change in the show with only three hours left?" Nina was indignant.

"It's not that big of a change," Yuzuha temporized. "We usually have a spray of flowers. I'm just substituting in young men."

"You want those women to parade past them like..."

"They're parading past nine hundred people already plus however many are watching the live stream, what's two more? And besides, men don't have to deny their sexuality to prove they belong in the world, why should women?"

Nina glared at the models fawning over the two hosts.

"Are you excited for your first fashion show?" one of them asked Tamaki.

He gave her that dreamy, princely gaze of his. "How could I not be if it brings me closer to you?"

The model blushed. She actually blushed.

"I suppose I would have a revolt now if I said no." Nina harrumphed.

Kyoya and Haruhi stood in the doorway between their two rooms and kissed until Kyoya's back begin to remind him of their height difference. From the small noise she made when he began to massage her neck, she was noticing it too. But she also had a slight hesitation and bit her lip when he led her towards the bed. He pulled out his phone.

"What are you...?" she started to ask.
"I'm setting the timer. Whenever I am with you, a half hour goes by like it's five minutes and even though neither of us cares about that fashion show, it's important to our friends and therefore we will be there. So," he said, holding up the phone, "when this goes off, no matter what we are doing or how much we are enjoying it, we have to stop."

She visibly relaxed. She had a limit. Longer than their usual one, but with no possibility of extension. One day, he promised himself, she'd feel safe enough that she wouldn't feel the need.

~oOo~

"Do I look presentable?" Haruhi asked as she slowly turned around in the dress Kaoru had laid out for her.

"Beautiful enough to make five men weep that they did not win your hand," Kyoya said softly.

"I do wish you wouldn't say things like that. It makes me feel like one of our silly clients."

"Would you prefer stunning, exquisite, lovely or acceptable?"

"I'll take acceptable." She smiled. As they exited the hotel, she stopped in front of a sleek aluminum sculpture mounted on four jet black tires. "Why is there a Lamborghini out front?"

"Because Tachibana parked it here? Oh come on, we have to get to the show somehow," Kyoya answered as though it was the only possible solution.

"We can't take the Metro?"

"It won't get us there in time. Honestly Haruhi, did you think I spent the whole day yesterday just watching stock prices?"

They pulled up to crowds of fashion groupies and photographers. Kyoya handed the valet the car keys then went around to open the door and help Haruhi out. A few people snapped pictures of the well-dressed young man in the fancy car, and a few more of the lovely young woman getting out. Haruhi adjusted her dress self-consciously. The professional photographers snapped a few more.

"What are all these people doing outside?"

"Hoping for tickets. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get into one of these shows?"

"But shouldn't the photographers be inside at least?"

"If you didn't want your picture taken, you shouldn't have become the Hitachiin Girl," Kyoya said in a soft, teasing voice.

"I didn't ask to be the Hitachiin Girl!" she snapped. "That was an accident! Oh shit, she said that out loud. A few scattered cameras become every phone and camera in earshot.

"Are you sure you don't like the attention, Haruhi?"

The third demon of the Host Club spouted fire from her eyes. "I...you..they..." She grabbed his hand and roughly pulled him inside the building behind her.

Even though they arrived a little ahead of schedule, the hall was already filling up fast. "Haru-chan! Kyo-chan! Over here!"
The small blond host, two years their senior, was standing on a chair waving excitedly like a child. When they made their way up to the jealously guarded front row seats, they were surprised to discover there were only two of them. "Where are the others?" Haruhi asked.

"You'll see," Honey giggled mischievously.

The lights went out. For a few heartbeats, nothing happened. Then a slow, intense music started up, filling the hall. Golden light suddenly flashed from the eastern side of the stage, a tight, condensed spot that slowly started to spread across the stage in softer hues as it went. But it never quite lit up the westernmost edge of the stage which remained bathed in purple and blues. Two low brick walls framed the entry to a garden backdrop. Simultaneously, Tamaki, dressed in the light, bright colors of a spring morning, entered from the east side of the stage while Mori, dressed in the dark, and rich colors of evening, entered from the west. They walked past each other with a slightly hostile, competitive look then circled around before returning to their respective sides to lean on low brick walls. The music abruptly picked up tempo and volume and the first model walked out from Tamaki's side in a stunning sundress. She paused midway between the two executing a three-quarter turn to show the audience the back of the dress, and catching Tamaki's eye. Haruhi would swear he didn't do much as bat an eyelash, but a twinkle appeared and when the model completed her turn, there was a secret smile on her lips as though at a private joke.

The next model entered from Mori's side in an evening dress. Like her predecessor, she paused, turned around this time catching Mori's almost imperceptible nod, then moved up the runway with a self-satisfied sway to her hips. It was the Host Club on overdrive. One after the other, the models paraded past them, all affected by one or both. It would not have worked with any other men. There was just something about those two. Light and dark, outgoing and reserved, beautiful and breathtaking as morning and night.

"The ultra feminist crowd is going to hate you for this," Kaoru noted.

"I'm not selling to women who hate men. I'm selling to women who want to own their men."

Overnight, every designer in Paris wanted to know where Yuhuza Hitachiin had found those two male models.

~oOo~

"Takeshi, you were amazing!" Honey said, launching himself at his cousin the moment they made it backstage after the show.

"It was surprisingly cool," Haruhi said.

"Thanks," Mori replied.

"You see Kyoya, I always said I could be a model with my good looks," Tamaki fluffed his hair for emphasis.

"You didn't model anything, you just stood there," Kyoya couldn't resist deflating his friend's ego.

"Haruhi liked it," Tamaki pouted.

"Actually, I was talking about the clothes," she said. But seeing Tamaki deflate added "but you were pretty cool too."

"See? She liked me."
"I did too," Kyoya relented.

"So what's next?" Honey asked.

"Well, Mom said as soon as we clear the hall she'll take us all out to dinner. And there will be a killer afterparty tonight," Hikaru said.

"No kidding," Kaoru added. "Tamaki-senpai and Mori-san will have their pick."

"Pick of what?" Haruhi said.

The twins gave her an identical arched eyebrow look.

"Oh."

"Hm," Kyoya said. "If we're going to an early dinner, I shall have to rearrange my plans. Tamaki, would you mind escorting Haruhi to dinner? I will join you at the restaurant. Oh, and save an extra seat."

"Extra seat?"

"If we're going to be doing business in Europe, we should have a consultant on retainer. I'm half of a mind to cancel the meeting altogether; he informed me yesterday that he will be unable to attend and so is sending his younger sister in his place."

"Younger sister?"

"Unmarried younger sister. Apparently, word has gotten around that K.O. travels with an entourage of eligible young interns. I do hope you'll be nice to her."

"We'll be nice Kyo-chan," Honey promised.

"But if she's a horse, we're ditching her before the party," Hikaru put in.

Yuzuha came up. "I called the restaurant, the table will be ready in about 45 minutes. Haruhi-chan, Kyoya-kun tells me you want us to leave that model alone?"

"It's too late to save the sweater," Haruhi shrugged.

"Spoilsport," the twins muttered under their breaths.

Yuzuha looked thoughtful. "You really are a one in a million, aren't you?"

"The best out of 350,000, at any rate," Kyoya murmured.

"Haruhi, I know I should have asked this at the beginning but we would like to make another offer to adopt you."

"What makes you think my aunt will change her mind?"

The woman shifted her shoulders. "I handled it badly last time."

"You mean you thought she would just give me up because you are rich and famous," Haruhi said bluntly.

Yuzuha just smiled. "Partially," she admitted. "But also because I thought your father would have
"Told her what close friendships you have with the boys. But I suppose he never got the chance."

"Mrs. Hitachiin, I don't want to impose..."

"Impose? Oh sweetie, you will be doing me a such a favor. I desperately need another woman in that house. Can you imagine being the only woman in a house with three men? Especially if two of them are Hikaru and Kaoru? And when I talked to my husband about having you, he more than approved, he was relieved. Like you, he is sensible and reserved and grounded and clever enough not only to make plans but to see where they're going to go. Can you imagine being the only such person living in a house with three exuberant extroverts?"

Unbidden, that world literature class came back to Kyoya. "Till you return, I will not hear two words of sense spoken together in this house." Pride and Prejudice again. He shook his head against the rush of sympathy he suddenly felt for the poor Mr. Hitachiin. Who knew a modern technology giant could have so much in common with a 19th century country attorney?

"And as for the boys," Yuzuha continued, "since joining that weird club of yours, they are the happiest they've ever been. Those are the first real friends they've had in their lives. And now they've all graduated except you. If you move to Osaka, they'll be alone again. They'll go back into their private world, and I'll lose my precious boys. I know I have no right to ask you to fix our family's problems, especially when I'm not offering anything in return besides room, board, and a ride to school."

Only a lifetime of training kept the astonishment off Kyoya's face. That woman was a master manipulator beyond what he had ever seen before. His parents, the Suohs, even the Haninozukas got people to do what they wanted through a mixture of intimidation and promise of reward. People were going to do what this woman wanted because it made them feel good about themselves to do so. If Kyoya ever wondered how this flighty, impulsive woman came to run one of the world's top fashion houses, he didn't wonder anymore.

"You don't have to give me an answer now. Think on it for a while. But do consider it please. Everyone in our house would be delighted."

~oOo~

Kaoru had drawn the short stick and sat next to the empty space where Kyoya's mystery guest would be seated once they arrived. Yuzuha sat between her boys, but with Haruhi the only other girl, the standard boy-girl-boy seating arrangement was not possible. Actually, Haruhi was glad of the two empty seats between them; the Hitachiins were in a debate over whether Haruhi needed to change before the party.

"What's wrong with what I have on?" Haruhi looked down at the dress.

"You've already been photographed in it," Kaoru said.

"Kyo-chan's here," Honey said. They all turned. The mystery lady was quite beautiful, but not particularly young. In their curiosity, they didn't notice how Tamaki had frozen. Nor how she politely scanned the table until she reached him and stopped.

"René?"

"Maman?"
'"René?"

"Maman?"

Their held breaths were released only when they rushed to hug each other.

"Haruhi," Kyoya said, "would you mind sitting next to Kaoru? I don't believe his French is sufficient to maintain conversation through dinner." It was a bald-faced lie, of course. Having grown up around the fashion industry, Hikaru and Kaoru's French was second only to Tamaki's, but absolutely no one was going to contradict him. Although Hikaru couldn't resist poking at Kyoya. "Hey, I thought you said she was a younger sister..."

Kyoya shrugged. "She is. Her brother's 54."

"Mme. de Grantaine, would you like a private table for you and your son?" Yuzuha asked. "I can have the restaurant reseat you."

"No, that would be rude of me," Anne-Sophie shook her head without ever taking her eyes off Tamaki.

"Nonsense," Yuzuha said. "Opportunities to spend time with family never come as frequently as they should." She glanced at her sons, then briefly at Haruhi.

Even as her eyes drank in the sight of her son Anne-Sophie demurred again so they let it be.

Haruhi whispered to Kyoya, "What is she afraid of? Are they going to get in trouble for this?"

"Possibly," Kyoya said. "It does technically violate their agreement with Shizue Suoh. However, shortly after Tamaki left for Japan, Mme. de Grantaine closed the account the funds were being deposited into and vanished. Since then, the money has been deposited into a trust fund. Apart from adding a 'pass on death' to Tamaki, she's never done anything with it. It appears her primary motivation was never money but to give the Suohs a chance to get to know Tamaki, an opportunity they have regrettably squandered. And as for Tamaki, Shizue could cut him off, but as of this morning, Tamaki has ¥1.2 billion in my investment pool. I can move that into an index fund and he could live off the proceeds for the rest of his life. Not in the manner to which he is accustomed, but better than most people."

Haruhi blinked. "You've freed him from his grandmother."

"If he so wishes. I think he is still hoping to reconcile his family. At any rate, I will have Tachibana make sure that if Tamaki's bodyguard reports this encounter, he includes that she was a last-minute substitution and neither had any way of knowing the other would be present."

"Madame Suoh will never believe this was chance."
Kyoya gave a cold smile. "Consider it my way of letting Shizue Suoh know she miscalculated. She hurt my friend, threatened the woman I love, and tried to destroy my family's company. She assumed she was safe because I couldn't go after her without going after the Suoh Group which would hurt Tamaki. But being born third does not mean it is safe to dismiss me as others have."

"Wait, is this about protecting your friends or proving you are better than your brothers?"

"It can't be both? I saved my family's company, now I need to prove it was not a fluke. And make it clear to the world that for one more generation at least, you do not mess with an Ootori."

"Just when I think you've become a really nice guy, you turn out to be Kyoya-senpai after all," Haruhi grumbled.

~oOo~

Dinner ran long; no one was willing to interrupt Tamaki's precious time with his mother. He regaled her with stories of the club and if his versions made him out to be the dashing hero more often than not, not even the twins were inclined to correct him. "And what have you been doing, Maman? Tell me everything that's happened in the last four years."

His mother smiled at his childlike insistence. "There's not much to tell. I work when I can..."

"You have a job?" Tamaki interrupted. "Does that mean you're better now?"

"...better..." she said. But still not well. The subtext was plain.

Tamaki was torn between dismay and elation. "What do you do?"

"I'm a housekeeper."

"Housekeeper?" Dismay was winning out.

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with being a housekeeper," Haruhi spoke up, jabbing her finger at him. "You'd be lost without Shima-san."

"I'm not that bad!" Tamaki protested.

"No?" Kyoya observed. "I seem to recall Shima had to stop you from running out of the house dressed in your Ouran blazer, pajama pants and bunny slippers once."

"I was in a rush to get to school."

"On a Sunday," Kyoya said.

"I was worried about Haruhi!"

"And after you realized you were worked up over a dream...?" Kyoya continued.

"I called everybody. But you all came running."

"Hey, we just wanted to see where Haruhi lived," Hikaru said.

"And this way, she'd be mad at you, not us," Kaoru finished. Apparently now that Kyoya had taken the first shot, it was now open season on Tamaki. In a perverse way, it was even more comforting to Anne-Sophie than their polite behavior had been for the friendly teasing showed they were truly friends, something René had sacrificed as a child to spend time with his ailing mother.
"Hey! You guys said you were just in the neighborhood," Haruhi said.

"We were in the neighborhood because Tama-chan drove us there." Even Honey was rolling over on Tamaki.

"This is not all on me."

"It pretty much is, boss."

"Mommy! The children are misbehaving."

Somewhat to Anne-Sophie's surprise, the black-haired boy beside her and not the girl answered. "They behaved themselves for almost three hours. You can't really expect more."

Tamaki started to grow mushrooms, so Haruhi relented. "It's all right, senpai. I got over being mad a long time ago."

"Yay," the twins said in unison.

"Although stalking me at the supermarket was kinda creepy."

"That was your dad's idea," Honey said.

The trio of idiots gasped in horror. Don't say that! they were clearly thinking, bringing up her dad might upset her.

"Yeah, I figured," she said.

The trio exhaled in relief.

"But we did get a good stew pot out of it," Mori said.

"Haru-chan makes the best stew pots!"

"Yeah, you should cook for us more often," the twins said.

"You idiots!" Tamaki yelled. "She's not your servant."

They all froze in horror and turned to Tamaki's mother. "I forgot ... I didn't mean..." Tamaki stammered, "that is, I mean... but you're like the head housekeeper, right? You direct the maids, you don't actually clean the house yourself."

"Yes, René, I actually do clean."

"But it's physical work! Your health...You must not overtax yourself. Kyoya," Tamaki's voice dropped to that soft, commanding tone of his, "surely one of our companies has an office job that would be mentally stimulating but not physically demanding."

Kyoya nodded. "I'll look into it."

"René, I like my job. I know you and your father would consider it beneath me - there was a time when I would have thought so too - but it turns out I am stronger than I thought."

Tamaki nodded but threw a distressed glance at Kyoya who gave a slow blink and imperceptible nod. They would find her that job, although whether or not she would take it was another matter. At least they've learned not to bully everybody with their money, Haruhi thought.
"A lot of things have changed since you left, René," his mother said. "Some of them for the better."

A man passing through the restaurant stopped at their table and put his hands on her shoulders. "Anne-Sophie," he said in her ear, "it's time to go."

"I can't!" She protested. "Don't you see...? It's René!"

"I know, I recognize him from the photo on the mantle."

Tamaki's world spun. It was a central tenet of his life that his parents were faithful to each other even though separated. And what the man said next didn't help.

"You must get your rest. You are finally in remission. The doctors don't want you to do anything that might trigger a relapse."

Tamaki felt a surge of jealousy on behalf of his father. "Maman, who is this man?" And why has he seen the inside of your house? And how does he know what your doctors say?

Anne-Sophie looked back and forth between them momentarily taken aback. "You don't recognize your Uncle Richard?"

"Your son hasn't seen me since he was young," he said, amused. "Nephew." He scanned the table. "K.O. did not come?"

"You cannot conduct business with only one party, and you were not to be here," Kyoya interjected smoothly. If the others were confused they at least kept it to themselves. "Tamaki, perhaps you and your mother could have brunch tomorrow. The element of surprise has a limited life span anyway."

Tamaki watched her leave with a mixture of anxiety and wistfulness.

"Cool," Hikaru said. "Now that that's over, let's go to the party."

~oOo~

The twins were right. It was a killer party. When they got there, Kyoya held Haruhi back for a minute. She looked at him quizzically. In answer, he nodded towards the building. Photographers swarmed over Yuzuha and her sons. "Thank you," she mouthed, for sparing her that. Then Tamaki and Mori stepped out of their car, celebrities of the moment. Cameras went off everywhere. It was like pouring gasoline of a fire. Haruhi could swear Tamaki's hair was glinting bright gold in the sunlight even though it was night. "Does he bottle it somehow?" she muttered.

Kyoya merely smiled. "He is our host king for a reason."

Out of nowhere, girls behind the red velvet rope began producing photos downloaded from the internet and sharpies. He signed five or six of them. One girl even had him sign her phone. "Really?" Haruhi said, annoyed at the girl's stupidity. Then he got to a girl with nothing to sign at all. Sorrow filled her eyes as though she has somehow failed him, but Tamaki, ever the perfect princely type, lifted her hand to his lips and gave it a slow, lingering kiss then let her hand slide from his as he raised his hand to her chin to gaze into her eyes, then ran his fingers through her hair letting the strands fall away one by one as he moved on. The girl made a small noise and fainted.

"Twenty four hours ago, she didn't even know who he was," Haruhi said tartly.

Mori would have been completely eclipsed but Honey came running up. "Awwwww," the girls all intoned at the sight of the very good looking, gentle giant and the small child who adored him. "Is
that his son?" asked one. "His cousin, apparently," another answered. You could hear the girls' hearts crack open.

"At least we won't get this stupid kind of attention," Haruhi said as she got out of the car.

"You think not, Hitachiin Girl?" Kyoya answered.

Click, click, click, flash, click, flash, flash, click.

"I could kill them for this," she muttered. Kyoya hoped she could appreciate that she was dating the one other person in their circle who didn't want that kind of attention. But at least the security at the door was decent. There were still photographers of course, but everybody was screened which meant they weren't intrusive or out for embarrassing photos. There was a dance floor governed by a largely superfluous DJ as the karaoke setup had been taken over by actual pop stars mostly doing each other's songs. Models and show staff filled the hall and drifted around an amazing buffet. True, they'd just come from dinner but the final hour and a half had been spent talking, not eating. Fortunately, this was Europe and the restaurant took this to be completely normal. The food on the buffet was all in bite size portions but there had to be fifteen different types of desserts. "Planned for Honey-san, did they?" Haruhi said as she surveyed the spun sugar doves presiding over egg shaped cupcakes, ice cream sculpted into roses surrounding a hummingbird shaped ice sculpture, white and dark chocolate swans swimming through a sea of fruit cut and arranged into flowers and hearts, and a cheese and vegetable tray laid out like a peacock. "Kinda taking this bird theme to extremes, aren't they?" Haruhi said.

"The party is a marketing event," Kyoya answered. "The theme this year was birds. Speaking of which, that bracelet was quite lovely."

"You already blackmailed me into the necklace."

"Yes, but Mori-san ended up getting you the dress, so I'm really no more out of pocket than I was planning if you get the bracelet as well."

"Don't push it." She was the reverse of every other woman on the planet. "Why do you keep trying to buy me stuff anyway?"

"Because people are shallow and stupid and judge on appearances."

"And why should I care with those kind of people think?" She said disgustedly. Then her eyes flew open "Oh my God, they have a whole table of sushi including…"

Fancy tuna. She made a beeline for it but never got there. Hikaru intercepted her inches away from her goal when he grabbed her hand and pulled her out onto the dance floor. After his dance, he handed her off to Kaoru who handed her to Tamaki, who handed her to Honey, who handed her to Mori before Kyoya came out and claimed a slow dance. And continued to slow dance with her through the next two songs, even though they weren't slow.

"Quit hogging Haruhi," Tamaki came up. "It's time to give her back."

"It's still my turn," Kyoya said continuing to dance with her.

"You've had her for three songs now."

"You learned to count. I'm very proud."

"Three songs, Kyoya. The rest of us only got one."
Kyoya considered playing the fiancée card, but as this was Tamaki, that would have been cruel. "Don't you have some supermodels drooling over you?"

"They're not as beautiful as Haruhi." It was the way he said it with complete sincerity that twisted at Kyoya's heart. The man still loved her. Kyoya bowed to her and allowed his best friend to cut in.

It took until Honey's turn in the rotation before Haruhi could finally finagle a break. "Have you been to the dessert table, senpai? I really wanted to try one of those ice cream roses before they're all gone."

Honey's eyes lit up and he dragged her over to the table. "Try the pink ones. They're strawberry, they're the best!"

"You've tried them all?" Haruhi wondered where he put them.

"Uh-huh," he nodded. "All seven flavors. The dark red ones are raspberry and the dark blue ones are blackberry. They go really well together."

"I don't think I can eat three of these."

Honey nodded sagely. "It is a lot at once. But if you take break, you should come back and try those two together. Meanwhile the cupcakes are really good too."

Haruhi had the most peculiar feeling they weren't really talking about ice cream anymore. She tried to bring the conversation back to the table. "If I'm going to eat that much, I'd probably rather have the sushi."

Honey scrunched his face. "I don't think you should mix raw tuna and ice cream, Haru-chan."

Another four dances - Mori, Tamaki and the twins - and Haruhi begged off saying she needed to get a drink. Hikaru snagged a glass off a passing waiter's tray and handed it to her. She gagged on the bitter taste and the twins roared with laughter. Giving them a surly look, she stalked over to the small table from which Kyoya had been watching her and set the glass down with a little more force than necessary. "OK, is this decent champagne or did they just give me some cheap crap to make fun of me for being a commoner who didn't know the difference?"

Kyoya arched an eyebrow the tasted the glass. "It's passable. It's not the finest made, but certainly acceptable."

"Yuck," she opined. "Why do people drink this stuff?"

Kyoya shrugged. "About half the people drink it because it has cachet and it makes them feel rich. About a third drink it because it's socially acceptable to get tipsy on champagne. And the remaining third drink it because they actually like it."

"You know that adds up to more than one, right?"

God he loved this woman. "The groups overlap," he said. "But if you don't like it, don't drink it."

"I wonder if they have any sparkling cider," she mused.

Kyoya shook his head. "Too obvious. It never looks like champagne." He raised a hand and snapped his fingers. Instantly a waiter appeared.
"Sir?" The waiter asked.

"The lady would like ginger ale in a champagne glass."

"Sir," the waiter bowed and moved off.

"How do you do that?"

"What?"

"Make servants appear whenever you want them?"

He gave her an amused smile. "It's the natural order of things. I call, they come."

"You know I'm never going to be like that, right?"

"Haruhi, any man who wants to change you doesn't really want you and certainly doesn't deserve you. After we're married, you may go on treating our staff as though they were actual human beings if it pleases you to do so."

She gave him a sideways look. She was never quite sure if he was teasing or serious.

The waiter came back with her glass. Kyoya was right. It did look like champagne but tasted much better. She gazed across the room, her eyes settling on friends. Each of them was at least three deep in models, starlets and pop singers. Tamaki had seven. "That's their natural environment, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"But not yours?"

"I won't deny the attention is pleasant, but I find it hollow. Very few of those women are either smart enough or educated enough to keep up with me."

"Not everybody wants the same things, senpai."

Funny how she used what should have been a term of respect whenever she wanted to chide him.

"Precisely," he said. "Rather than pursuing long term goals, these women have chosen to spend their youth pursuing a possibly lucrative but definitely transitory career. And if their egos can recover once the fame has fled, they can go on to fine life after. But I'm not interested in rescuing a woman from poor choices if her ego cannot."

"Why do I put up with you?"

"Because you know I'm right. But enough philosophizing. Would you care to dance?" He nodded towards the bandstand from where the opening bars of the waltz that they had first danced to at the Ouran Fair drifted across the room.

"Is this part of the natural order too?"

"Sometimes the natural order takes a little bit of nudging," he smiled.

~oOo~

Tamaki watched Kyoya and Haruhi glide across the floor to the familiar strains of a long-treasured memory with envy and a little bit of sadness, before turning back to his bevy of beauties with twice
his normal charm.

~oOo~

As the waltz turned, Haruhi thought she saw Tamaki watching them with a look of loss and pain. The waltz turned away again. By the time it turned back, Tamaki was whispering into a girl's ear while she giggled and dissolved against his chest.

She looked back at the man who held her in his arms, who had never so much as glanced at another woman since being with her. She was tired of living with ghosts and she was tired of being alone. "Would it be rude to leave when this dance is over?"

~oOo~

Haruhi removed her makeup, brushed her teeth and took a long shower, her thoughts unusually quiet.

She dried herself off and went to her suitcase, and stared for a while at one of the few articles of clothing from which the twins had not removed the tags, indicating they were in favor of her returning it.

Satin and lace.

It was not sexy in the revealing sense of the word; indeed, it flowed past her knees clinging in a way that hinted but showed nothing. There were no lace covered cut-outs over private places, no sheer fabric making promises. Just soft, opaque, cream colored charmeuse with a touch of lace at the edges. But it draped just so, drawing attention to her tiny waist, making her small chest seem rounder by contrast. And it was inexplicably elegant. She clipped the tag with her fingernail scissors.

She went to the door that adjoined their rooms. Kyoya sat on the bed, fresh from the shower himself, wearing his pajama bottoms with a towel draped across his still damp shoulders, his computer on his lap as he moved funds between their various accounts. There would be no time tomorrow once the dawn raid commenced to make these fine adjustments. Unaware he was being observed, he had let his genial façade completely drop away. There was nothing on his face but raw cunning, refined intelligence, and laser-like focus. To an intellectual like Haruhi, it was a potent aphrodisiac. She watched him for a long while unwilling to disturb him, unable to turn away. After a time, the keystrokes took on a finality as he started logging off and closing windows. "Did you need something, Haruhi?" he asked without looking up.

"Yes."

When he received no further answer, he looked up and for an unusually long minute let his eyes skim appreciatively over her form. "Then come and get it."

She moved over to the bed and lowered herself gingerly to the edge. "You plan to rescue the de Grantaine's fortunes."

"It will annoy Shizue Suoh," he deflected.

"You don't fool me, senpai. You are kind as well as amazing." She reached out and touched his hair with a single fingertip.

His gaze went straight into her soul. "If you mean to test whether I truly desire you, then I will give be you only one warning: Ootoris do not fail tests. Do not begin something you do not intend to
She leaned in, her lips passing over his in a silken whisper. Her hand slid down and brushed over the tiny hairs on his face without making contact with his skin. He trembled ever so slightly. *This was something new,* she thought. Kyoya Ootori was finally at her mercy. She placed her hands against the headboard on either side of him so she could control how her body draped across his. She shifted her weight noting how his breathing stopped as the silk nightgown slipped across his bare chest. She parted her lips but never made contact with his so their breath alone mingled, then she turned aside as if to whisper in his ear. Instead, her tongue traced up the outer edge of his ear then down so she could nibble on his earlobe. A low noise rumbled in his throat, calling her attention away. His mouth made a lightning fast strike to capture hers, but she twitched away just in time. Her lips slid down centimeter by centimeter until they reached the towel draped across his shoulders. Her hands still braced against the headboard, she took a fold of the towel in her teeth and lightly peeled it away. It took her three maddening repetitions to move enough of the towel to let her play at the hollow of his neck. His shoulder muscles were tense as a supercoiled spring, his hands clenched into fists around the base of the hapless pillow. "Do I get to respond?" He asked in a low, controlled voice.

Her knee grazed against his thigh. "If you haven't responded already, Ootori, you failed the test of desire."

He definitely had not failed. She sat up for a minute and regarded him thoughtfully. This dangerous, active Haruhi. "One half hour."

Goddamnit, she put a limit on them. But he kept his voice light and teasing as he responded, "one half hour till what?" He held his breath, dreading the response.

"One half hour until you can move your hands."

He thought about protesting her cruelty, but was afraid she might back away entirely. "Agreed. But no extensions." *Oh what the hell, he thought, your first time, you should be the recipient of the seduction.* He abruptly wished he hadn't thought that. *Was this her first time? How far had she and Tamaki gone?* He reached up and took her face in his hands. As he studied her, he realized he didn't care. Whatever had happened was in the past. He leaned forward and kissed her lightly.

"You cheated," she said.

"It doesn't matter," he said, confirming out loud the conclusion his brain had reached.

"It doesn't matter when you break the rules?"

One hand slid around her neck and the other around her waist pulling her close. It was his turn to brush his lips tantalizingly across hers. "You can make me start again, if that's what you want."

She wasn't sure she would go on breathing if he released her. But on the other hand, she couldn't just let him win. "I don't think that's compensation enough." She looked at him under her eyelashes and said in a low, seductive voice, "But if you want to, you can pay me back with your body..."

His eyebrows arched up to hear his words and his intonation coming from her. For the second time that day, she'd rendered him speechless. He pulled her hard against him, his tongue plunging deep into her mouth. Her fingers raked through his hair in answer. Her little sound of pleasure turned into protest when he broke the kiss. He gave her a self-satisfied smirk, pulled her on top of him then rolled her on the bed. She lay pinned between the soft sheets and his hard body. He came in for a kiss that brooked no opposition, nor had she any to offer. The hand behind her neck slid...
forward and down to the base of her throat before drifting sideways, pushing the top of the nightgown with it. He gazed at her bare shoulders as though pleased with his accomplishment then followed it down to explore with his mouth.

If I'm going to stop him, Haruhi thought, I need to stop him now. She didn't want to stop him.

His hand slipped lower still and paused as if only now realizing that this was a nightgown and not a dress; she wore no bra underneath. There was nothing but a thin layer of silk between his hand and her breast. His smile warmed his storm gray eyes, please at how she flowed in the cup of his palm.

Her hands traced over the lean musculature of his back then around to his defined chest. In his case, slender did not mean insubstantial. It was no wonder the girls all squealed when the guys took off their shirts on school physical day. He gave her an insolent smile, partly because he was enjoying the feel of her hands on his chest and partly because he knew she was enjoying the feel of her hands on his chest. She caught the look and slapped the delightfully offending pectoral.

"That was uncalled for," he said.

"Oh, it was entirely called for."

"Is it so very wrong to appreciate being appreciated? Don't you appreciate it?" His hand moved back to her breast and his thumb began tracing over her breast beneath the thin fabric.

Whatever tart rejoinder she formulated died in the shaky breath she drew. He tried to slide the fabric down a little farther, but it wouldn't go as long as the other side of the nightgown remained atop her shoulder. He remedied that, then lifted her free of the fabric, moving down himself to better "appreciate" her body. He kissed and sucked and nibbled until she thought she would go mad. Her hands grasped at his hair, at his shoulders. Just when she thought she couldn't take any more, he moved over to the other side, leaving his hand to continue tormenting the first.

"Kyoya," she breathed, not sure what she was asking for.

In answer, his leg moved against hers, a gentle upward caress, then again, each time pushing her nightgown up a bit higher.

She tugged sharply at his shoulders and though there was still so much he wanted to explore down there, he obligingly allowed her to reposition him until they were face to face once more. Somewhat relieved, her hand slid down from his shoulders, down his torso, past the slender waist, down to his hips where they seemed to find a natural resting place. It was with a start she realized her hands were grasping bare flesh, held there inside his pajama bottoms. He shifted his hips and the fabric slid down an inch or so on one side. He repeated the motion on the other side with the same results, then again. She started to remove her hands but that only completed the process. He moved his weight again and the pajamas were gone altogether. His hands traced over her body. She sat her up and peeled it from her body, before laying her down again. Only thin cream satin panties trimmed in black lace covered her now. He ran his hands over her, slipping one behind her waist and lifting her hips just a bit. Instead of falling when he released her, they rolled against his invitingly. He removed the last piece of her clothing then settled on top of her. They shared several long breaths, unmoving. "Are you sure?" He asked softly. She nodded shyly. Then he gave a slow, passionate kiss and made her his own.

~oOo~
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~oOo~

The chirping alarm clock rudely pulled Kyoya from the first truly restful sleep he'd had since he was eight. He cracked open one malevolent eye contemplating the fastest way to destroy the clock. Before he could act, a soft, slender arm reached across him and silenced the infernal device. A surge of contentment washed through him. This was an unexpected benefit of a lover. He gave her a kiss in gratitude before his brain began racing ahead. He'd allotted 40 minutes to beating up the clock before finally succumbing to its dictates, 10 minutes to shower, 10 to shave and get dressed, 20 minutes to inhale coffee, 40 minutes to review his plans one last time. Kaoru said it would only take 5 minutes to add Kyoya's computer onto the network he set up, but Kyoya set aside 20 in case Kaoru was wrong. And another 20 minutes to explain everyones' roles to them before the market opened. How much of that could he blow off? Haruhi snuggled a little closer. All of it, he decided. Except the computers and the clothes, and the latter was only so she didn't have to be embarrassed.

"Do we need to get up?" she asked sleepily.

"Not yet," he answered, and the next 40 minutes slotted to hating the rising sun were instead spent drifting in and out of sleep, only waking every few minutes to run his hands over the beautiful creature next to him, assuring himself she was still there. Why did he have to pick this morning to take over that damned company? His burst of irritation must have registered because she began to nervously run her fingers in little circles on his chest. He pressed a kiss into her hair and squeezed her shoulder to reassure her.

"What happens next?" she asked in a small voice.

"It depends what you mean by next," he said gently stroking her hair. He rolled onto his side and propped himself up on his elbow so he could watch her face in case he answered wrong. "In the short run, we should get you bathed and dressed before those morons come looking for you." He paused, not wanting to end this moment but unwilling to share it. It was theirs, the two of them. The others didn't need to know. He took a breath. "In the medium term, we should get you to a doctor and get you on a reliable form of birth control. We'd be fools to think this can't happen again. And we need to decide where you are going to live once we get back to Japan."

Haruhi blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you could go to live with your aunt, but there's not a single living person - including you and your aunt - who really likes that option. We can renew the lease on your old apartment, but as my team has repeatedly reminded me, it is not an easy building to secure. We'd have to lease out one of the neighboring apartments on either side and set up a station there, or at the very least have a member of the Black Onion Squad move in. We could find you an apartment in a security complex, but that will be more expensive. I'd pay the difference of course, since it's my fault you'll need it. You could move in with my parents and get to know them better, but frankly, I don't recommend it. My sister would love to have you, but Shido is very conservative. He'll want you to live under the same rules you did when you stayed with them last time and he won't approve of this." Kyoya ran his hand over Haruhi'a naked body and pulled her into a long, slow kiss. He gently stroked her hair then gave her a light kiss on the forehead before settling back onto his side. "You could take the Hitachiins up on their offer, but the twins have no concept of privacy and you are a
private person. And lastly, I was planning on getting an apartment. You could live with me but that will raise more than a few eyebrows at Ouran."

"It's also kind of a long commute from America."

"I'm not going to America. At least not this year. I promised your father I would take care of you and I can't do that from another continent. Which brings us to the long run: we have to decide where we are going to college. I still am leaning towards Harvard or Stanford. Stanford is not far from San Francisco, we can tour it while we're there. Berkeley is there as well - it's not as good for business connections, but their law school is first rate and their science and engineering are excellent so I could use it to look for future ventures to capitalize. Harvard is on the other coast and will have to wait for another trip."

"Kyoya! I'm not going to let you throw away your dreams for me."

"I'm not throwing away anything, just delaying it. Those schools have been there over a hundred years. They can wait one more. You need me now. One thing I've learned from a family of doctors is that some things require immediate attention and putting it off can mean losing everything. And while you process all that..." He tapped her nose and got out of bed.

He's giving up everything, she thought. He's worked to get into those schools so he can surpass his brothers as long as I've worked to become a lawyer. Oh mom, please help me. It's all gotten so complicated so fast.

When he returned, he was wearing a light bathrobe and carrying a tray. On it, arranged in a neat triangle were a lavender rose, a glass of juice and a small white pill. She looked up sharply.

"If you get pregnant Haruhi, they will expel you from Ouran and no amount of money will change that." It was there, unspoken: I will not do to you what your father did to your mother.

She looked at it uncertainly. "How does it work?"

"It will not stop anything that has already started, but it will stop anything that has not yet started from doing so."

"What if it's already too late?"

He didn't think this was the moment to discuss the biological timeline of human conception, and the damned thing wasn't 100% effective anyway so instead he said "We can get a home pregnancy test in a few days. If you are, Las Vegas is only a short distance from San Francisco. If the movies are to be believed, we can get married there with only a few minutes' paperwork. But the sooner you take it, the better it works."

After a hesitation, she took it. Kyoya felt peculiarly disappointed. What the hell's the matter with you? he though viciously. You should be relieved. It saves you embarrassment and keeps her safe. Ouran is what she wants, what she's worked so hard for. I don't care how much your father wants grandchildren, he can get them from Yuuichi or he can wait. The old man is not worth messing up her life for. But it wasn't for his father that he was disappointed.

He sat down on the bed and pulled her to him, stroking her hair gently. "There no guarantee anything would have come if it anyway," he said to her as much as to himself. He held her for a long while before getting up to run them a bath.

The bath was necessarily short as they had spent so much of their time already and as they dried each other off, she said "we'd have gotten cleaner of we'd taken showers." Ever practical Haruhi.
Kyoya smiled. "Why don't you order breakfast while I go shave?"

"What do you want?" she called out as she picked up the phone.

"Just coffee."

"You can't live on just coffee."

He heard her order croissants and fruit to go with it. "Not too much," he said. "Extra food attracts vermin."

"Oh come on, a couple rolls aren't going to attract rats," she said as she went through the door to her room to get dressed. A knock a few minutes later brought in room service and Kaoru.

"I need your computer to put it on our network," he said to Kyoya grabbing a croissant as he passed. "You got a password on this thing?"

"Of course," Kyoya answered.

"You need my password too?" Haruhi said.

"Oh please," Kaoru rolled his eyes. "I hacked yours two hours after you set it."

Hikaru came in. "I thought we were meeting in our room since it has that sitting area and we set up the computers in there." He helped himself to the coffee. "This all you ordered for breakfast? Hey boss, your hotels share recipes? Any chance they have those cheese puff things from Osaka?"

Tamaki walked in. "Dunno. Call down and see."

"And order some pain au chocolat while you're at it," Mori said joining them. "Mitsukuni will be in a better mood when he wakes if there is chocolate waiting for him."

"What did I tell you about too much food, Haruhi?" Kyoya said.

"Hey! This isn't my fault," Haruhi said exasperated. "I only ordered a basket of rolls and two small bowls of fruit."

"Two bowls of fruit?" Tamaki glared at the twins. "You said there was only one bowl of fruit."

"Well, there was only one bowl of fruit left by the time you asked," Hikaru said finishing off the berries.

A small cloud of evil crankiness oozed into the room. "All right, I'm up," Honey said. "This better be worth my while."

"Oh no!" wailed the twins. "The chocolate isn't here yet!" They grabbed each other in terror while Tamaki began to frantically push buttons on the phone to speed up room service. Fortunately the waiter showed up only seconds later with a large tray of chocolate rolls and a pot of hot chocolate the consistency of warm pudding.

"So explain it to me," Honey said as he irascibly snatched a cup poured the hot chocolate and cut it only slightly with heavy cream. "And use small words because I hate mornings."

The trio looked over at Kyoya, grateful that he must answer to the demon. "There's a biotech company. I've been buying stock in them for about a year through various shell companies so no one would know it was all one buyer. Somebody else has been doing it too. I only recently figured
out it was Grand Tonnerre. I have multiple reasons to not like them and right now, we have an opportunity to make a great deal of money at their expense. I wanted to see if I could scare them into making a rash move so I had our investment pool OHC and its subsidiary MR3 buying large blocks of stock. They now think there are two investment firms trying to buy this company. They don't know about me let alone that we're all in this together. But they need this biotech to feed their product pipeline. Without it, their financial projections go flat and they're vulnerable to takeover."

There was a moment of shocked silence in the room among the guys. Haruhi was silent too, because she really didn't get any of this. "We're going to take over Grand Tonnerre?"

Kyoya shrugged. "We don't have the money..." he paused before a slow calculating smirk came over his face, "...but the Suoh Group does."

"Kyoya..." Tamaki said.

"You hand this to them on a platter and your grandmother has no choice but to acknowledge you. You father won't need Shizue to maintain control of the board which means he can tell her to go to hell. He can bring your mother to Japan, you can move into the main house, you can be the family you always should have been."

"Kyoya," Haruhi breathed.

"Shizue Suoh should have never messed with the Ootori Group," was all Kyoya answered.

"And if it doesn't work?" Honey asked, aware that business is war and battles can go either way.

"OHC started buying stock at £48. It's now at £54. With a buyout on the horizon, it won't go down."

Honey looked unusually thoughtful. "Ten percent minus commissions? That's acceptable."

Haruhi looked stunned. "Honey-senpai? When did you...?"

Mori gave her a sideways glance. "You think the Haninozuka have remained one of the most powerful families in Japan for 700 years because they are cute as children?"

"It's ok Haru-chan," Honey said brightly in his Loli voice as he went over and hugged her. "I'd rather you think of me as cute!"

Kyoya continued. "Once someone knows or even suspects that you're buying a company, the price goes up. The purpose of a dawn raid is to buy as much as you can as cheaply as you can in an attempt to gain controlling interest before anyone notices and can react."

"And what are we going to do with this company if we get it?" Hikaru asked.

Haruhi did a double take. When did the guys all become business magnets?

"Clean it up and resell it. Keep the brains and expertise, trim the deadwood and administrative redundancies. It's a small company, they need money, there are not a lot of shares and British regulations do not allow poison pills so it should be a relatively easy pickup. I can guarantee the Ootori Group will take it, but I have no problem if somebody else will pay more."

"Rules of the game?" Mori said.

"Under the British takeover rules, controlling interest is set at 50% plus one share. The people in
this room collectively own 27%. Grand Tonnerre owns roughly 28.5%. As soon as you cross over 30, you have 90 minutes to make a formal announcement of intent to buy out and you have to be able to buy up to that 50% level and willing to pay no less than you paid for your most expensive share."

"So this game is not for the faint hearted or small of pocketbook," Haruhi muttered.

"It is not," Kyoya confirmed. "I have a considerable amount of my own money in this, I'll be managing my own accounts. Tamaki, you have the second biggest stake in OHC, you'll manage those accounts. Haruhi, you are president of MR3, you'll manage that. You buy when I tell you to buy, sell when I tell you to sell. Kaoru, you're the secretary. I've prepared the buyout announcement; you drop it when I tell you and contact the attorneys in London so they can begin the necessary paperwork. Hikaru, you're going to monitor our share. Call out how much the three entities own together so we don't go over 30% before we're ready to. Once we do, you're the time keeper. That 90 minute time limit is not a joke. They'll come down in our asses if we screw that up. Mori-San, you need to monitor volume. We need to know how much of the activity is us and if there's someone else besides us buying. If the price jumps more than 5% in a single day due to our activities, we have to announce the buyout, 30% ownership or not. If somebody else is driving it, we're off that particular hook. Honey-san, you'll monitor the price. We need to know how much money we're spending so we don't over spend. We want this but Grand Tonnerre needs this. Once they realize they're about to lose it, they'll come in hard. And they have more money than we do. If it turns into a bidding war, we will lose. Everybody got it?"

All Haruhi got was that she should do what she was told. But that seemed simple enough.

The computers told them the opening bell had rung. "Opening price: £54.88," Honey said.

"54.75... 54.60."

"Let's see if we can't shake their confidence," Kyoya said. "Haruhi, sell 5000 shares."

"Sell?" She said. "I thought we were buying."

"Sell!" Kyoya snapped.

"Yeah, um, sorry."

"5000 shares sold at £54.50," Mori said.

The price hovered for several minutes then dropped some more.

"54.30... 54.25 ... 54 even," Honey said.

"Tamaki," Kyoya said is measured tones, "buy back Haruhi's 5000 shares."

Tamaki didn't hesitate.

Once they started buying, the prices started creeping back up, but they managed to acquire quite a few shares before it made it back to its opening price. Then they started buying in earnest and the price spiked.

"28%," Hikaru called out.

"55 even," Honey said.
Haruhi had expected a frenzy of "buy, buy, buy," but Kyoya was being measured, processing information the way Tamaki processed music. She glanced over at Kyoya's computer. She had one window open, Tamaki had one. Kyoya had five. From at least three different brokerage houses. Even this late in the game he was still hiding his movements. It was no wonder that no one had any idea how much or what he owned.

"28.5%"

"Someone else just bought 25,000 shares," Mori said.

Kyoya chuckled. "Good morning Éclair, how's your day starting off?"

"£55.75"

"Tamaki, pick up another 10,000 shares."

"Tonnerre just offered a buyout at £59," Kaoru said.

"Oh Éclair, don't be cheap," Kyoya said. "Offer £63."

"£65," Honey said.

Kyoya paused. They were starting to get into territory where he'd have to cash in other investments to cover. How much did he want to screw Tonnerre for what they tried to do to the Ootori group? "66," he said cautiously.

"67," Honey cane back almost immediately.

"...68..." Kyoya said.

"70," Honey said.

Kyoya's eyes darted across spreadsheets only visible in his head. "Sell," he said.

"Sell?" Haruhi said.

"Sell everything, now!" Kyoya answered.

Hikaru watched as their ownership percentage went from 29.8% to nothing in a matter of seconds.

There was silence in the room.

"Does that mean they beat us?" Haruhi asked.

"They beat us," Kyoya confirmed.

Silence again.

"You don't seem particularly upset about it," Hikaru said.

"Well, they did just pay £30 million for the privilege."

After another pause Tamaki started laughing. They all looked over at the banker's son. "They just paid £100 million for a company that was only worth 70."

~oOo~
"So we lost," said Haruhi, leaning back on the couch watching the twins dismantle the computer network.

"We lost," Kyoya said.

"But we still made money," she said.

"After expenses and fees, the club will realize 7 to 8 million pounds."

"Which is...?"

"About a billion yen."

"And that's a loss in your book?"

"I was as hoping to make twice that."

"In a single day?"

"It took eight months to set that up. Still..." Kyoya made a noncommittal noise. "Tamaki will not be able to bring his mother to Japan, but he will be able to take her to a very nice brunch."

"You really are amazing." She leaned over to kiss him on the cheek.

The twins looked up. "Hey, you're not supposed to kiss losers."

"If your definition of loss made any sense..." Haruhi said

"Is Éclair Tonnerre buying her makeup at the supermarket?" Hikaru said.

"You shouldn't be so mean," Tamaki said entering the room while buttoning his shirtsleeves.

"It's nothing personal," the twins said. "We just hate her."

"She was nice to you because she had something to gain," Honey said, "but she wasn't very nice to the rest of us."

"She wasn't that nice to Tamaki either," Mori observed. "She wanted to change everything about you."

"She was lonely and sad," Tamaki defended her. "Have you considered..." His phone rang, interrupting him. Tamaki looked quizzically at the unexpected number. "Hi dad, what's up?"

"I am sorry to interrupt your trip, Tamaki. You must return to Japan at once. Your grandmother has had a heart attack."

~oOo~

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sorry this one took a while. I am not a stock broker. I tried to do research on corporate takeovers on the London Stock Exchange. If I got the details wrong, feel free to PM me. I'll fix it as long as it doesn't screw up the story.
Chapter 29

~oOo~

The color drained from Tamaki's face even before he ended the call. The others looked at him expectantly. "My grandmother had a heart attack."

"Is it serious?" Kyoya asked.

"They want me to return to Japan immediately." Tamaki swallowed. "Actually, I don't even know if she's alive or dead."

Kyoya looked at him sympathetically then pulled out his phone. "Forgive me for disturbing you, father. I am standing next to Tamaki Suoh. He has just been told of his grandmother's heart attack but the information was incomplete. He has no idea what he is returning to."

Even over the phone, Kyoya could see his father weighing out how much to part with. "She is in Intensive Care at the main Ootori hospital in downtown Tokyo, listed in serious condition. She's a tough old bird so I wouldn't count her out. On the other hand, it's a bit premature to be picking out her next birthday gift."

Kyoya thanked his father and hung up. "Well, she's still alive but it could go either way."

The twins look up from their phones. "We can get you on the 3:00 flight," Hikaru said.

"No, no, it needs to be the first flight out," Tamaki insisted.

"There's room on the 1:30 but this is a non-stop. Even though it leaves later, it will get you in two hours earlier," Kaoru said.

"And besides, by the time we get you packed, to the airport, and through security, this is the first flight out Milord."

"Tamaki," Kyoya said in a smooth and steady voice, "you were supposed to have breakfast with your mother this morning. Go. Haruhi and I will stay and pack your bags. The twins will make the flight changes for you. Honey and Mori will arrange to get you to the airport and have somebody waiting on the other end to pick you up."

"I..." It was a feeble protest, but Tamaki really didn't know what else to say.

"It's what families do for each other," Honey said. "We can't give you much time with your mother, but we can give you this."

~oOo~

Haruhi went to the closet and began pulling out Tamaki's clothes, folding them with far greater care than she showed her own. Kyoya watched her for a minute, then went into the bathroom. He gathered up the hairbrush, toothbrush and other items, putting them into a neat pile then leaned back on the wall. Was it a sin to want the right thing for the wrong reason? If Shizue Suoh died or even had a near-death change of heart, Tamaki could take Haruhi back. True, she'd come to Kyoya last night of her own accord but the relationship was too new, too fragile to weather a storm like this. The look she'd given Tamaki during the photo session haunted him. And the way she watched Tamaki when they were dancing. Kyoya had given up so much for Haruhi and he'd never thought
it too high a price, but if she went back to Tamaki now, he'd be stuck there for a full year having to watch them together. *Please,* he thought, *please let the old woman live and wake up just as mean and hateful as she ever was.*

A knock on the door pulled him out of his thoughts. "You alright?" Haruhi said.

"Fine," he lied in a completely nonchalant voice. "Just looking for a bag in case his liquids leak in flight."

"Good idea. I saw one in here ... huh. They went to a toy store in London?"

"I find it's best not to ask what those idiots do."

He watched her reflection in the mirror as she went back to packing Tamaki's things. What had Kyoya done to deserve any of this? He was born intelligent and ambitious, he had made himself disciplined, diligent and accomplished then told to compete with a brother who had a ten year head start. He'd found the one perfect woman born in this generation only to have his best friend, his truest friend, his brother in all but blood, fall in love with the same woman. He'd reconciled himself; he wouldn't compete; he would pay the price for Tamaki's happiness. Then a twist of fate had given her to him. For one night.

One.

Single.

Night.

If he had known it was only for one night, he could have prepared himself. He wouldn't have changed anything about last night, not a moment, not a motion, but at least he wouldn't be turning inside out.

The twins came into the room, followed shortly by Honey and Mori. "We made the boss's flight change," Hikaru said.

"There will be a car waiting for him when he gets back from brunch," Honey added.

"Do you think... do you think we should go to the airport with him?" Haruhi asked uncertainly.

"Yes," Mori said. And that settled the matter. If Tamaki was the heart of the group and Honey was the font of wisdom, Mori was their moral compass.

"I almost think maybe we should return to Japan with him," Haruhi floated the idea.

Kyoya entered the room with Tamaki's toiletries in the bag. "It's highly unlikely there were seven first class seats left on the last-minute flight to Japan."

"There weren't," confirmed Hikaru.

"We were lucky to get one," added Kaoru.

"We don't actually have to fly first class," said Haruhi.

The guys all looked at her. She may as well have suggested they bungee themselves to the outside of the plane. "I'm just worried about him," she added.

"He took a far more frightening flight to Japan four years ago," Kyoya said. "He's a stronger man
than you think."

"I suppose," she said, closing the suitcase.

"Besides, if it turns out to be nothing, he can rejoin us in San Francisco."

~oOo~

Tamaki babbled pleasantly the whole way to the airport as if he was delighted to be returning home early, so why did Haruhi's gut twist so hard when she watched him board the plane?

Walking out of the airport, the day had gone gray. "What's on the schedule?"

Kyoya shrugged. "Well, we were going to see the Arc de Triomphe and wander down the Champs-
Élysées."

"Hm." The twins looked dubious. Without Tamaki to tease, it had lost much of its appeal.

"Does your mom need any more help?" Haruhi asked.

"Mom's gone," Hikaru said. "She was on the first flight back to Tokyo this morning."

"Now that her shows are done, she'll spend a day or two catching up on the backlog then take off for a couple weeks with dad," Kaoru said. "It's how they keep their marriage together when they're apart so often."

"You guys don't go with them?" Haruhi said, wondering if they were breaking up a family vacation.

"No," said Hikaru. "It's their alone time."

Haruhi said nothing as she absentmindedly fingered the ¥500 ring then clutched at the keychain in her pocket. They had all rolled their eyes at Tamaki's delusion that they were a family, but perhaps he was right. Even now, Tamaki was on a plane to see blood relatives who had never treated him well. Kyoya had only mentioned it once, but that he'd brought it up at all meant he was worried about his parents' reaction to this whole 'Hitachiin Girl' thing. The twins no longer even noticed when their parents excluded them. Heck, Honey and Mori took time out of their vacation to attend to family business. But this little group was here, taking care of each other, worrying about each other. Maybe the question wasn't how Tamaki got that weird idea, but how he had been the first one to see the truth of the matter. She gave a smile she didn't totally feel. "The Champs-Élysées ends down by the river, doesn't it? Maybe we could take Mori-senpai's boat tour when we're done."

When Tamaki's plane landed twelve hours later, his phone began to buzz with picture after picture after picture: a selfie of four happy looking guys, one squished looking Haruhi and one disgruntled looking Kyoya shoved into the back of a cab; Honey on Mori's shoulders posed so they looked like they were holding up the Arc de Triomphe; Haruhi throttling the twins when she discovered the famous street was just more high end shopping; the twins dangling Usa-chan over the rail of a boat while a frantic Honey lunged towards them; Mori dangling the twins over the rail of a boat while Honey clutched his bunny; at a patisserie, Honey surrounded by 12 empty plates and four empty hot chocolate pots. And one final picture of the six of them with Haruhi holding up a paper napkin on which was scrawled "Wish you were here" while behind and above her Hikaru held up one that said "kinda" and Kaoru held up on that said "sorta."
They called it an early evening as the sky was threatening rain. Kyoya wasn't entirely disappointed; he rather felt like he had done Haruhi a disservice. The day after your first night together should be spent holding, cuddling; not necessarily making love again (although he wouldn't have objected to that), but just being together, strengthening the bond lovemaking had left in its wake. Not trying to take over a company, packing off your best friend then trooping half way across Paris with four rivals. The problem was those four wanted to join them this evening.

Kyoya tried to distract them. "You don't have to stay in with us," he offered. "I know those models invited you to at least two or three fashion-show after-parties tonight."

"Something quieter," said Mori.

"A show maybe? Or a movie?" Kyoya suggested.

"Good idea!" said Hikaru. "Haruhi can make popcorn and we can watch the movie channel again."

"Why do I have to make the popcorn?" Haruhi said.

"You really want us to make the popcorn?" Honey said.

Visions of carbon-black kernels danced in her head. "Yeah OK," she said. "But we'll have to find a market."

This was not what Kyoya had planned. He began to appreciate how so many of Tamaki's plans all turned into three ring circuses. The key difference being that Tamaki enjoyed the circus. "We should watch it in the twins' suite, since they have the largest room." If they ensconced themselves in Haruhi's room, he definitely wouldn't get any alone time with her.

They located a store with microwave popcorn then headed back. Everyone went to their rooms to drop off their stuff and change into something comfortable; the wind was picking up making the odds of their going back out decreasingly slim.

Haruhi wandered into Kyoya's room to find him staring at his computer screen looking, well, put out was the only phrase that came to mind. "You're not upset about this morning..." She misunderstood the source, but that was probably to the good.

"I had plans," he said. "They didn't work."

"You made enough money to put every one of us through college."

If we divided it evenly. A sly smile played at the corner of his mouth. She had no idea what her share amounted to. He could pad it out of his own and she'd never know. Tamaki would, the banker's son would. Would he tell her?

"You see? I'm right," she said, thinking she'd won the argument. She sauntered over to the bed, her misplaced smugness evident, when a flash of lightning rent the air so bright and loud that even Kyoya startled. She spun to face the window, caught the corner of the bed, tripped and ended up on the floor beside it. Kyoya wasn't even aware he threw the computer across the bed until he found himself kneeling beside her. As she bit her lip to keep herself from making any noises and Kyoya...
wrapped her in his arms to stop her shaking, the twins came running into Haruhi’s room.

"Haruhi!" Hikaru shouted.

"Haruhi!" Kaoru echoed a second behind.

They looked around and didn’t see her. "You check the closet, I'll get the bathroom."

"In here," Kyoya called out.

They ran to the door that connected the two rooms.

"Why are you guys on the floor?"

Kyoya looked up. "The shadow from the bed hides the windows." It wasn't quite why they were there, but it was why they would remain there. Another flash of lightning, distant but still bright, reinforced his assertion.

"Ah," said Kaoru watching the girl plastered tightly against his friend. "I think he's got this Hika. We should go."

"No!" Her hand blindly grabbed in their direction, latching onto a blue pajama-clad ankle.

"Haru-chan! Are you all right?" Honey and Mori came rushing in.

Kyoya stared at the hand with its death grip on the fabric. He didn't sigh, but his shoulders slumped a little in defeat.

"Even if we are going to spend the night on the floor, there's no reason to be uncomfortable," Kyoya said. "Honey-san, Mori-san, go grab blankets and pillows off the beds. Hikaru, can you go find the noise canceling headphones you gave her? Kaoru," he said still staring at her hand, "I don't think you're going anywhere. You may as well sit down."

Once on the floor beside her, Kaoru gently peeled her hand from his leg and took it in his own, squeezing it reassuringly.

Hikaru came back in with the headphones just as Mori dropped a massive pile of pillows around them like sandbags around a foxhole. Honey threw a comforter over the mass and yelled "Blanket Fort!"

Haruhi smiled a bit. All that was missing was the one who promised he would never leave her.

~oOo~

Yuzuro Suoh met his son at the airport. As the chauffeur opened the limo door, he said "I appreciate you cutting your vacation short."

"Of course," Tamaki said as he got into the car. "This is a family emergency."

Yuzuro let a proud smile escape. Once in the car, he rolled up the window that separated the front from the back, giving them privacy.

"Has she called for me?" Tamaki said hopefully.

"Don't be ridiculous, Tamaki. But for appearance sake, there must be a family member in attendance in case she dies. And since she refused to let go of the reins, her abrupt absence has left
a leadership vacuum at work. If I am not the one to fill it, we could find ourselves in a power struggle for our own company. So you must be there by her side and be the dutiful grandson. Don't worry though. She's asleep much of the time and when she's not, she pretends to be so she doesn't have to talk to anybody."

"She's not going to want me there."

"No, but she expects you to be there and as we are all well aware, appearances and expectations come before personal desires with her."

"What do I do if she throws me out?"

"Sit in the hall," his father said practically. "You needn't worry about those appearances, by now the entire hospital staff will be well aware of what you are dealing with."

They walked up to her hospital room and Yuzuro gestured his son inside. "You're not coming in?"

He looked through the door frame and considered. "No. If I go in, I'll be expected to stay, and I've been away from the office through too many critical hours as it is."

Tamaki sifted through what his father said. "Do you hate her for everything she's done?"

"Of course I don't hate her," his father said. "She's my mother. But just once or twice in her life, I wish she could have chosen compassion over pride. But to do that, she would have had to have been a different person."

~oOo~

Haruhi woke practically laying on top of Kyoya and Mori while the twins and Honey were blanketed over top of her. After a moment of trying to move unsuccessfully, she started to laugh. They all woke up. "Aren't we a little old for a puppy pile?" she asked.

"No," Hikaru said.

"Not really," Kaoru said.

"Never too old for a puppy pile," Honey said.

"Woof," Mori said.

Kyoya just reached over and began petting her hair. She lay more on top of him than on Mori, but Kyoya was still jealous of every square centimeter of contact.

They laid that way until Honey's tummy let out a ferocious growl. There was a heavy silence, then they all cracked up.

"What do you expect? I skipped my snack last night."

"Sorry," Haruhi said.

"I chose it," Honey said. "I liked where I was."

"Comforting a coward?" Haruhi replied.

Honey looked up at her in all seriousness. "Being frightened doesn't make you a coward and wanting your friends with you doesn't make you weak. It's how we meet our fears that matters."
"I hide in a closet with a blanket over my head."

"Hm. That is pretty cowardly. But you're a very cute coward."

"Mitsukuni, you not helping."

"What can I say? She won the argument."

"Everybody has fears, Haruhi," Kyoya soothed her. "Some are simply easier to hide than others."

"What are you afraid of?"

There was an awkward pause before Kyoya answered. "We're men, Haruhi. You can't expect us to willingly expose our weaknesses to the world."

She thought for a moment. "What's Tamaki afraid of?" He wasn't there to defend himself.

She kept thinking about him; she kept bringing him up. Kyoya ran his hand through her hair as though he could feel her slipping through his fingers. "Being alone," he said softly.

"Losing us," Kaoru said.

"When he was growing up, Tama-chan's mother was sick a lot. His father came and went. He wanted that feeling of a close family but never had it."

"Then he moved to Japan and his grandmother rejected him," Hikaru said. "I don't know why his father didn't move into Mansion #2 to live with him."

"He was hoping he could wear his mother down," Mori said, "change her mind. It didn't work."

"I hate that woman," said Honey.

"That's why he likes to pretend we're a family. Because we do care for each other and want each other around," Kaoru said.

"And we sent him back alone," Haruhi sounded worried.

"We could only have ridden on the plane with him," Kyoya said. "Once back in Japan, our presence at his side would not have been welcomed."

~oOo~

Tamaki was unprepared for the sight that met him when he rounded the corner into the hospital room. He had expected to find his grandmother propped up in bed, covered by one of her silk comforters from home with maybe a little clip-on monitor on her finger, looking as imperious as ever. What he found was a frail old woman covered by a pale hospital blanket with tubes and wires running everywhere. On the metal tree next to her hung two clear plastic bags with tubes running into her arms.

He rushed to her side to grab her hand, only stopping at the last second when he remembered how much she hated it when he touched her. He clutched the railing of the bed instead. How long he stood there starting at her, he had no idea.

A nurse came in. "You can touch her, she won't break," she said, setting a cup of ice chips on the bedside table.
"No," Tamaki said. "She doesn't like that."

"You might be surprised." Seeing Tamaki's dubious expression she added, "at least let her hear your voice."

"I'm not sure she'd like that either."

"You obviously care about her. Everybody wants to be cared about." The nurse moved over to the tree and began changing out one of the bags.

"What is that?" Tamaki asked.

"It'll keep the blood from clotting in the stent they put in last night. It means we have to keep an eye on her for the next few days, but with luck she'll be feeling worlds better than she has in a long time."

"She was in pain?"

The nurse shrugged as she adjusted the flow rate on the IV drip. "That too, but I was thinking of how frustrating it would be for an intelligent, driven person to be trapped in a body with no energy. When you know there's so much to do and you simply can't make yourself do it, it would make you angry at the world."

"Especially if you didn't trust the decisions the people around you made," murmured Tamaki.

"What are you doing?" barked a loud voice behind both of them.

The nurse jumped and spun around. "I was just taking care of the patient," the nurse answered the irate doctor nervously.

"You were gossiping about her condition with a random visitor."

"He's her grandson," the nurse explained.

"The only two people we are authorized to discuss her condition with are the patient and her son. If that list is too long for you, I will arrange for another nurse."

"No sensei, that will not be necessary." The nurse bowed her head and quickly left.

"Was that really necessary Akito?" Tamaki asked the doctor. "She was just being polite."

"You may be my brother's friend but in this setting you will address me as sensei." Akito glowered at the young man who was plotting with his brother to help unseat him.

~oOo~

When Honey's tummy rumbled even louder a second time, they decided it was time to crawl out of their nest of blankets and pillows. "Thank you guys, for staying with me."

"I told you Haruhi," Hikaru said, "we will be there for you in any way you need us."

She disappeared into the bathroom. A few minutes later, they heard the shower come on. The twins grabbed their pillows and headed back to their room. Mori caught Honey's eye, nodded, then left without a word.

"Are you OK Kyo-chan?" Honey asked.
"Of course, why wouldn't I be?" Kyoya answered smoothly.

"You're worried about Haru-chan."

"There's nothing to worry about, the storm has passed."

"Has it?" Honey looked at him knowingly. "This morning Haru-chan asked two questions, but only three of us took the cowards' way out and answered the second."

After Honey left, Kyoya listened to the shower run for a while. If she was humming to herself, it was too quiet to be heard over the running water. Her first thoughts this morning had been for Tamaki. Last night it was Kaoru she grabbed onto for dear life. He wondered if he wouldn't have been happier in a loveless marriage, one where he wasn't expected to show his weaknesses. But the thought of any other woman in his life, in his arms, in his bed was truly abhorrent. He wanted this one. He just needed a little time with her. Time where he wasn't competing with the others, time where he wasn't fending off the twins' attentions. He closed and locked the doors leading into their hotel rooms, and he shut off his cell phone. Please, he thought, just a short while alone with her.

~oOo~

After Akito left, the nurse came back in and quietly finished making her notes. Despite the earlier comforting words, the nurse made a disappointed "hm" noise before closing the file. But she gave him a cheerful smile before she left the room. If there was one thing Tamaki could do, it was read women. The noise at the start had been genuine, smile at the end had been fake. His insides twisted up. So he did what he always did when confronted with inner turmoil good or bad; he called Kyoya.

The phone immediately rolled over to voicemail, which meant that either it was off or he was on the phone to someone else. But with all their friends right there close to him in Paris, who could he possibly be on the phone with? Except his father. Who was no doubt filling him in on whatever horrible note the nurse had just made. He wished he had the twins know-how to hack a computer. Not that he would've understood the notes if he had been able to. He felt so alone. Here, with his grandmother, with Kyoya unavailable, he felt cut off. There was one other person he could reach out to. After all that had happened, he knew he had no right, but he knew he could just the same. He called Haruhi.

The petite brunette turned off the water and wrapped a towel around herself when the pile of clothes on the floor emitted a ringtone she hadn't heard in a couple months. She dug through the mound searching for the pocket that held the phone. She didn't even have a chance to speak before Tamaki jumped in.

"Haruhi, is everything ok?"

"I think I'm supposed to ask you that."

"Kyoya's not answering. Is he on the phone to his father? Is his father telling him things they're not telling me?"

"I'm not in Kyoya's room so I don't know, but if he is talking to his father, we should not interrupt and let him get all the information he can. Does this mean things don't look good there?"
"I don't know," Tamaki said. He hadn't meant to show his anxiety but once he started talking, he couldn't stop. "She hasn't woken up since I've been here. My dad is talking about taking over her position at the bank. She looks so small and helpless, Haruhi. There's tubes running everywhere. She's always been this tower of strength. Well OK, a little tower. But she stood on a high hill. She commanded everything. And now she's trapped in this bed, in this room. And she looks so alone and small. I never even got to know her. She was my grandmother Haruhi, and I never even got to know her. The only things I know about her are the stories my father told me. About how when her husband died, and she was all alone in the world, how she fought tooth and nail to protect everything. How she held the family together, and held the company together, and fended off everybody who tried to hurt them. She's just... Just totally amazing. Actually you remind me of her a lot. Driven and focused. Like a she-bear trapped in the body of the small woman. But you fight and fight and you never give up. And you do everything you can for those you care about." The wistful tone in his voice said he missed being the one she cared about most.

"That's kind of the definition of caring senpai," she said oblivious to the undertone.

"You think I'm being overly poetic."

"I think you're worrying about the wrong things. Now quit growing mushrooms in your grandmother's hospital room. She won't appreciate it and it's completely unnecessary. You know I care about you. You were my first real friend and my first love, I will always be here for you," she said softly. "And you're underestimating this club, senpai. I can't imagine any of us turning our backs on each other. Even the twins - for all they love to give you crap, I shudder to think what they'd do if anyone actually tried to hurt you."

~oOo~

He could feel her slipping away but she wasn't gone yet. As soon as the shower stopped, Kyoya's brain went into overdrive trying to think of the exact right thing to say. He knew this obsession with perfection came from an unhealthy place, but it was part of him. Complicating matters, whatever he came up with would also have to be completely honest. Haruhi would see right through anything else. He adjusted his glasses, hiding his eyes from the empty room when he heard her phone ring. Tamaki's ringtone. His first thought was to unlock the doors and get the twins in here to interrupt the call. But that would just be trading one rival for two who wouldn't go away once there.

He didn't mean to eavesdrop, but he could hear her voice through the bathroom door.

"That's kind of the definition of caring senpai ... you're worrying about the wrong things. Now quit growing mushrooms in your grandmother's hospital room. She won't appreciate it and it's completely unnecessary. You know I care about you. You were my first real friend and my first love, I will always be here for you." He couldn't listen to any more. He went back to his side of the room.

~oOo~

If Shizue Suoh's eyes had been open, they would have been rolling. Bad enough that her son had dropped his bastard off to watch over her without having to listen to him snivel to that sly little commoner trying to marry above her station. Shizue had no desire to speak to him so she pretended to be asleep. But if she had bothered to speak she would have told him not to wear his heart on his sleeve to gain that girl's sympathy while pretending to admire her. As if they had anything in common.

"You think I'm being overly poetic."
That was an understatement. A small tower on a high hill. A she-bear in the body of a small woman. His teachers said he was bright enough and self-disciplined, but given to flights of fancy. A foolish romantic, just like his grandfather. No! Nothing like his grandfather! Not in his light colored hair, his slender build, his soothing voice. Not in his playful attitude nor his laughter like music. He had adored her, and cared for her and promised he'd always be with her. He painted a picture of a happily ever after with a large, loving family... "You lied to me," she shouted as she sat up. "You promised then you left me alone with a teenaged boy who hated me!" She grabbed the cup of ice chips and threw it at Tamaki so hard it ripped the monitor wires and one of the IV tubes off her skin. Doctors and nurses came running. "What did you do?" Akito yelled.

"I didn't do anything!" Tamaki protested. "I thought she was asleep so I was over in the corner talking on the phone. As soon as I hung up, she threw the cup at me."

~oOo~

Haruhi came out wearing a bathrobe. She was surprised to discover her doors were closed, even the one to Kyoya's room. She knocked lightly and poked her head around the corner. "Did I leave my slippers in here?"

Kyoya was sitting in the bed with his laptop open. "Yes, they're on the floor." He kept his voice perfectly neutral.

"Why were all the doors closed?" she said.

"I didn't know if you come out of the bathroom dressed or in a towel."

She walked over to him. "That's very considerate of you." She kissed him on the cheek and walked back to her room but left the door between them open. As her back was turned, he didn't feel the need to conceal his reaction. His hand went up to touch his cheek. There had been a casual, comfortable affection in her gesture. Perhaps he hadn't lost her after all.

"Or are you going to pretend that was a selfish act too?" she called over her shoulder as she started to skim through the closet.

"It was entirely selfish," he said coming up behind her and slipping his arms around her waist. "You think I want to share?"

She leaned back into his chest and for a moment he was soothed. She turned her head and breathed in deeply. "Tamaki called while I was in the shower."

Kyoya immediately released her. "Did he?"

She turned to face him. "He thinks they're hiding something from him at the hospital."

"They probably are," he said carefully. "I assume you comforted him?"

"How would I know what's going on with his grandmother?" Haruhi said. "You're the one with the in at the hospital." She grabbed a sweater and went back to the bathroom to put it on. "You should give him a call."

He wasn't sure why, but he did.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Well, you know. My grandmother threw a cup of ice at me and your brother threw me out of the
"The patient should feel she has an advocate on her side. Shizue Suoh knows that I am friends with Yuzuro and that you are friends with Tamaki. She also knows that you and Akito are not on the best of terms; that makes him a natural ally. So I have instructed him that as long as it does not compromise her care in any way, he is to side with her. It will reassure her that her care is indeed the best available and also this way, no matter who is the head of the Suoh Group in thirty days, they will have reason to think well of the Ootori family."

"A patient should feel she has an advocate on her side. Shizue Suoh knows that I am friends with Yuzuro and that you are friends with Tamaki. She also knows that you and Akito are not on the best of terms; that makes him a natural ally. So I have instructed him that as long as it does not compromise her care in any way, he is to side with her. It will reassure her that her care is indeed the best available and also this way, no matter who is the head of the Suoh Group in thirty days, they will have reason to think well of the Ootori family."

"A patient should feel she has an advocate on her side. Shizue Suoh knows that I am friends with Yuzuro and that you are friends with Tamaki. She also knows that you and Akito are not on the best of terms; that makes him a natural ally. So I have instructed him that as long as it does not compromise her care in any way, he is to side with her. It will reassure her that her care is indeed the best available and also this way, no matter who is the head of the Suoh Group in thirty days, they will have reason to think well of the Ootori family."

Kyoya considered. "That logic has merit."

"Thank you," his father answered drily. "I am not the head of the Ootori Group for nothing."

"And how is she doing?"

"You expect me to share confidential information?"

"You want Tamaki to think well of us."

Since his son wasn't present, Yoshio felt free to smile. Kyoya was getting better at maneuvering around his father. "The stent is working and will save her life. But the clogged artery and reduced blood flow have done serious, possibly irreparable damage."

"For Tamaki's sake, I am sorry to hear it."

"Nothing is ever certain until it happens," his father said. "He may yet hope for the most advantageous outcome."

"Tamaki is not hoping to gain from his grandmother's illness."

"Gain is a verb that can take any number of objects, Kyoya," his father said. "On a topically different note, the financial news this morning reported Grand Tonnerre paid way too much for a new acquisition."

"Did they?" Kyoya said blandly.

~oOo~

Yuzuro Suoh found his son sitting in a chair just outside his grandmother's room looking miserable. "I am sorry to have caused a disruption in your day father," Tamaki said. "I promise you I did not ever leave her alone and you know I don't hate her."

Yuzuro gripped his son's shoulder. "It's not uncommon for a person to be disoriented when they've been unconscious as long as she has," he said comforting. Tamaki nodded as his father walked into the room from which he was now banned.
Yuzuro paused by his mother's bedside. "Do you want to explain that temper tantrum?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Shizue said haughtily.

"Look at your arm then."

Almost unwillingly, she glanced down to where the torn out IV tube had left a large bruise. "It was a nightmare. It had nothing to do with you."

"The hospital staff said that you were ranting that Tamaki hated you. Despite that your grandson has every reason to, he does not actually hate you."

"Just because that filthy child is your bastard does not make him my grandson."

"The dictionary says it does. But if it will make you feel better, I would be willing to marry his mother."

"You're planning on it anyway?"

"I will not be the first man to marry his mistress after his marriage disastrously fell apart. It's almost trite."

Out in the hall, Tamaki's ears perked up. No one had mentioned to him that his parents were planning marriage.

"You had a perfectly suitable wife."

"Who only ever wanted the money and the name. She was never interested in being a family."

"It might have been different if you had given her a family, if you had given her a child."

"If there was a child, I would have had to ask for a paternity test. She remained faithful to me exactly as long as it took me to get her a credit card." Yuzuro tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "I don't fault you for being taken in. She was from a good family with all the right connections and we needed an heir. But what I do fault you for was turning your back on that heir once you had him. The boy sitting in the hall even now is intelligent and charming and loyal beyond what either one of us deserve. And if you want a second heir, then you had better relent soon because Anne-Sophie is in her forties and may only have a few years left."

Tamaki panicked and came running into the room. "Maman is dying?"

"He meant she was going to hit menopause you idiot," his grandmother said scathingly. "And this you think is smart enough to run the Suoh empire?"

"Oh for heavens' sake mother, he's a teenage boy. At his age, he's not trying to get children, he's trying to not get children."

~oOo~

They took Haruhi to the Tuileries Gardens. "Is it just me or do these look like the gardens at Ouran?"

Kyoya gave her an indulgent smile. "Rather the gardens at Ouran look like these."

"Yeah," Kaoru said, "they should be relaxing because they should make you remember the last time you were in Paris."
"Except I've never been to Paris before."

"Deprived commoners are so cute." Hikaru said.

"Don't worry, Haru-chan. Beauty is a universal constant."

Haruhi rolled her eyes. "You guys are all starting to sound like Tamaki."

They went next door to the Louvre so Haruhi could get her museum fix, but she kinda knew she was in for the Host Club Experience when they ran across the Winged Victory of Samothrace in the stairwell. "I don't know how victorious she was. She lost her head," Honey said.

"I think that happened after," Haruhi defended the statue.

"That doesn't negate the point," Honey replied.

Although if she were to be honest, she did kind of exacerbate the problem when they walked into the sculpture gallery and she said "why does that statue of Cupid kissing that girl remind me of Tamaki?"

"Tamaki?" Kaoru cried, melodramatically throwing himself the floor. "You think of Tamaki when you see such tenderness?"

Hikaru rushed to him and knelt over his brother in the exact pose of the statue. "You needn't be distressed, Kaoru, I'll be your Cupid."

Numerous passersby stopped to watch the theater, a few even pulling out their phones.

"Sorry but neither one of you is the god of love," Haruhi said tartly.

"Haru-chan! You're so cruel!" Honey went down on his knees, clutching at Haruhi like a cherub clinging to Venus.

Mori threw his left hand behind his head. "Awful," he said posing as Michelangelo's Dying Slave.

Haruhi glared sideways at Kyoya.

"Don't look at me. You're the one who wanted to bring these morons."

"C'mon, we need a Tama-chan!" Honey cried. The twins ran over and raised Kyoya's right arm so he was posed like Caesar. Kyoya glowered at them and they all cringed and cowered back.

Not to be deterred from their fun however, they rushed over the a somewhat safer target, scooted Honey a bit to one side and embraced Haruhi so the four posed as the Arria and Paetus. It was only when she tried to escape that she realized how very many people had out their cell phones. "If this hits the Internet, the world will be short two Hitachiin twins."

"Haruhi," Kyoya said in that patronizing tone he had, "you should probably not have used their name."

Oh shit. Her hand flew to her mouth. Sure enough, a group of tourists followed them the rest of the time they were in the museum.

And got into the cab behind them.

And followed them all the way to the Eiffel Tower.
Fortunately, Kyoya had made reservations at the very exclusive restaurant on the tower and no one who was not on the list was even allowed on the private elevator. Free of their followers, Haruhi relaxed enough to enjoy the spectacular view. "Tamaki would have loved this."

~oOo~

Kyoya looked out the window of the cab. She was worried about Tamaki. Of course she was. Everybody reminded her of him. He was her God of Love. Even when they were all having fun together, she was thinking how much better it would be if he was there. The writing was on the wall; there was no point in dragging this out. When he got back to the hotel room, he would put her on first flight back to Japan. In fact, he'd put all five of them on the flight. He would go on to San Francisco alone. Find a tech company or biotech to buy out. Spend a few days touring Stanford there. Since he would be by himself, maybe he would go ahead and fly out to the East Coast to tour Harvard for a couple days as well. If Shizue Suoh lost control of the bank, Tamaki would be able to take care of her. She wouldn't need Kyoya. We can close out her company, let her collect her salary, free her to go where her heart leads. Kyoya stared hard at the cityscape as it rolled past. It was a good thing Ootoris didn't cry.
When they got back to the hotel, Honey and Mori pulled Kyoya to one side. "Takeshi and I need a quick word with you." The others all looked at the trio curiously. "About travel arrangements," Honey explained.

"Of course," Kyoya said calmly. If they were going to ask to be sent home, it would make his plans so much easier to execute. "I'll be up in a few minutes," he said dismissing the younger trio.

The three elders found a sitting room downstairs. "Changes to the travel arrangements?" Kyoya said, steering the topic right where he wanted it to go.

"Don't," Honey said.

"Don't what?"

"We can see in your eyes what you're planning. Don't do it." Mori watched impassively from the door as Honey began pacing the room. "This would be so much easier to discuss over cake."

"We just came from dinner," Kyoya said.

"Yes, but French desserts aren't very sweet. And sweets put everybody in a better frame of mind." Honey drew a deep breath then tried to exhale his frustration, centering himself for a confrontation. "Let's try this a different way. Kyo-chan, you are the best person I've ever even seen when it comes to numbers and money and companies and managing people..."

"And that's saying something," Mori put in.

"...but has it ever occurred to you that some people shouldn't be managed?" Honey finished.

"If you're worried about our employees, don't be. We didn't get the company yesterday morning." Surely they understood that. Even Haruhi understood that.

Every muscle in Honey's body clenched up. *Fine*, he thought. *I'll throw down a gauntlet I know you'll pick up.* "You're not capable of running a 700 year old company, because you can't read people for crap."

"I'm not after your family's company." Where would Honey get an idea like that?

Honey made a noise that sounded like a stifled scream. "Takeshi!"

"Stop trying to manipulate Haruhi. She doesn't deserve it and you're no good at it," Mori said.

"I got her to stay in the club for two full years," Kyoya said.

"It doesn't take much coercion to get a horse to stay at a trough full of oats and carrots," Mori answered.

"She's not that much of a glutton. She didn't stay because we had good snacks."
"Thank you!" Honey said. "Now you're getting it."

"She stayed because she owed us money."

"Aaaggegghhhhh!" Honey screamed.

"What are you getting at?" Kyoya had lost the thread of the conversation and was starting to lose patience.

"Don't put Haruhi on the plane to Japan by herself," Mori said bluntly.

"I'm not putting her on the plane by herself. I'm sending all five of you with her."

"Wait, you're sending all of us back to Japan?" the twins said, coming into the room.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you it's rude to eavesdrop?" Kyoya said.

"Oh yeah, we get told that all the time," Hikaru answered as he plopped down onto a chair.

"At least once or twice a month," Kaoru added.

"Haruhi is worried about Tamaki," Kyoya started to explain.

"We're all worried about him," Hikaru said, "but I'm not cancelling my vacation for him."

"Besides," added Kaoru, "you said it yourself. It's a family crisis. We're not welcome."

"The old bat broke Haru and milord up."

"If Haruhi waltzed into her hospital room it would be like saying 'I think you're about to die, so I'm not afraid of you anymore.'"

Which if she is about to die, would be cruel," Honey interrupted the twins' back-and-forth. "And Haruhi is not a cruel person. And if she doesn't die..."

"It would give old lady Suoh an actual reason to hate Haruhi," finished Mori.

The twins shuddered in horror at the thought of what the old biddy would do to their defenseless friend.

Honey tried one more time. "Has she been sending you mixed signals?"

"She's trying not to hurt my feelings."

"Does Haru-chan have a subtle bone in her body?"

"Maybe those little ones in the ear," the twins gestured. "They're pretty small."

Honey glared at them before continuing, "If she hasn't said she wants to go back, then she doesn't."

Kyoya gave a short, sharp exhale. "She said she wanted to go with Tamaki when he left."

"Pity of the moment," Hikaru said. "Doesn't count."

"Yeah, what's with you?" Kaoru added. "It's not like you to just surrender to fate and quit fighting."

Kyoya gave him a cold look. "It's entirely like me. I had completely surrendered to being a
meaningless third son with no worthwhile future when Tamaki convinced me I could be more."

"And this is how you repay him?" Honey said. "But going back to what you were?"

"Yeah dude. We totally want you to screw up on your own so we can swoop in and take the girl,
but winning this way wouldn't be any fun," the twins said.

Kyoya glanced over at Mori, the silent observer. "Anything to add?"

"Don't sleep alone tonight."

The twins shrieked. "Don't listen to him," they said in unison.

"Definitely sleep alone," said Hikaru.

"Yeah, now is a time for aloneness," said Kaoru.

"A time to contemplate what we discussed," said Hikaru.

"In solitude," said Kaoru.

"I didn't say 'have sex with her,' I said don't let her sleep alone. Right now she has no parents, no
brothers or sisters, not even a weaselly corporate executive who will pretend to take care of her in
order to gain control of her company." This last one seemed to get through to Kyoya.

"Tama-chan's losing his grandmother is reminding her of her own losses," Honey added.

"At the very least, leave the door between your rooms open tonight," Mori said.

"Door open might be OK," Hikaru said. "But definitely don't go into her room."

"Yeah, because she needs her solitude too," Kaoru added.

~oOo~

Through the open doorway, Kyoya could smell the light scent of incense and hear Haruhi's soft
prayers to her dad apologizing for not praying last night. An unnecessary regret, Kyoya
thought. Ranka would never fault his daughter for being forgetful when she was coping with her
own terror. He nonetheless sent a silent request to Ranka to let her know that.

The ritual done, Haruhi came to the door the connected their rooms and paused. Kyoya looked up.
There was no soft satin this time, just an oversized cotton nightshirt. He gave her an inquiring look
but waited for her to say something.

"I'm feeling kind of lonely tonight. Would it be ok if I sit in here for a while? I brought a book so I
won't disturb you." She held up the indicated object.

"Of course," Kyoya waved to the unoccupied half of the bed feeling more indebted to Mori than
ever. She came and sat down. She opened the book but didn't look at it. After a few minutes Kyoya
took the book from her hands, closed it and set it to one side. "Is it something you want to talk
about, or just something you feel?"

"Just something I'm feeling."

Kyoya was both relieved and disappointed. Relieved because he was no good at dealing with
emotions; disappointed because he was not Tamaki, he would never figure out what she was
feeling without being told.

*She is a bright woman,* he reasoned. *By now she will have realized what Tamaki's grandmother's death would mean. It was natural that her heart would start drifting back in that direction. But without Tamaki's input, she'd have to wonder if it was drifting into nothing.* He wrapped an arm around her, firm enough to let her know he was there but lightly enough that she wouldn't feel trapped. It was killing him. For all his clever planning and plotting, he couldn't control her heart. He couldn't make her see how much he needed her.

Haruhi breathed deeply. "Tamaki says that we are his family. But even though his blood relatives have always treated him badly, when they call, he drops everything and goes running for them."

"As you would have gone running if your father needed you." Tamaki didn't deserve to be faulted for his loyalty.

"But I didn't, did I? Tamaki ended his vacation because of family obligations. I'm here on vacation despite my obligations."

"Haruhi," he said, "you are doing exactly what your father wanted you to do. I saw the letter, remember? Your father loved life, loved living. If it hadn't been for what your aunt and my father would have said, I would have said skip that somber wake altogether and hold a rollicking party with loud music, dancing, and not a single person dressed in black."

"He would've liked that," she said, then quietly asked "Would you leave us if your family needed you?"

"Probably. They wouldn't deserve it but I would probably do it." *Except you,* he thought. *I would choose you over all of them.* But that wasn't fair to put on her right now. He pressed a kiss into her hair.

She leaned against him, comforted by the silence. Tamaki would have insisted on talking more. The twins would have poked at her until she laughed, but she didn't feel like laughing. She needed to be sad and Kyoya understood that. Honey and Mori would have too. Well, unless Honey decided to push cake on her. The half-smile at the thought turned into a frown that went down and down until she felt like a cartoon character. A single tear escaped her eye and rolled down her cheek. She kept it inside while the grief and misery washed through her and filled her, threatening to break down the increasingly thin-walled dam that was holding it back. She didn't speak again for the better part of an hour. When she finally got a hold of herself again, she decided she should probably leave before she really broke down and her tears made the sheets all wet. "Sorry," she said quietly.

When he didn't answer, she looked up at him. He had gone to sleep. She tried to slip out from under his arms but surprisingly, his grip tightened and he pulled her closer to him as though afraid to let go. "Don't leave me," he whispered softly. Caring boyfriend or sleeping beauty? The thought kind of amused her. *Oh well,* she reasoned, *that made it his own fault if he had a wet pillow in the morning.* She snuggled up close to him and quietly cried herself to sleep on his shoulder.

Kyoya briefly woke up at the same time his alarm had gone off the day before. Realizing he didn't have to be up, he closed his eyes to go back to sleep. She was still there beside him. He started to pull her closer then realized he was already holding her very close. A feeling akin to pleasure washed over him. She had stayed. He moved his face a little closer to hers then realized the pillow was damp. Damn it, she must've cried after he'd gone to sleep. Not that he knew what he would have done, but he should've been awake for it. So much for Ootoris not failing tests. Maybe he could make it up on the bonus round. Since he was already holding her tightly, he rolled her over to
the other side.
She made a noise. "What are you doing?" she asked groggily.

"Just moving you to a dry pillow."

"Thank you," she mumbled. They settled back down.

It could have been two minutes or two hours later when the pounding began on the door in the other room.

"Haruhi!" Hikaru shouted.

"Haruhi!" Kaoru echoed.

"Why is the door locked?" Hikaru said.

"Is everything ok?" Kaoru said.

"She must be trapped! Quick Honey-sempai, break down the door!"

"Why don't we try Kyoya's door?" Mori said.

There was sixty seconds of quiet before the pounding resumed on the other door.

"Kyoya! Is Haruhi in there?" Hikaru shouted.

"Haruhi, are you all right?" Kaoru added.

The door opened up to a cloud of thousand black daggers. "Is the idiocy quotient in this club a constant so that when Tamaki is gone the rest if you take up the slack?"

"Takashi! He's growling at us!" Honey shrank against his cousin.

"You growled until they handed you a chocolate roll," Mori replied.

"Oh yeah,"

"We were just worried about Haruhi," Hikaru said.

"We are asleep," Kyoya spat out.

"Well we're not now," Haruhi grumbled.

"Hey Haruhi, do you want some breakfast?" Kaoru said.

"Yeah, breakfast sounds good," she said. "Let me go get dressed."

Malevolent lasers shot from Kyoya's eyes and burning the twins to a crisp before he slammed the door shut.

"You think he'd be in a better mood," said Honey.

~oOo~

Shizue Suoh was annoyed. She wasn't really sure what she was annoyed at, so she was just annoyed at the whole world. Annoyed at the way the monitors beeped. Annoyed at the way the IV
needle ached in her arm. Annoyed at the financial news for speculating on the stability of the Suoh Group with her in the hospital. Didn't those idiots know that her son was perfectly competent to handle it? She was annoyed at her son for being perfectly competent to handle it. He didn't even have the decency to call her for advice. She was annoyed at Grand Tonnerre for paying too much for a recent acquisition. To think she'd ever considered them as a potential partner for the Suoh Group. She was annoyed they would keep such incompetent advisors on their staff. She would have fired them all. She was annoyed she never got the chance to fire them all.

The nurse came in and quietly went about her business. Shizue was briefly grateful to the doctor for silencing the nurse. Normally the nurse came in and prattled away mindlessly with pointless commentary on the weather and how everything was going to turn out fine and other meaningless platitudes. The chatter was annoying. The silence was even more annoying. Scratch that, she was annoyed at the doctor too.

"Is that person still out there in the hall?" she asked icily.

"Yes ma'am," the nurse replied.

She was annoyed at Tamaki for hovering like he had some stake in her health. She was annoyed at him for having a stake in her health. She was annoyed at him for doing his duty. Although if she were to be honest, she would've been even more annoyed at him for failing his duty. And she was always brutally honest with herself. "Does he ever leave?"

"He left briefly then came back shaved and in clean clothes," the nurse said. It annoyed Shizue that the nurse obviously thought well of the young man. It annoyed her that he was the sort that most people generally liked. Even at Ouran, bastion of nascent snobbery, that bastard son of a foreigner whose family had gone bankrupt somehow managed to gain general approval. Perhaps it wasn't annoyance. Perhaps it was more akin to jealousy.

But what she felt when her son had told her that he would honor her wishes as long as she lived but go ahead and marry that woman as soon as she was dead, that wasn't annoyance; that was something else entirely.

~oOo~

Haruhi went into the bathroom to splash water on her face and wash away the dried tears and blotchiness. She felt empty. That was not entirely a bad thing; since finding out her father was dying, she'd been filled with anger, despair, loneliness, fear, grief, all building up inside her. Last night, she poured it all out on Kyoya's pillow.

He really was the perfect boyfriend when he was asleep. He held her close, made the occasional comforting noise. She couldn't make out the words, but he seemed to be promising to be there for her. And best of all since he was asleep, she didn't have to feel like she was being weak. She hated feeling weak. Ever since her mother died, she'd had to be the strong one, the stable one. Any deviation from that made her feel like she was failing her mother.

"Don't leave me," he had said. Those were the only clear words she could make out last night. Of course, he was unconscious and not prescient so he had no idea what was about to happen to his bedding, but she had the most peculiar feeling it wouldn't have mattered. The cold emptiness filled up just a little ways with something warmer.

He even made the supreme sacrifice of getting out of bed in order to protect her from the twins. She was surprised the twins hadn't noticed her face still a little red from crying. Although perhaps they did know something was wrong. They seemed particularly frantic to get to her this morning. Oh
dear god, if she was developing a psychic connection to the twins, there went her sanity. Kyoya was right, they had no concept of personal space. Actually, they had a very strong concept of their own personal space, it's just that nobody else's mattered. And they wanted her in their own personal space. Her heart filled up just a little more.

She dried herself off and got dressed, pausing on her way out to apologize to her mom for being weak last night. Then she saw the picture of her dad and her heart drained out just a bit. Not as empty as it had been this when she woke up, but less than when she left the bathroom. She sat down on the couch and stared at the pictures.

~oOo~

Haruhi was taking an unusually long time to get ready. Normally if you wanted her in more than a quick swipe of eyeliner or mascara, Hikaru had to be the one to do it. It was one of the things Kyoya loved about her; as cute as she looked in all Tamaki's cosplays, she wasn't inclined to waste time on unimportant details. He'd never find another one like her.

He knocked on the doorframe that adjoined their rooms. "Haruhi?"

She was sitting on the little couch starting at the picture of her father next to the picture of her mother. Without saying a word, he came over and sat beside her. They sat there for several minutes before she leaned against him. He draped an arm lightly over her shoulders. "Do you want to go home?" he whispered softly.

It took her a while to answer. "It will ruin everybody's vacation."

"It's ok. We can come back later when things are more ... settled."

She didn't answer, which he took to mean yes. He pressed his lips into her hair and added "There are five seats available on the flight day after tomorrow."

She turned abruptly. "Five?"

He shrugged in the nonchalant way of his. "I'll go on to San Francisco alone. It's all going to be work anyway."

"You said San Francisco was all fun."

"I assumed our money would be tied up in investments. As it turned out, we have quite a bit of available cash and I need to look for a place to park it."

"Oh," she said quietly.

"The others will see you safe and Tamaki will be there waiting for you." He managed to say that last without his voice cracking. And Honey and Mori thought they had physical self-control.

There was another long pause before she said "I won't be in your way...I can find something to do...I'm not so good at reading people as Tamaki is, but you can still use me as a secretary or something. Or I can just sightsee until you're done working. Please let me come with you."

Kyoya ruthlessly suppressed the hope that was trying to build in his heart. "You don't want to go home?" he asked carefully.

"I don't have one." She swallowed hard. "I spent the night before our trip in the old apartment but I kept waking up waiting for my dad to come in, then I'd see his picture next to mom's and realize all
over again he was never coming home."

"No wonder you were so tired on the plane," Kyoya murmured.

"And I know it's churlish to be ungrateful to my aunt and uncle, but I don't want to live within their
narrow horizons so long I forget there's anything outside the tunnel." She took a deep breath, hating
to ask any of the guys for anything. "Look, I know this trip only buys me a few more days but
please don't send me back to Japan."

She was staying for practical reasons, but at least she was staying. He could pretend for a few more
days they had a future together.

"Who's going back to Japan now?" the twins said as they came into the room without knocking and
leaving the door open behind them.

Kyoya and Haruhi just stared at each other.

"Did our talk mean nothing to you last night?" Kaoru demanded.

"Are you really that stupid?" Hikaru added, thwapping Kyoya upside the head. Kyoya grabbed his
hand and twisted it back.

"What's going on?" said Honey as he and Mori wandered in through the open door.

"He's talking about sending Haruhi back to Japan," said Kaoru.

"Are you really that stupid?" asked Honey. "Takashi," he waIVED in Kyoya's general direction.

Mori walked over, grabbed Kyoya's wrist pushing on the tendons forcing Kyoya to release Hikaru.
"Did last night's talk mean nothing to you?" He thwacked Kyoya upside the head for good
measure.

Kyoya glared at him.

"Hey! How come all he gets is a look while I got my arm twisted up?"

"Because I'm not actually stupid," said Kyoya.

"Also he's not fast enough to get me," Mori added.

"Wait a second! You guys were all deciding to send me back and not one of you thought it was
worth discussing with me?" Haruhi became livid. The third demon was stirring.

"You were feeling guilty about being here," Kyoya said.

"So you went ahead and found the flight."

"Well I can't offer you a flight if there's no seats available," Kyoya said in a reasonable tone of
voice. "I can't change what happened in the past, but I don't want to hurt you."

"You don't seem to mind hurting me," Hikaru said, rubbing his wrist.

"That's because I don't care about you," Kyoya answered. Somehow, watching the guys give each
other crap partially filled some of the space that her father's picture had emptied.

~oOo~
Shizue Suoh was bored. It was annoying. People with her resources should never be bored. She tried reading but the print was so small. And smudgy. She supposed it could just be that her eyes were tired, but she hadn't been doing anything. It had to be smudgy print.

She tried watching TV and quickly concluded there hadn't been a good television show made in ten years. She switched to the news channel but they repeated the same stories over and over every 30 minutes. She tried the finance channels but they were filled with pretty talking heads and shallow analysis that clearly indicated why they were on television and not running the business world. She flipped to a different channel. "...One has to wonder how big a hit the Suoh stock is going to take. The market likes stability; this woman has headed the company for nearly thirty years. Word on the street is that if her son were competent, she would have handed over control years ago... so will the Suoh Group have to finally look outside the family for their next director?"

"Not necessarily," the other responded. "His competence isn't really in question. The subsidiaries that he runs have been the most profitable divisions in the Suoh Group. The people who've worked with Suoh-sama all say she's a micromanaging control freak..."

Shizue shut off the TV and glared at the dark screen. She wasn't a control freak; she was meticulous and attentive to detail. If she hadn't been, they would have lost control of the company a dozen times over the years. It was just weak men complaining about a strong woman. And why should a competent woman stand aside for a competent man just because of gender? More weak men whining that they weren't given a place they hadn't earned. It was enough to make her cross-dress and pretend to be a long-lost male cousin.

Cross-dress.

She sucked in her cheeks in frustration. The last thing she needed to do was start sympathizing with an undeserving commoner. She hit the call button for the nurse.

"How may I help you, Suoh-sama?"

"Is that person still in the hallway?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Tell him to come in here."

The nurse didn't even get half way to the door before Tamaki came rushing in. "You wanted me grandmother?"

It figures the little rat was listening in.

"Sit in that chair and be quiet." It was so much more satisfying to ignore someone if they were in the room to appreciate the snub. Even now that stupid boy was sitting there looking at her hopefully. Stupidly, stubbornly hopeful.

The stubborn he got from his father. The stupid must have come from his mother. "Why are the men in this family determined to reduce the bloodline by bringing in inferior stock?"

Tamaki blinked. She had just called him family. He quickly scrambled for an answer that would please her without betraying the women he loved. "Don't confuse trappings with quality grandmother. You can put a cart horse in front of a carriage and a carriage horse in front of a cart, it doesn't change what they are. Fortunes can be won or lost in a day; but qualities like loyalty and intelligence and hard work are intrinsic, not put on like fancy clothes."
"Foolish optimism is also inbred. You mother has stayed faithful to a man who has only been intermittent in her life for twenty years."

"You've stayed faithful to the memory of a man who has been gone longer than you ever were together," Tamaki answered quietly.

His answer unnerved her. So as was her tendency, she lashed out when someone got too close to a soft spot. "Your commoner didn't though, did she? She found another as soon as you were done."

"Father gave Maman every reason to hope. I gave Haruhi none. That doesn't make her disloyal, it makes her a realist."

A realist. Loyal. Hard working. Intelligent. The Ootoris had seen something in her that she had missed. Of course, Yoshio had three sons. He could afford to waste the youngest on a long shot. She only had one son and one grandson. They had to choose right.

However...Even threatening this girl had turned her feckless, idle grandson into someone with cunning and purpose. Tamaki had shielded the girl, found her a new protector. What was it Yuzuro had said? That Tamaki had arranged that weekend so that she would bond with her new boyfriend, and not try to return to Tamaki. That for the girl's sake, the boy had gone beyond what was asked.

"I want to meet her. Bring her here tomorrow."

"She is out of the country."

"Then you'd better get her on a plane immediately." She closed her eyes and went back to ignoring Tamaki. Knowing people were scrambling to meet your unreasonable demands was the most fun thing about being a tyrant.

~oOo~
"What do you mean your grandmother has ordered Haruhi back to Japan?"

"What right does she have to order me anywhere?" Haruhi said. "Give me that phone!"

She grabbed for the phone and Kyoya let her have it, but not before he put it on speaker so they could all hear it.

"I don't know. I just know it's not a good idea to refuse her," Tamaki sounded miserable. "If it helps at all, I think she may let Haruhi off."

"Or she may just want to watch her face as she destroys her," Kyoya said coldly.

"That's possible too. She is like that."

"Don't go Haru," Hikaru said.

"Stay here, we'll protect you" Kaoru backed him up.

"I don't think so," Honey said. "I don't think you can. Madame Suoh doesn't need Haru-chan to be there to destroy her. She may enjoy it more but she can do it regardless. Running from a battle will not stop it." He turned to Haruhi. "You need to face her in person."

"Hn," Mori concurred.

"Isn't this my call?" Haruhi said. "Why do you guys think you get to make this decision for me?"

"Do you want to make this decision on you own?" Kaoru asked.

"Um... not really."

The twins merely looked at her. Oh my god, even the twins are thinking more clearly than me. I must be more scared than I thought. "Kyoya?" She said weakly.

He rubbed his chin in unconscious imitation of his father. He might be out of his depth when it came to romance and love, but he had been weaned on interpersonal power politics. "Tamaki, tell your grandmother that out of the deep respect she feels for the Suoh family and gratitude for their generous scholarship, Haruhi will be pleased to meet with your grandmother at the date and place of her choosing. Your grandmother will of course be paying for all the changes to the travel plans."

"Pay?" Tamaki said.

"One does not inconvenience an Ootori - or even a future Ootori - without recompense. But then your grandmother knows that."

"Pay for what?" Haruhi asked. The last thing she wanted was to somehow find herself in debt to that old lady.

"Airlines charge a fee for changing flights, there may be cancellation fees in San Francisco ..."
"Alright," Tamaki said. "I'll cover any of Haruhi's expenses."

"No, your grandmother will cover them. And everybody else's. Mine, the rest of the club's and our security teams."

"Kyoya, she called me family... I mean, she was mad and it kind of slipped out, but..."

Kyoya considered. "If you don't want to annoy your grandmother, tell her personal secretary and let the secretary tell her." Kyoya had made the mistake of thinking Haruhi could defend herself against these kind of vicious games once. He would not do so again.

~oOo~

Well, that was interesting. From the one side of the conversation Shizue had heard, feelings for that girl had made her short-sighted, impulsive grandson attempt to formulate a strategy without relying on his friend to do it for him. In opposition to his friend, in fact. And it was nothing short of charming that his friend thought he could take Shizue Suoh in a social battle. And all for this girl. This girl with no money, position, or connections. It might be worth looking into to see what effect she had on the other children at Ouran. The girl herself was worth nothing, but her influence on the boys around her might be very valuable indeed.

~oOo~

"I don't need it explained, Kaoru. I'm an engineer, programmer and mathematician. I'm very solid on if-then statements."

"This is really important to us, Dad."

"Yes, I'm sensing that." He hung up the phone and looked at his wife with a bemused look on his face. "Kaoru's in a panic because Shizue Suoh has ordered Haruhi back to Japan."

"Yeah, Hikaru has been texting me about it all afternoon," Yuzuha said. "I haven't seen them this upset since that maid who was stealing from us ran off."

"At least they're talking to us this time. This is Haruhi's doing. Somehow, when they opened the door to her, it let the rest of us in." He scratched his beard, unwilling to let his sons go back to being strangers. "I can call the attorneys about approaching the Inoues."

Yuzuha nodded. "I'll call Armand and let him know I'm dropping the ad early. I was planning on waiting two weeks so it doesn't get lost in the noise after fashion week, but we'll do it now in Japan. It'll be harder to go after Haruhi if she's a media figure in her own right."

"Which ad?" He had of course seen all the layouts.

"The headshot with the earrings where she's laughing with Kaoru."

"The romance angle? Is that going to play well with the Ootoris?"

"I don't give a damn about the Ootoris. It will play well with the public."

~oOo~

Kyoya watched as Haruhi sat in the lounge at the airport, twisting the ¥500 ring around her finger over and over. He was outwardly calm but inwardly tense. Tamaki's assertion that his grandmother might let Haruhi off didn't add up. The old lady would never apologize, she would just henceforth
ignore Haruhi as if the girl had never been worthy of her notice. Calling Haruhi in meant she was going to destroy Haruhi once and for all, or give her permission to return to Tamaki. If the former, Kyoya would have to martial his resources. Would he be fighting for her alone? It was a central tenet of his existence that no one took down an Ootori but another Ootori. Not even a Suoh was allowed the privilege. No matter how much his family hated each other - and they really hated each other sometimes - to attack one was to attack them all. That cardinal rule had enable the Ootori family to survive in the cutthroat world of modern business for nearly two hundred years. But would the rest of the family regard a mere fiancée as actual family? And if the latter ... if the latter, his best friend would be ecstatic and he would have to pretend to be happy for him. He became distantly aware of the twins trying to reassure Haruhi. Like family. Like people who loved her. Maybe the twins would have been better for her after all.

"You don't have to be afraid," Hikaru said.

"Don't worry Haru," Kaoru added. "We'll be there for you."

Haruhi thought before she spoke. "I'm not afraid, I'm ... " She had to stop and think what she was. "Annoyed... What right does she have to order us all around? I mean, she's in the hospital, so she gets some points for that, but from what Kyoya said, she's going to recover. Why can't she just wait for us all to get back?"

"People like her aren't used to waiting," Kyoya said.

"Well maybe she should get used to it," Haruhi said tartly. "Look, I'll do this to help Tamaki, but if she's rude to me or snide about Tamaki, I'm not going to put up with that."

The guys all looked at each other. "Maybe we should get the flight changed back to San Francisco..." Honey said.

~oOo~

Shizue Suoh looked at the girl's picture again. She wasn't particularly beautiful. The girl wasn't unattractive but her looks certainly didn't warrant the excessive fuss these boys were all making over her. She must be one of those women that photographs couldn't capture - vivacious, vibrant, overflowing with energy and light. Men fell at the feet of women like that. Demanding, selfish, drama queens. Tamaki already had that role covered. The Suoh family didn't need two of them.

The idiot boy had left for the airport to pick up the girl. And the entourage that grotesquely outclassed her. The Ootori boy had insisted that Shizue pay their traveling costs to let her know that compliance came at a price. Shizue had paid it to the last yen to remind him where the real money and power still resided. Did he feel the insult? Probably. Ootoris weren't stupid. But just to make sure, since she was dealing with a novice, she left instructions that when that passel of fools arrived only the girl was to be allowed in.

~oOo~

"Do you still think she's worth it?" Yoshio Ootori asked his son over the phone.

"Yes," Kyoya said without hesitation.

"Shizue Suoh still wields considerable power. Even if she is ousted from the corporation, she would be a formidable enemy, one we don't need."

"True. But if her son succeeds her as the next head of the Suoh Group - as seems likely - then
Tamaki will almost certainly follow. And he will never forget if we abandon Haruhi. Even if they part ways in the future, he will remember that we are not trustworthy in a crisis. If you recall, you originally instructed me to make friends with Tamaki with an eye to the long term. The importance of this test of character cannot be overstated."

"Hm. Well, Ootoris do not fail tests so I will trust your judgment. But keep an eye on the bigger picture; if you must sacrifice the girl to keep your friendship with the Suoh heir, do so."

~oOo~

Shizue Suoh's eyes raked coldly over the girl. "I don't see it."

"What are you looking for?" said Haruhi calmly.

"Whatever it is that makes them all think you're special. You're nothing."

Haruhi shrugged. "I'm an honor student. I've never claimed to be anything else."

"But you'd like to be something else, something better."

"Anyone who doesn't want to be better than they are is a waste of oxygen."

"What makes you think you're fit to marry a Suoh?"

"Last I checked, both Tamaki and his father appeared to be members of the human species. Is there a special chromosome that only you guys have?"

"So you would marry him if he asked you."

"Since he never asked me, we'll never know." Despite Shizue's baiting, the girl answered calmly and dispassionately. Bluntly, in fact, without any art or flattery. Simple, sincere, straightforward. Not at all what Shizue was expecting. No tearful pleas, no declarations of love. Had the foolish boy managed to pick the kind of woman that he needed rather than the kind she expected him to? The old woman's eyes narrowed. She reached for a file folder.

~oOo~

The minute Haruhi walked out of the room, the guys all clustered around her. "What happened? Are you OK?"

Haruhi got a scrunched up, almost confused look on her face. "It was very weird. You know how you walk into the middle of a conversation and you think you know what it's about then you realize you really didn't? It was like that."

"What did she say?" Tamaki asked fearfully.

"She said I'd never be allowed to see you again unless I signed a form that said any assets you have are yours and not mine, any gifts you give me worth in excess of ¥100,000 I have to return to you if we ever stop being friends, and if we ever get married, anything you bring is yours free and clear when we divorce along with any assets subsequently acquired whether in whole or in part using funds or resources originating with the Suoh Group... that woman is waaaay too obsessed with money."

But Haruhi wasn't. If Shizue Suoh had assumed Haruhi would dump Tamaki when she found out there was no money to be had, she was wildly mistaken. "What did you do?" Kyoya asked.
"I signed it of course. What did you think I would do?"

And just like that, it was over.

Kyoya stopped breathing. Given the chance to return to Tamaki, she had. He should have expected it. She had never stopped watching Tamaki, thinking about him, talking about him, loving him. What Kyoya and Haruhi had shared had been real, just not lasting.

One night. One perfect night. A handful of golden days in a cold season and one perfect night. The world in front of him went dark, but somehow in his peripheral vision he became aware the others were all looking at him with pity on their eyes. Except Tamaki, who had a mixture of pity and apology.

Ootoris didn't break down in public.

Haruhi's voice cut through the fog. "This is a really nice hospital and all," she said, "but would it be ok if we leave? I'm kind of done with hospitals for a while."

Kyoya adjusted his glasses to hide his eyes. "Of course," he replied in that perfectly calm voice of his. Even in his own ears, the voice sounded detached, like it was coming from far away. But where to take her. The problem-solving part of his brain kicked in, momentarily blocking out the part of him that was silently screaming. She didn't want to go back to her old apartment. Under the circumstances, taking her to Fuyumi's would be awkward. "I'm sure Tamaki can find a room for you in one of his hotels that will cost less than his grandmother's cap." He turned away, unsure how long his composure would hold.

"Hotel?" Haruhi sounded confused.

Tamaki didn't know what was wrong with her old apartment but he knew he could trust Kyoya to do what was in Haruhi's best interest. He came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. "We have three in the city, I'll call to find out what's available."

"What?" she said, shrugging off Tamaki's hands and moving towards Kyoya.

Honey intervened. "Haru-chan, give him a few minutes."

"Minutes for what?"

The guys all looked nonplussed.

"Haruhi," Kaoru said softly, "an hour ago you were engaged to Kyoya, five minutes ago you signed a prenuptial agreement with Tamaki."

"No I didn't... wait... that's what all that marriage and divorce stuff was?"

"What did you think it was?" said Mori.

"Um...some class conscious old lady telling me I couldn't even be friends with her grandson unless I promised not to sponge off him?"

Hikaru slapped his forehead with his palm. Even Kyoya was staring at her.

"I...you...we..." she looked down at the rings on her hands. "What kind of faithless trollop do you take me for? You are an idiot!" Haruhi yelled. "Yes, I do still care for Tamaki. A part of me will always love him. A part of me will go through the rest of my life a little in love with every member
of this club. But I chose you." She marched forward and started jabbing Kyoya's chest with her finger. "You. Arrogant, prideful, conceited, emotionally stunted moron. So suck it up, cherry blossom, because you gave me a ring and I'm not letting you out of it."

Kyoya blinked. And blinked again. "Do you have any positive adjectives for me?"

She thought for a minute. "Mine."

~oOo~

Chapter End Notes

No, that's not it. Getting close, but there are still some loose ends to wrap up.
"Mine."

Why does Kyoya have that look on his face? Surely he knows how I feel about him. We've been dating for a couple months now and were close friends long before that. We've had dinner together and breakfasts and brunches and lunches; we've been to museums and parks and even an opera. He gave me two rings and the only time I take them off is when I shower or do dishes because the soap will make the plating come off the cheap one faster and I read somewhere that water is bad for diamonds. We kiss. It's true we keep getting interrupted but that's neither his doing nor mine. I've cooked for him. It's one of the few things I can give him that he can't simply buy for himself. The others all understand that that's my gift to them, surely Kyoya understood that too. We've shared quiet evenings just reading or studying, when the only interaction happens if we reach for the popcorn bowl at the same time. I know he likes it because he smiles before he goes back to his books. When I'm lonely or frightened I keep finding myself drifting into his room. I wish sometimes he would do it in reverse, but showing human weakness is probably unbecoming for an Ootori or some stupid crap. And knowing his family, it might even be dangerous.

Sometimes I miss Tamaki's never ending hugging and touching, his constant reassurances of affection, the stupid little love notes he planted everywhere - in my school books, in my lunch, in the pockets of my Ouran blazer. He even made the tea leaves in my cup take the shape of a heart once. I'm still not sure how he did that; some kind of honey painted on the side of the cup I suspect. But when he put his hands on my shoulders just now, I didn't want them. I wanted Kyoya's.

He reaches out and touches my face like he can't believe what just happened. I let it soak in for a few minutes before I lean into him and reiterate softly so only he can hear it, "Mine."

"Mine."

The word ripped through me leaving shreds so small they will never mend. If it hadn't been for the look of astonishment on Kyoya's face as she stood there jabbing her finger into his chest, the look of unguarded hope that stole over his features when she said that word, I would have retreated to a corner and dissolved in a damp mass of my own tears. I love her. I can't lose her.

I have lost her.

And Kyoya does look astonished ... and hopeful. He reaches out and carefully brushes a stray hair back from Haruhi's face as if afraid any sudden movements might wake him from the only good dream he's ever had. Doesn't he understand this is not a time to be timid? He should hug her fiercely and kiss her soundly and twirl her around until she squeals with glee. He should shower her in rose petals until she is waist deep. He should sweep her in his arms and take her to his castle in a horse-drawn carriage.

But Kyoya doesn't have a castle. Then he should have rented one just in case! If Haruhi had confessed her love to me just now...
If she'd confessed her love to me, Kyoya would have been on the phone while I twirled her around renting the castle and arranging the carriage.

The air moves into and out of my lungs in shallow drafts. The others are all watching at me as I watch Kyoya and Haruhi, wondering if I am worthy of the love and friendship - the precious and cautiously given friendship - they have bestowed on me. On each other. On all of us.

Only one of us can have her. We all know that. We've always known that. Even the twins knew that eventually it would come down to one.

I wanted it to be me.

I am the most loving of the group. I am the one who is not afraid of love, who will give of my heart and give of my heart as long as it has life. But if I am to be honest, I am not the most giving one here. That is Kyoya. His passions run deep and strong yet he sacrifices them to those he loves. He was willing to give his loyalty and hard work to his father's company even though no one there would have appreciated it. He gives his time and considerable talents to our club to keep us together and happy. He turned away just now and let Haruhi go without recriminations.

Love is a crucible - what goes in pure comes out strong; what goes in flawed comes out broken. That moment was Kyoya's crucible. I hope I can come through my turn in the forge as cleanly as he came through his.

"We should go get something to eat," I hear my voice say. "The food on the trip was great, but I could really go for some actual Japanese food."

~oOo~

"Mine."

I watch Tama-chan's face as she says the word. It's frozen somewhere between gain and loss, a disturbingly neutral expression. I'm accustomed to seeing it on Kyo-chan's face, but not on our more expressive friend. He melts down explosively when he's fooling around and doesn't get his way but when he's genuinely hurting, he's as guarded as any of us. He had that look when he first decided to form to Host Club and every one of us turned him down rudely. When speaking of how his grandmother hates him. When he lied to Haruhi and told her he no longer loved her.

He doesn't deserve what happened. He made all the right decisions for all the right reasons. And he paid a very high price.

His father made wrong decisions, exposing the woman he loved to ridicule, social condemnation, isolation, separation from her child, yet she has stayed with his father. They still love each other. They are making plans to be together. His father will get the girl, bad decisions or no. Tama-chan has lost the girl.

Takashi is worried about him too. There's only so many times you can hammer metal, stretch it thin and still fold it back on itself. Too many times and the sword is too soft, worthless. Forge it too hot, quench it too cold, it becomes brittle and shatters. He's wondering how many blows our friend can take, how many sudden temperature shifts, how many hurts is too many hurts for our friend to recover from. But I think our friend is a better steel than that. I silently urge him to cross over from a good man to a great one.

Then I hear him suggest dinner and I smile.

~oOo~
"Mine."

Well shit, he won. For now.

I look at my twin and can see the same thought has occurred to both of us. The capacity for brilliance in this club is only matched by the capacity for screwing up. As long as he makes her happy, we will let it be. But the minute he screws up, the minute he hurts her, we will take her from him so fast it will make his head spin.

I see the glint in my twin's eye. Let him be is relative. There's no way he deserves less than we gave milord all the time, right?

~oOo~

"Mine."

The word keeps repeating itself over and over in my head. In her voice. Then she leans against my chest and says it again, just for my benefit.

"Mine."

I take her out to eat. For once, I am glad those morons all insist on cramming into the same limo. We touched the entire car ride; she was practically on my lap. I am not invading her personal space; there physically was no way around it.

"Mine."

I take her to her favorite restaurant. It isn't a fancy place; it will never win multiple stars from a critic. It was just a simple, family owned restaurant with decent food, but she is fond of it. I want her to feel comfortable. Also, their largest table seats six. That meant with seven, we'll have to squish in. Every time we move, every time we turn to talk to another person, our legs would bump into each other under the table.

"Mine."

After dinner, I pull out my phone and call my sister. "Fuyumi, circumstances caused us to return to Japan early. Could Haruhi stay with you for a few more days until we get matters settled?"

"She doesn't need to go there!" Hikaru protested.

"Yeah, we're adopting her, so she should just stay at our house so she can get used to it!" Kaoru added.

"Haruhi's aunt has not yet consented and we do not wish to make her so angry she'll refuse," I respond. The truth is, if she's with my sister instead of my rivals, I'll feel a little more secure.

I'm not used to feeling insecure. I've always known my appointed place in the world, even if I hated it. Even though it was unfair. I am the third Ootori son. I am the student with good grades that are never quite good enough. I am the appointed friend of Tamaki Suoh who he turned into a true friend. I am the vice president and CFO of the Ouran Host Club. I have no reason to feel insecure.

If I lost her now, I would fold.

When did she become the single thing that I cannot live without?

"Which is why she should stay with us," Honey said, as though neither he nor the others could hear
my inner monolog. "Both our parents are home so she'll have proper chaperones and she'll probably never get the chance again."

"We have nice houses," added Mori.

"Hey, I heard all that," Fuyumi said. "But I'm already an approved chaperone. She should come to my house."

Haruhi looked at Tamaki. "Are they actually fighting over where I should go?"

"Haruhi, we've always fought over you," he said. "You just never noticed. For that matter, we could all hold a slumber party at Mansion #2."

"No chaperones," said Mori.

"I have a housekeeper and a full staff."

"Who could be fired if they oppose you," Fuyumi said. "Her aunt will never buy it."

~oOo~

In the car on the way back to Fuyumi's, the long day, the travel and the denied stress of meeting with Shizue Suoh caught up with Haruhi and she leaned against Kyoya.

"Mine."

It wasn't her leaning on him that took him by surprise, it was how familiar it felt. And that he was leaning back just a little on her. Were his senpais right? Had he been managing a relationship that was moving fine on its own? The entire plane flight back to Japan, she had sat next to him, staring into space turning that ring around her finger while he sat there, strategizing ways to convince her to keep it on. Had that been unnecessary? No, contingency plans were always a good idea. When he told her he was going on to San Francisco alone, she had asked to come with him. She said she was buying time to better consider her options.

_Wouldn't you have said the same?_ a voice inside asked him.

Yes, but Haruhi wasn't duplicitous.

_No, she's smart. She gave you a reason you could understand._

She came to him the night she cried herself to sleep... _Go ahead, try to talk your way out of that one._ Kyoya wasn't sure how a disembodied voice could smirk, but it was very definitely smirking at him, almost daring him to work all the way back to _that_ night. _It appears the idiocy quotient in this club is a constant after all. When Tamaki stopped being clueless about Haruhi, you picked up the slack._

"No," Kyoya defended himself softly, "I've always known I loved her."

"What?" Haruhi looked up, half asleep.

"Nothing," he smiled.

~oOo~

"Haruhi-chan!" The girl was barely through the doorway when Fuyumi glided up, took both of her hands and pulled her across the foyer as though afraid Haruhi would slip back out the door.
"Welcome back. I would have had your room ready for you but I thought you still had a week left on your trip."

Haruhi replied in a practical voice, "We cut it short. Tamaki's grandmother was taken ill."

"I saw that on the news, but I thought she was supposed to recover..." Fuyumi looked over at Tamaki.

"She will," Tamaki assured her. "Grandmother just wanted to get a few things taken care of and she's not the type to wait."

Fuyumi glanced around the circle of Hosts. She wasn't nearly as adept as Tamaki was at reading people, but she was still pretty good. Something had definitely happened. Unconsciously, the Ootori observational skills clicked in to high gear. "Oh," she said, turning her attention back to Haruhi. "Does that mean you just got off the plane? No wonder you look so tired. Kyoya, take her into my study. The rest of you take her bags to her room and unpack."

"Hey, we just got off the plane too!" Hikaru protested.

"Don't you have servants for that?" Kaoru added.

Fuyumi shrugged. "Of course, but they won't know what to unpack or how much, and if you leave it to Haruhi, it will all stay crumpled up in the suitcase."

The boys grumbled all the way up the stairs until they opened suitcase.

Jumbled.

Rumpled.

Random assortment of colors and textures.

The Alfred Hitchcock-esque music played in Tamaki's mind as he cried out in dismay and jumped back, allowing the lid of the suitcase to fall back covering the mayhem. Even Mori was appalled at lack of respect for designer originals; the twins were positively twitching in horror. "It's true," Hikaru sobbed. "I didn't want to admit it, but it's true. Commoners don't understand designer clothing." Kaoru comforted his brother as best he could.

Tamaki took a deep breath. "It's ok men, we can get through this. We'll open the suitcase again then remove the items one by one. Brace yourselves."

They held their breath as Tamaki gingerly flipped open the top. Hikaru reached in and removed the first item. They all applauded his courage. "Noise cancelling headphones," he said. "We will put them on the nightstand in case she needs to find them in a hurry."

Honey was next. "White silk scarf," he said. "If we hang it in the bathroom, the steam will pull the wrinkles out." They breathed a little easier.

"Tailored dress Kaoru designed that she wore to dinner." Tamaki said as he took his turn at the suitcase. Kaoru caught his breath but didn't let out the pained noise.

Hikaru was not so successful when they pulled out the red top and yellow skirt. "It's ok, it's ok," Kaoru reassured his brother. "It's a broomstick skirt. It looks better when it's wrinkled." Hikaru bit his finger and nodded.
"Totally awesome red dress," Mori said, shaking it out and hanging it up.

"Coffee stained sweater," said Tamaki.

"You don't suppose she's going to try to rescue that thing?" said Kaoru.

"She might," Tamaki confirmed his fears. "Commoners try to be thrifty with their clothing."

"No," sobbed Hikaru. "Just bury it and let it go with dignity."

"Soft cotton nightshirt," said Honey.

"Put it under her pillow," instructed Tamaki.

"Cream colored satin nightgown," called out Mori.

He held it up. There were no tags on it. It had been worn. The twins and Tamaki all screamed in horror and passed out on the spot.

~oOo~

Alone at last, Kyoya reached up and touched Haruhi's face before pulling her into a gentle kiss as though she was made of fine porcelain. In the foyer, Fuyumi watched through the open door, her whole posture softening, a romantic smile on her lips.

Shido gave his wife a sideways look. "What are you doing, Fuyumi?"

"They needed a few minutes to themselves."

"If they need time by themselves, why are you watching them?"

"I've never seen him like this. He's in love with her!"

"And you don't think he loved her when he asked her to marry him?"

"It's different now. Something has changed between them."

"Sorry to interrupt," Honey said appearing on the stairs. "Do you have any smelling salts?"

"Smelling salts?" Shido repeated.

"It's ok. Takashi offered to slap them, I just thought we should try this first."

Honey disappeared back up the stairs. Shido stared dumbly after him then decided he really didn't want to know. He turned his attention back to his wife. "You can get that thought right out of your head, Fuyumi. You are a chaperone, not a matchmaker. Because of their age and circumstances, there are rules and conventions..."

"We have more than one guest room, Kyoya. You can stay if you want."

"...which you are going to ignore, aren't you?" Shido pinched the bridge of his nose and gave a sigh.

Fuyumi leaned back into him and snuggled into his neck with the back of her head. He really hated it when she did that he thought as his hand dropped of its own accord to encircle her waist, because when she did, he pretty much gave her anything she wanted.
Five guys thundered down the stairs, fortunately - or perhaps unfortunately - sparing him his wife's affectionate manipulations. "You're inviting us to stay tonight?" Hikaru said. "That's very nice of you."

Tamaki stopped dead when he saw what Fuyumi had been staring at. Kyoya and Haruhi were lost in their own little world. No so long ago, she had looked at him like that. But what really twisted him up inside was Kyoya.

His walls were down.

In all the years Tamaki had known him, Kyoya had never left himself completely open to anyone or anything. A part of him was still waiting for Tamaki to turn on him. That single word had shattered his defenses. "Thank you for your offer, Fuyumi-san, but we cannot stay."

"Sure we can," said Hikaru.

"No, we can't," said Mori.

"You've been traveling and need to go see your families and I...my dog is waiting for me," Tamaki said, his voice breaking.

"But milord..." Hikaru nodded in that general direction. "Upstairs."

"He knows, Hika," said Kaoru.

"But she's our sister!" Hikaru protested. "It's our job to look out for her!"

"Sister?" Fuyumi said.

"Our parents are trying to adopt her," Kaoru explained.

"Interesting," Shido said. For a moment they wondered if giving free information to an Ootori by marriage was as dangerous as giving it to an Ootori by birth.

"We should go now," Honey said. "We'll be back in the morning," he promised Hikaru.

Fuyumi grabbed Tamaki on his way out. "Thank you for this, by the way."

"For what? I didn't do anything."

"I know. And it's the nicest 'anything' anyone has ever not done for him. Because you know as well as I do that he wouldn't hate you if you tried to get Haruhi back and he wouldn't hate her if she went."

Tamaki kind of shrugged. "I don't... know... that she'd come back to me if I asked her." He was surprised at the pain the lanced through his chest when he said that out loud. And Fuyumi's kind, knowing smile made it worse. For a minute he couldn't breathe. Stop it! he told himself sternly. She's going to marry your best friend. You came to terms with this weeks ago. If you had a thousand lifetimes and could choose one man to be your brother and your best friend, in all one thousand lifetimes, you would choose him. He has found a woman to love. The only woman I've ever met who was worthy of him. She couldn't care less whether he is rich or a disinherited third son. She loves him because he is smart and clever and loyal. Even rarer, she is just as smart and hardworking as he is. She is beautiful and fearless and honest to a fault...

...And I wanted her.
The thought kept coming back into his head, accompanied every time by a wash of guilt for his selfishness. "But if he lost her ... to me especially ... he'd never be able to love another, ever."

"It's not that he wouldn't be able to, but that he wouldn't allow himself to," Fuyumi said.

Tamaki's guilt vanished in a flood of anger. "I know this is rich coming from me, but what the hell is wrong with your family that they convinced Kyoya he wasn't worthy of love?"

She thought for a minute, unable to see the question as semi-rhetorical. "My parents used love and praise as a means of recognizing extraordinary accomplishment. The Ootoris rose to prominence at a time when primogenitor was still practiced in Japan as a way of keeping family fortunes together. But there came a generation when the oldest son was a drunk and not good for much, so his father disowned him and left everything to the second son. It was quite a scandal at the time. But it started a new practice, that the son best able to run the company would inherit everything. Yuuichi was four when Akito was born, but even then, he was aware that our parents compared all their milestones, so he made sure he was always at the top of the class, the best grades, the highest praise, the top awards for the science fairs. Since our family are doctors, he became a renowned surgeon who did just enough charity work that everyone would think well of the Ootoris without doing so much that it would be expected. How do you beat that? So Akito not only was the top student in every class, he shut out all distractions and activities to show he was focused. He not only became a doctor, he studied business as well so he could show that he could run the company as well as understand the medical profession. How do you beat that?"

"Kyoya saved the company from takeover at 17."

"Yes, but his personality was already formed by then. If not for you, he wouldn't believe in friendship. None of the others would have made it inside his walls without you. And he certainly never intended to fall in love."

"I suppose," Tamaki said with his careless Gallic shrug, "watching my two best friends be happy together is not exactly too a high price considering all they have given me. And even if it was, he was willing to pay it for me."

She kissed him on the cheek. "You're a good man, Tamaki Suoh."

"Yeah, well, don't go spreading that around. My grandmother will disinherit me for sure if she thinks I'm weak as well as stupid."

~oOo~

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this one took so long. I had it done a while back but it didn't quite feel finished. So I sat on it and sat on it, then one night a little over a week ago, all the guys came in and started talking to me. "You know," they said, "this isn't just Kyoya's story. It's all of ours. And we have some very definite opinions."

"That's great," I said, "but it's past my bedtime. Can we have this conversation in the morning?"

"No," they said, "you'll be too busy in the morning thinking about the stuff you need to
get done to hear us."

Anyway, still not quite done, but getting very close. Thanks everyone for the comments and Kudos.
Rei Inoue sat in her living room, regarding her niece. When the Hitachiins had contacted her again, it wasn't hard to guess where this was going. She was aware that they could offer Haruhi advantages that she could not and that adding another child would not strain their resources the way it would strain hers. But this wasn't about advantages and resources. It was about family and duty. And what was truly in her niece's best interest.

She told the Hitachiins she would not speak to them. But she would speak to Haruhi. Alone.

Rei had to suppress her irritation when Haruhi arrived in Osaka with her six escorts. "I said I wanted to speak with you alone."

The twins started to argue but Kyoya cut them off. "Of course, Madame, we will wait outside."

They went to the front yard and prepared to wait.

"They don't take hints very well, do they?" Haruhi's aunt eyed the boys as they left.

"It's more like they don't trust very many people to do the right thing. And frankly, having seen the people they interact with, that's not an unfounded distrust."

"I see." She noticed how the boys clustered next to the open window. "And that excuses them from proper behavior?" Her aunt walked over to the window and closed it. Out on the lawn, Kaoru popped open a device that looked like a small satellite dish, plugged it into his computer and turned it towards the living room. Aunt Rei settled in to her imagined privacy. Her husband was at work. Kimi had been banished to her room, which she protested against until she realized she could sit at the window with her best friend and admire the lawn ornaments.

Rei took a deep breath and considered her niece as they sat facing each other. The girl didn't even have the decency to fidget. "You really think that it's somehow a good idea to move into a house with two boys who lack self-discipline, common sense or any apparent propriety? Who have, so far as I can tell, no measurable level of adult supervision. But who do have a romantic interest in you?"

"It isn't like that," Haruhi protested.

"Really? Because Kimi has 15 teen magazines that say it is."

"That was a misunderstanding."

"You know, I don't speak Italian or whatever language that press conference was in, but I would think 'he has loved her for years' would be hard to mistranslate." Watching her niece wither, Rei softened her tone. "Haruhi, you're very young. I know that living with a pair of rich, handsome boys who adore you sounds like splendid idea, but trust me, there are complications that can arise from that that you are not ready to deal with. And I don't just mean sex," she said, holding her hand up to forestall the objection, "although that is an issue as well. There are personal relationship issues from which, if you are living in the same house, you have no escape. You are awfully young.
"I'm awfully young to have lost both parents, too. I was awfully young to take over the household chores at six when my mother died. And I was awfully young at seven to take over the shopping. Life doesn't wait until we're ready," Haruhi said. "And you know what? Everything you've said about the Hitachiins is absolutely correct. Their parents are working people who try to do their best for their children but there aren't enough hours in the day and sometimes they fall short. Their sons are stunningly good looking and smart and funny and just bad boy enough to make any woman crazy. But they are my best friends, and that is how I think of them. I am engaged to Kyoya Ootori. I don't know why everyone thinks I am going to walk away from that. He is brilliant and hardworking and focused and observant. He's kind, although he never wants to admit it. You should see the lengths he's gone to to make his friend Tamaki's dreams a reality. He offered to marry me to protect me from an old lady's anger even though that old lady was infinitely more valuable to him and his family than I will ever be. As you said, we're young. There's a very real chance we won't make it all the way to marriage. But right now, he means everything to me and I want to try to make this work. And I can't do that from halfway across Japan." She paused for a deep breath. "And lest you think I'm just a silly teenaged girl with romantic ideas, you need to know it's not all about the boy. Ouran is one of the best schools in the country and all the colleges know that. I know you didn't always approve of my father, but surely my mother was everything you wanted: educated, honest, hard-working. The best way for me to follow in her footsteps is to get a first-class education but I need a scholarship to do that. I know this isn't the path that most people take, but I'm not starting from the same place. And if we're being honest, I'm not sure I want to go the same place everyone else is going." Haruhi swallowed hard. "Aunt Rei, you have been trying to take care of me since you found out about my father's condition, even before we actually met. And believe me, I value family loyalty very highly. In some ways, it's all I've ever had. You were willing to take me - a virtual stranger - into your home even at some cost to yourself and your family. And it is a lovely home and a lovely family and it suits you perfectly. But it is not for me."

Rei Inoue regarded her niece thoughtfully. "You are a peculiar one, Haruhi Fujioka. Like your father, I suppose. And I still think you would benefit from living as the vast majority of the world does for at least a brief time. Especially if you are to become an attorney who must interact with that world.

"I will not fight you on this so long as you come to stay for a few weeks every year so I can make sure you are being taken care of and are living a respectable life."

Haruhi smiled. "I will visit on holidays."

"What?" The twins shrieked as they barreled in through the door. Haruhi tried not to wince at her aunt's raised eyebrows. Couldn't they at least eavesdrop with some subtlety? "No no! It's already decided that we get the holidays," the twins said. "At least we get the good ones."

"The good holidays?" Takami said.

"Like Christmas and New Year's," the twins clarified.

"Why do you get both?" Tamaki demanded.

"Because there's two of us."

Kyoya arched an eyebrow. "And who decided that?"

"We did." The twins gave a sideways smirk. "Your family's horrible. Even if we gave them a good
holiday, they'd turn it into a crappy one, so they may as well start with the lame-o holidays to begin with."

"Ok, how about this?" Kaoru temporized, "we get the good holidays; the Inoues get the so-so holidays, the kind where the family just eats together; and Kyoya's family can get the phone call kind of holidays."

"Phone call holidays?" Kyoya said.

"Hey I want some holidays too!" Tamaki said.

"Yeah, she's our sister as much as yours," Honey chimed in.

"Yeah," Mori agreed.

"Ok, ok, we can work this out," Hikaru said.

Somebody produced a pocket calendar from someplace and the Hosts all went over to one side to squabble it out.

Haruhi slapped her palm against her forehead.

Rei Inoue looked at her niece, looked meaningfully over at the guys then back to her niece. "And this is what you want?"

"Yeah," Haruhi said, "it is. Just ... set aside some of my trust fund money for psychological counseling. I've got a feeling I'm going to need it."

~oOo~

Six guys stared at the front of Haruhi's old apartment complex. "What are we doing here?" asked Honey.

"The Hitachiins are going to adopt Haruhi so we have to move all of Haruhi's stuff to the Hitachiin mansion," explained Tamaki.

"Can't we just hire movers?" said Hikaru.

"Believe me, I offered," said Kyoya drily.

"That's not how commoners do things," said Tamaki knowledgeably. "We have to go to the market and buy a bunch of their old used boxes, then put her stuff into them, then load it in the back of the car and make 20 trips to the new house."

"We can't even hire a truck? We have to make multiple trips?"

"That's why I brought the stretch limo. We can make it in fewer trips. You don't think she'll mind, do you?" Tamaki sounded anxious.

"I can't see why she would," said Mori.

"Wait, do they even sell their old boxes at the market? I've never seen them on the shelves."

"I couldn't find them either so I hired a graphic artist to custom design us fifty boxes that look like they might have come from the market. He only charged ¥5000 per box!"
They walked into the apartment to find Haruhi wearing a dress and one of her father's frilly aprons with her hair pulled back in a scarf looking much like she did in Karuizawa. Every time Kyoya looked at Haruhi, his throat closed up a little, there was a peculiar fluttering in his chest and a small wave of dizziness. Either he had contracted a rare tropical disease or he was profoundly happy. Since he didn't have experience with either, it was hard to self-diagnose.

She had stayed. Of her own free will, without any manipulation. Well ok, without much manipulation.

The guys elbowed past him to find Haruhi already hard at work wrapping up dishes in paper.

"You actually bought the school newspaper?" Hikaru said.

"They gave me a good deal on unsold back issues. Did you remember to pick up the boxes?"

"Oh, they should be delivered any time now," Tamaki said.

"Since when do the grocery stores deliver their extra boxes?"

"Uhh..." the guys began to panic.

"...We mean 'delivered' as in dropped off..." Tamaki said.

"...by the staff..." said Hikaru.

"...which is not like a custom order being delivered..." said Kaoru.

"The Suoh Hotels buy produce in large quantities," Mori rescued them. "The suppliers are willing to do them a favor."

"Oh." She wasn't entirely sure she believed them but it was too late to go get boxes herself. "I guess we can get started sorting things then. We should make three piles: stuff that I'm taking with me, stuff that's broken and can be tossed out, and stuff I'm putting into storage."

Hikaru looked confused. "Why would you be storing anything?"

"So I don't have to buy it again when I move out."

"Why would you move out?" Kaoru asked. He turned to his brother, "Was moving out part of the plan?"

"Wasn't part of my plan," Hikaru answered.

"Oh come on," Haruhi said. "Eventually I have to go to college."

"So?" said Kaoru. "Ouran University has one of the best law programs in the country and the University of Tokyo is one of the finest schools in the world."

"And both are within commuting distance of our house," Hikaru said.

"I don't want to impose any longer than I have to," Haruhi said.

"Besides, she'll be attending university in America with me," Kyoya said.
"What?" Tamaki shrieked.

"I don't think so," said Hikaru.

"Uh-uh," said Kaoru.

"No way," said Hikaru.

"Not gonna happen," said Kaoru.

"I'm inclined to agree with the twins," Honey said.

"Hn," agreed Mori.

"The University of Tokyo is a fine institution," Kyoya said. "But she can do better, and you all know it."

"I haven't actually decided..." Haruhi put in, though no one was listening to her.

Mori stared Kyoya down. "If she's going to practice law in Japan, she needs to study at a Japanese institution."

"Yeah, what he said," Tamaki put in.

"Enough!" Haruhi shouted. "I will let you know where I'm going to school when I know. In the meantime, get packing or get out!"

A knock at the door interrupted her before she could get a serious tirade going. "I have a delivery of boxes for the Fujioka residence...?" the man said.

"In here!" Haruhi called out.

"If you'll just sign for them Miss," he held out a receipt.

"Sign for a bunch of old boxes?" Haruhi wondered aloud. "Whatever." She pulled out a pen and glanced at the stack. "These are really nice boxes."

"Thank you," the delivery guy said. "We worked very hard on them."

"What?"

"He just means they made sure to send the very best ones over," Tamaki said, shoving the man out the door.

"Yeah, thanks!" Hikaru added, waving down the stairs. "We'll make sure to use your company again."

"Whew," they both said, looking at each other.

"That was weird," Haruhi muttered.

"Was it?" Kyoya said. "I didn't notice."

She looked at him suspiciously. "Anyway, let's get started. There're tape and tape guns over there."

"Tape guns?" said Hikaru.
"How fast do they shoot?" said Kaoru, wondering if they could mummify Tamaki before he could stop them.

"They don't shoot at all," Haruhi held one up.

The twins were obviously disappointed. "That's just a dispenser with a handle."

Haruhi was starting to fume.

"Are you sure you don't want professional movers?" Kyoya asked. "I could have them here in under a half an hour and it would take them far less time to get you packed and moved."

"No," she said definitively. "I don't want to waste money on something I could do myself."

"As you wish," Kyoya turned towards the cupboards, pulling out his phone once his back was turned. Three blocks away, a team of professional movers saw the text, slumped their shoulders, got in their truck and drove away.

Honey picked up the tape gun while Mori began unfolding boxes.

"We'll start in the bedroom," the twins volunteered, grabbing a couple boxes.

Haruhi watched them. "What grocery store are these from? I've never heard of these brands."

"Oh um..." Tamaki started.

"Um...uh..." the twins echoed.

"A different one than you shop at," Honey looked wide-eyed and innocent.

The twins disappeared before they could be questioned any more. No sense poking at demon, especially one who would be living across the hall. Mori went over to the bookcase. "Which ones do you want?" he asked, distracting her.

"All the school books should stay with me; the others can go to storage."

Mori began pulling books off the shelves. Honey grabbed a bunch of school papers and began wrapping up Ranka's collection of adorable figurines. Tamaki and Kyoya started on the kitchen.

"We're done!" said the twins.

"Already?" Haruhi went to the bedroom. There were three piles: small, medium and very large. "You put all my clothes in the throwaway pile?"

"Not all of them," Hikaru said.

"We put the Ouran uniforms in the keep box," Kaoru clarified.

"You said get rid of anything that was old and out of date," Hikaru added.

"I said old and broken!" She pointed to an orange wad of fabric on top of the pile. "And that's current; I only bought that last fall!"

"And it'll be out of date by this fall," Hikaru said.

"Yeah, I'm not sure why that style even got one season, it definitely won't get two," Kaoru
supported him.

"It's soft and I like it! You two go pack the living room where I can keep an eye on you. Honey-san, Mori-san, take over in here. If you can even remember me wearing an outfit, it stays!" She huffed out of the room.

As they slipped out of the room in Haruhi's wake, Hikaru bumped into Mori and said softly, "A thousand yen if you forget what she was wearing the first time she set foot in Music Room 3."

"Done," said Mori. It really was a hideous sweater.

Back in the living room, Kyoya was neatly folding her dad's coats and scarves. She caught her breath, wanting him to leave them alone but not wanting to put them away herself. Kyoya was the one dad liked best. It's ok for him to be the one who puts dad's stuff away, she thought, watching him work. The twins were busy putting stickers on everything in the living room while Tamaki was busy in the kitchen going through her drawers - whisk, spatulas, cooking knives. He ran his thumb sideways along the edge. "They're good knives," she said.

"I can see that," Tamaki answered, thinking to himself but cooking means so much to you, packing away your cooking utensils would be like packing away my piano.

The twins looked up. "Done. What's next?"

"How can you be done that fast?" Haruhi demanded.

"This room was easy, it's all furniture and the furniture all goes."

"It can't all go with me; it won't all fit in my room."

"Not go with you, go away."

She let out an exasperated snort. "Stop trying to get rid of everything I own!"

"Not everything," Hikaru said. "Just the cheap things."

"Which, to you guys, is everything. If I move in with you, it's because I need a place to live, not because I want a makeover. You are not going to change the way I dress, the way I do my hair, my makeup, my contacts...." She blinked. "... I hate you guys."

"It's ok, Haruhi," Hikaru said. "You've changed us as much as we've changed you."

"Yeah," Kaoru said. "Without you, we wouldn't know how to make up after a fight."

"Or how to get past our jealousy and share our friends with other people," added Hikaru. "Or that instant coffee even existed," said Kaoru. "Or that it's possible for a human being to sing as badly as you do."

Haruhi gave Hikaru a playful shove for his teasing. Honey walked in. "What's going on?"

"Haruhi's just getting a couple things out of her system before the move," Kyoya answered.

"Good idea. If she has to push Hikaru out a window after the move, there will be too many
witnesses." Honey went over and picked up a roll of packing tape and then walked back out of the room.

~oOo~

Haruhi wasn't a materialistic person but even to her it seemed a little sad that the sum total of her life could fit in the trunks of four cars and the back of a stretch limo. She relented about the furniture. "Keeping it all seems like a waste," the twins said.

"They have a point, Haruhi," Kyoya said. "You'll be living with them for at least a year. Even if you move out when you go to college, most student housing comes furnished. And if we go the college in America..."

"Which she's NOT," the twins loudly objected.

"...you certainly can't bring the furniture with you," Kyoya continued, ignoring them. "Which mean five or six years in storage. You'll have spent more money than it would cost to simply buy new furniture." And if I play my cards right, we'll be moving in together and we can have nicer things. I love you, but I don't love your furniture. He cocked his head with that logical, innocent expression as though presenting the only sensible suggestion.

"I hate you too."

They finished packing. Honey and Mori came back from the last trip loading stuff into the cars. She turned around and paused at the doorway, unable to go through. "I'm not ready to let go."

Tamaki came up and put his arm around her. "You don't have to. After we drop everything off, we can come back."

He was lying, but she needed him to lie. She couldn't do this otherwise. As soon as they were gone, someone - probably Kyoya - would call the salvage people who would come and take anything usable off to the second-hand shop. Then the cleaners would come and remove any trace of her life and her father's life that remained. She said she didn't want to spend money on things she could do herself, but there were some things she couldn't do.

She wedged herself between the boxes in the stuffed limo. They went first to storage where she dropped off the books, her cooking utensils, her mother's china and her dad's figurines. She kept one or two of Ranka's favorites out; she would put them by his picture. He'd like that. She carefully packed the matching frilly aprons he'd made for them even though he himself didn't cook. Maybe someday, when she had children of her own, she'd dig them out; she could teach her children to cook her mother's favorite recipes; she could wear her father's aprons and her children could wear hers. "You did put my cookbooks in with the books I'm taking to the house, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Mori.

She turned to give them all a hug. "What would I do without you?"

"Live a really boring life," Hikaru answered.

She punched him in the arm.

Now that the back of the limo was free of boxes, the guys all crammed in so she had no more room than before. When they arrived at the Hitachiin mansion, Mr. And Mrs. Hitachiin were waiting out
front to greet her. "Welcome home." The twins' father gave her a formal bow.

She returned it. "Doumo sumimasen, arigatou gozaimasu. Osewa ni narimasu." Thank you. I come into your care. I am sorry to be a bother.

"We are pleased to have you," he said formally, although she almost didn't hear it because their mother swept her up in a hug worthy of her own father. "None of that! We're family!"

Haruhi kind of preferred their father's reserve.

"We'll take you to your room," he said.

"It's hopelessly plain," Yahuza said, throwing an accusing glare at her husband.

"Your taste is exquisite my dear," he said, "but I thought Haruhi might like to decorate her own room." He turned his attention back to his new daughter. "After we show you your room, we will go down and help unload while you stay and look around and start deciding where you want to put things. And if there's anything you want to decorate the room that you don't already have, just say the word and within 24 hours, the boys and their mother will have something three times more expensive and with some famous artist's name on it occupying a different corner than you intended to begin with. Fair warning."

His wife glared at him then turned back to Haruhi to show her the room. It was spacious and airy, with large leaded glass windows and a balcony that opened onto an immaculately tended garden that was probably in a dozen magazines the world over. "The bathroom is over here," Yahuza said, opening the door to a marble and gilt confection, "and the closet is here."

The closet was the size of her old bedroom. Mr. Hitachiin sidled up to her and in a quiet voice said, "A note of advice: Hikaru told his mother you were like me. You see I don't care what I wear. So I have a little corner of my closet that is mine. I put all my favorite things in there, the things that are comfortable, the things that I wear when I'm hanging around the house, and they are not allowed to touch anything in that section. The rest of the clothes come and go and I never even know when. I just wear what they tell me when they tell me and everybody's life is less stressful." He winked at her and left.

Once the Hitachiins were gone, she looked around her new room and paused.

"What is it?" Kyoya said, setting down his box and coming up behind her.

"This room is the size of my old apartment."

He looked around appraisingly. "Minus the kitchen," he said, "But I understand they have one of those downstairs."

"I don't belong here," she said in a small voice.

Out in the hallway, the Hitachiin patriarch stopped and put down his box to eavesdrop on his newly acquired family member.

"You do belong here," Kyoya said. He gestured with a finger around the room. "The space? It's just a space. It's unimportant. But this family? They really want you. Blood isn't always the most important factor. Hikaru and Kaoru... your brothers... they care for you. Far more than my brothers care for me. And your new parents? No, they don't love you as much as Ranka did. But you only get one of those in a lifetime, if you even get that. But if you leave yourself open to them, I think you'll be surprised at what develops."
Yahuza came down the hall to find her husband waiving her off. She looked at him questioningly. He took her box from her, set it on the floor and led her down to the kitchen. They could arrange snacks for the workforce. And perhaps, while the boys were taking a break, they could have the servants finish moving everything. Haruhi's stuff stood a much better chance of survival that way.

"Are you sure?" Haruhi asked.

"Am I ever wrong?" Kyoya answered. He traced one finger along her jaw and tilted her face up to his. He gently leaned down, touched his lips to hers. Hers parted and the kiss slowly built and deepened.

"Hey, no doing that under her parents' roof. Don't you have any decency?" Hikaru demanded in mock outrage.

"Yeah, we're going to have to ask you what your intentions are towards our sister," Kaoru added.

"I intend to marry her," Kyoya answered, barely breaking the kiss before renewing it.

Haruhi wasn't responding anymore, but it didn't matter. The kiss wasn't about her any longer. It was about the relative status of the three guys. "You know there's a tradition," Hikaru said. "When you marry a Hitachiin woman, you have to take the Hitachiin name."

"The only reason for me to take the Hitachiin name would be to take control of both of your family's companies." He smiled down at Haruhi. "Do you want them? It'll take me a couple years, but I can get them for you."

For one horrifying moment, they realized that this man had taken control of the Ootori Group at the age of 17. He could deliver on that promise if he chose. Haruhi dissolved into giggles shaking her head. "No," she said "I don't know the first thing about business."

"You should learn," Kyoya said. "It is the family business after all." Then a thoughtful expression flitted across his face. He looked her in the eye. "You're logical and analytical. You'd probably be very good at coding." Then he looked down a little farther. "But your taste in clothes is abysmal. We probably better keep you away from the fashion side of the house."

"Hey!" She slapped his chest. "I like my clothes! They're comfortable!"

"You could always design clothes that are both high fashion and comfortable. That could take the House of Hitachiin to a whole new level," Kyoya said.

One look at the twins faces as Kyoya planned the takeover of their companies and Haruhi had to stifle a laugh. "Except then they'd be broke. And you know they'd be helpless as commoners, so they would just turn up on our doorstep."

Kyoya looked at them, already irritated at their future poverty. "Hm. Poor relations are annoying. Maybe we should just leave them alone."

Haruhi gave him a quick kiss to let him know he'd reached the right conclusion.

"Oh god, are they kissing again?" Tamaki rolled his eyes as he put down his box.

"They're cute, Tama-chan," Honey piped up. "So cute maybe I should have adopted them."

"Maybe I should just adopt all of you," Haruhi said, going over to give them a group hug.
"Good idea," Honey said. "But we'd all have to be Haninozukas. We are the oldest family, after all."

"But these guys are terrible martial artists," Mori pointed out.

"Hmm. Yeah. They might embarrass the family," Honey nodded.

"Clearly we should all become Suoh's. Our company is already set up for multiple unrelated subsidiaries."

The twins pulled Haruhi between them, draping their arms around her. "Excuse us," they said in unison, "half is us are already Hitachiins. It would be a lot easier for the rest of you to fall in line."

"Why don't you just all become Fujiokas? It's what you all want anyway." Kyoya said coming over to the group. "Except you." He tapped Haruhi on the nose with one finger. "You are going to become an Ootori."

~oOo~

Chapter End Notes

And that is it, unless I write an epilogue. I'm working on an epilogue. It's actually the only way this chapter is ever going to get posted. These guys have been my constant companions for a year now and I don't want to say goodbye. I guess I have to convince myself that the other stories I started will be just as fun.

Thank you everybody for sticking with me through this adventure, for all the kudos and comments! You support means so much to me.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!