Night Call

by oseltamivir_phosphate

Summary

Iwaizumi's face is so much clearer now. He seems like a man of his regiment; sharp edges that could express benevolence, ultraviolence, unforgiving hazel eyes, the bearer of cruel tidings, knuckles firm and ruddy – all of which disproportionate to the way his hands would gently graze over Oikawa's deathly pale ones.
Ultraviolence

Chapter Notes

Heavily inspired by Hotline Miami. Enjoy!
Ultraviolence by Lana Del Rey

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s half past midnight.

Iwaizumi took a cold shower at around nine and climbed onto his bed a quarter before ten. When he figured that his tossing and turning would lead nowhere, he went out to the kitchen to get something to drink. Beer would do. Beer made him tipsy. He wandered away from the stainless steel wares and dark marble countertops two and a half bottles later. The late night news at eleven force-fed him more negativity than he had initially liked. Corrupt government officials. Missing persons. Drug busts. Failing consumer markets. Spotted Chinese fighter jets by the coast—

Watching the news has always served as a quick fix whenever he forgets to feel hopeless.

He's back on his bed, the mattress sinking at the weight as he begins to hate the clock hanging innocently on the wall. It always strikes back at him antagonistically - twelve midnight, two-thirty, half past five. The seconds pour slowly and the ticking doesn’t stop. It only deepens that wretched feeling of awareness of not being able to sleep, finding it hard to remember when it had been a natural company in his life.

Time melts onto the dark edges of his room until it's one in the morning.

The city is unsettling at this time of the night. It’s quiet and it’s cold, even though spring is already singing its swan song. But then again, corners in Roppongi won’t get any warmer under any kind of weather. There’s a breakfast place that’s warm enough - open all day and all night. Iwaizumi hops off to blindly put on a graphic tee, layering it with a black letterman jacket with mint sleeves and mint trimmings to ward off the cold before traveling thirty floors down from his pad down to the commercial floor of his condominium.

In spite of its name, Ogatama is an inviting entity. It's a tree. It's an inviting spirit. It serves breakfast at night. He sits himself inside the restaurant, always at the same table by the windows. Their set meal of western-style pancakes, grilled fish, pickled vegetables, banana bread, and that one glorious spinach quiche never fails to give him that slight rush of optimism. He’ll get sleep soon. The sun will rise. Tomorrow will come.

It doesn't take too long for the waiter to come walking by with a tray of food - the meal Iwaizumi usually orders already on top of it. This restaurant has had the same people for years. That waitress on the other side of the room is Haruna, the guy responsible for the spinach quiches is Toshi, the cook who makes mediocre miso soup is Maeda, and this waiter assigned from midnight until early morning is Kindaichi.

“Couldn’t sleep, Iwaizumi-san?” he asks, placing the breakfast plates gently in front of Iwaizumi. He wonders how Kindaichi can be that energetic at this time of the night. He fills a glass with water, another with iced shaken tea. “I haven’t had a good night’s sleep lately, too. Night shifts are
Iwaizumi finds it slightly hard to sympathize, doubtful anyone can sleep as badly as him. Kindaichi wears his ability to stay away like a badge of honor. He probably doesn’t wake up every thirty minutes at night, doesn’t have to hit his head against the wall so he could knock himself out, doesn’t have to shoot up diamorphine to fall into that fabricated hallucination of a well-rested afternoon.

But still, Iwaizumi nods. He spews out words of encouragement, although personally, he knows it’s not worth shit. "Hey, at least you get paid more, right?"

“Right—Oh, by the way,” Kindaichi adds suddenly. “I know it’s already, like, one in the morning, but do you want yesterday’s newspaper?” Iwaizumi cranes his neck up to look at him, then down to his hands. He’s already holding the said object while another customer calls out to him. There’s only one other person inside besides him right now. Seems like a slow night.

Iwaizumi thinks reading the newspaper is just as depressing as watching the news. But the kid’s obedient, persistent, and he obviously looks up to him.

Kindaichi should really find a new role model.

“Sure,” he says, then takes a huge bite of his midnight meal before lighting a cigarette. “Leave it here.”

In these small hours, the majority of people in the continent is asleep, and somehow this very fact makes him feel small and mundane and tragic. Just specks of dust trying to get through the night. Iwaizumi’s line of thinking quickly swerves into the opposite direction when the phone in his pockets rings. He picks it up, calmly, casually, his bland reaction contrasting to those around him, heads turning at his ringtone of a partly recognizable synthesized guitar riffs from an old foreign television show.

“Hey there! It’s Kurosaki from the Valhalla Nightclub. The DJ backed out last minute, and I was hoping you can fill in for him at around two. We have a set list ready. It’s in the usual spot. I want everyone dancing tonight!”

Straight off, the call ends. It ends when it likes to end. That’s how it is. Not a second early, not a second later. Iwaizumi can say the Nightcall helps ease those thin dreams and his desperate pursuit of sleep. The desire to sleep simply vanishes, and Iwaizumi takes out an awfully long sigh. He rushes in to finish his food and pushes the cigarette on an ashtray. The red light between the embers and ashes disappear together with his appetite. He leaves cash on the table and goes out to leave, but not before grabbing the newspaper he had so willingly accepted. It’d be rude to leave it.

Kindaichi didn’t have the chance to say goodbye as Iwaizumi walks out the door.

The Palm Plaza Hotel isn’t far, and honestly if Iwaizumi can spare fifteen minutes, he can walk right to it. He doesn’t though, and heads straight to the fifth floor parking lot to hop onto his Lexus, knowing the hotel won’t be his first stop for tonight. He drives off to his destination. Despite its location, Iwaizumi can’t help but praise of its ability to mimic a beachside resort in the tropics, dotted with faux palm trees exported from the Southeast, big enough to unfaithfully clean the polluted air and tall enough to hide the entire city’s secrets.

It’s in the usual spot, just as the Nightcall had said. The hotel’s staff entrance is hidden within an underground parking lot, the locker room for employees located in the basement. Expectedly, Iwaizumi is a figure well-known enough that the security guards didn’t have to question him.
There’s no lock. Iwaizumi finds a note, vines and leaves embossed on the scented paper.

Your targets are stolen diamonds. Retrieve the target from Kazuo Kozlov. Eliminate Kozlov and all witnesses. Discretion is of essence. Leave the target at point HK-107.

Without fail, the notes would always give out direct and clear-cut errands, and with it a rubber mask. It’s a wolf baring its teeth this time again, and has been for the last couple of months. Why do they keep leaving this? He never uses it. Probably did once or twice before. It’s hard to breathe in it, hard to see through it, hard to do anything in it. Iwaizumi has never been a fan, so he leaves the mask inside and slams the locker close.

Outside, the air grows colder. He finds his car where he had left it on an outdoor parking lot. It has a great view of the city, the land higher and steeper than normal, lights brighter, roads wider. Iwaizumi lights a cigarette and leans back on the car doors. His watch points at one-thirty before he removes it from his wrist. Still have time left. Usually he’d be pulling his hairs at this hour, desperately trying to sleep. He closes his eyes and lets the nicotine warm his senses.

Iwaizumi gets inside the car after finishing his third cigarette. In an attempt to kill time, he turns on the car’s interior lights and grabs the newspaper he got from Kindaichi sitting and neglected on the passenger seat. He isn’t a reader, more of a movie person when it comes down to it. But he flaps it open anyway.

May 4, 2016 — Search for missing student reaches third week: The Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department resumed their search Wednesday for a Tokyo University student who has been missing since early April. Oikawa Tooru, 20, was the subject of extensive search as police believed he was taken by a crime syndicate operating in the city. Video footage showed the student walking alone northbound to his apartment in Ueno, hours before the building was—

It’s one of those missing kids again, and there’s a photo peering out in the middle of an article, eyes front. Iwaizumi wonders what color his eyes are. They look big, round, and definitely bright enough even on a gray canvas. Is it blue? He must be half-foreign or something. The photo provides a bit of wistful calmness in him - a young man radiantly smiling on the front cover like he had won a competition. Maybe he did. Maybe the black and white ink didn’t do him justice.

He stops and looks back down to read other articles until the words become stale and the utter hopelessness of the journalists writing this crap begins to float around his feet. Because somehow there are two students missing, then there’s a famous actor accused of sexual assault on the second page, rumors about North Korean missiles right next to it, an Olympic champ failing a drug test on the bottom right corner, a gang war brewing in the capital written in big letter across the last page. All of these in one day, written in sheets of paper for everyone to worry about. Finally, he folds the newspaper in half and throws it back on the seat. There it’s joined by an old baseball bat with dark red streaks from a previous job and some of last week’s laundry.

Iwaizumi pushes in the key and starts the engine.

In the east of Shinjuku is a beastly district called Kabukicho. Just like the breakfast place on the
ground floor of Moriyome Hills, it’s alive twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. It’s the sort of Tokyo foreigners would see several times in magazines and brochures; streets washed in saturated pinks and purples, a hundred thousand impatient locals, drunk on alcohol and drunk on lust, well-dressed but ill-mannered. Iwaizumi avoids walking among them. In Piss Alley, no one cares if you’re holding a bloody baseball bat. It’s uniquely closed in and tiny and dark, dimly lit by red paper lanterns and old unmarried ladies serving chicken intestines skewers and grilled salamander. Other than that, it’s just this cramped inebriated street that serves as a nice little shortcut.

His feet stop at a three-story building that’s excessively lit up with neon that paints the fog around it red and demonic, making it look like the entrance to hell than a nightclub. Just like the rest of Kabukicho, it’s cramped tight between two other buildings, narrow alleyways separating them from each other. Iwaizumi slips through the alley that's only big enough for a child to go through comfortably. At the back of the Valhalla Nightclub is an emergency exit and a camera right above it. The door’s locked, naturally. Iwaizumi begins, squeezing through a blind side and planting an electronic mine on the outside wall, right next to a dumpster. That should fuck up those stupid cameras.

Two o’clock.

Kazuo Kozlov must be comfortably settled in by now.

He kicks the door open, destroying the scrawny fire exit bar with a single hit. The welcoming committee consists of flamingo-colored walls and two bald guys, one with a tiger tattoo on the side of his face, and one with a tacky purple shirt hiding under a white suit. Iwaizumi hears them shout in both confusion and anger.

“Hey!” Purple Shirt barks at the stranger prowling in their club, sounding afraid despite his furious expression. "How’d you get in here, you bastard?"

“Get the fuck out if you don’t wanna get hurt,” warns the more aggressive one; Tigerface, as Iwaizumi decides to call him.

He wonders if they have ever been in a fight before. They seem like they have no idea what their capabilities are, no idea what another man could do to hurt another. Their faces look like they didn’t expect a confrontation this late in the night. But Iwaizumi keeps walking towards them, and he finds it a little funny that Tigerface thinks he’ll go away just by shouting at him like some dog.

Little by little, he closes the gap between them.

Iwaizumi knows a bat is designed to be swung on a horizontal plane, and now that he’s closer, he figures this guy is just the right height for a home run. Without delay, Iwaizumi swings his bat, except the ball isn’t a baseball, and instead, it’s Tigerface’s head.

“Whoa, you’re pretty sturdy,” Iwaizumi mutters, almost impressed. Tigerface is still standing there, quiet and wordless, despite the gaping crack on his skull and a now empty eye socket. On the second swing, he drops on the floor, pink flesh flowering from where his brain should be. Blood had poured into every crevice of his face before Iwaizumi could notice Purple Shirt breaking into a panicked run.

Iwaizumi’s not having it.

He realized that he had been holding his breath, listening to the bass music permeating within the hall, keeping his focus and energy into his limbs and strength. Purple Shirt is slow and Iwaizumi is
able to catch up easily before he could climb up the stairs to tell his friends about an uninvited visitor. He hits the man’s legs out from under, and as he went down, Iwaizumi swings a fist straight to his face. Two, three, four. Eye, nose, mouth. His purple collar buttons are all broken when Iwaizumi lets go.

“Any ideas where Kazuo Kozlov would be?” Iwaizumi asks as if he’s talking to a child and he doesn’t want to scare him off.

Most of the guys he had to beat the shit out of wouldn’t falter just as easily as this one. When their faces get beat to a pulp even more, they get afraid a lot less. With blood shining on his lips and leering bruises hidden behind the pink neon lights, the man swallows, then forces his mouth to move along the pools of blood and saliva.

“T-Third floor...V—VIP room—!”

At this crucial moment, Iwaizumi feels like a higher power had granted him the right to smite someone to death. He raises his baseball bat, takes one long inhale, then smashes the man’s head with one swift move.

☆ ☆ ☆

As soon as the acid gains in richness and climbs to its peak, that’s when Oikawa is able to distinguish the streams of color that mingle at the edge of things, at the edge of their faces.

It’s a circus, the light – the vivid lights. It’s penetrating and volatile, adhering in objects, his brain focusing selectively on other levels of textures and patterns; the diagonal cuts on the tiles, the fabric padded walls, the blinding neon lights reflecting on glass panels. Oikawa observes these colors with keen interest, as long as he’s able to forget he’s being used, a trophy to share and display, monsters pursuing a forceful and irrational physical exchange that he had no choice but to succumb to.

A cigarette is pressed onto his skin, a reminder, a branding iron, sizzling, right along the collarbone, melting the surface, mixing in with the other burns as if to form a symbol of some sort. Don’t look at him. He’s strong and barbarous and did not care by the way he forces himself into him until he’s satisfied. This is the third one. Don’t think of anything. It numbs the pain, whatever that thing they injected in him with. But that was half an hour ago, and sadly the effects are withering the more they used him.

The acid helps, in a way.

“Better be careful, Kozlov! At this rate your boy here might grow to like my cock more than you!” a man says, a disgusting laugh blaring right after. The thick fingers that had been digging deep into his hips disappears, along with the burning intrusion, the sick sloppy noises. It’s gone for a while. He is thrown like a rag on the floor before the man pulls his pants back up. He lets out this condescending sigh when he looks down at Oikawa, simply proud of his accomplishments.

“Straight flush, two times in a row. Can you believe that?”

“Shut the hell up, fucking cheater,” the man called Kazuo Kozlov grunts, gritting his teeth. Oikawa can’t see his face from his view. He doesn’t need to, having memorized his face in less than three weeks. His face reminds him of a withered apple, angry and impish with a short-cropped beard.
“There ain’t no way you’re winning this time, goddamn son of a bitch.”

His most recent patron, Kuhara Cheung, as the others have called him, goes back to the low loveseat by the center table. He shuffles the deck of cards as three others wait and break into their vices. Kozlov had just arrived from Hong Kong that night, bringing in some of his friends to the club. Important people, apparently. Oikawa memorizes their faces before he forgets.

Each of them throws in cash in ten-thousands, but Kozlov throws in one or two packets of condoms - a token of Oikawa’s service.

Oikawa feels as though he should thank Kozlov’s guests. They had brought in experimental narcotics and tested it on him. And so unlike most days, his hands aren’t tied, he’s isn’t blindfolded or gagged, the pain substantially halved. He spends the next several minutes waiting – waiting for the current round of poker to be finished, waiting for an infection to permeate, waiting for a victor while his own face lies numb against the cold tiled floor, the increased drug-induced sensitivity raising the deep, deep feelings of pain and self-destruction.

“Ha! Four of a kind!” Kozlov cheers, throwing his cards, banging the table in triumph. There’s a collective groan of curses and chuckles as Kozlov pulls the mountain of crumpled money to him. He sneers at Oikawa. “Now, for my prize.”

The touch Oikawa had sickeningly grown familiar to sends an atomic bile in his stomach, the sound of zippers and belt buckles clanging enough to make him vomit. His eyes can’t focus on the man’s face, even more so when he is turned over on all fours with a heavy foot, knees and palms against the pink ice. He still has four limbs intact, but it feels like he had none. Oikawa can do nothing but to cry at the brutal penetration from behind, the rough fabric of Kozlov’s suit scratching his exposed back. Close your eyes. His arms tremble to keep himself up. Don’t cry. The effects of the acid wear off with every agonizing thrust. Don’t think of anything.

“You missed me a whole lot, didn’t ya?” he grunts, laughing out ragged breaths. It’s all a dream. Oikawa chokes, feeling actual acid burning in his throat. You’ll wake up soon. Oikawa’s concentration is interrupted when Kozlov grabs a handful of his hair and pulls his head back. The mouth and tongue that slides across his skin feels like flesh-eating worms. Slimy. Predatory. His hair is being pulled from its roots. It’s painful. Everything’s painful. “Come on, Oikawa-san, say you miss me.”

“...Hurts—” Oikawa chokes out instead, then coughs out a sob. “It hurts—”

He’s cut off when the hand in his hair slammed him face first into the sharp patterned tiles, a whirlpool of pain ringing inside his head. Again and again and again until something wet drips down from his brow bone. “That’s not what I said, fucking faggot!” The pain heightens, and Kozlov digs in faster in growing fury. "You like that, don't you? Come on, don't deny it!"

Oikawa keeps his mouth closed tight. Eyes squeezed shut.

“Hey, don’t fuck angel face up,” Kuhara says with little to no empathy at all. He squats down in front of him, grabbing his chin with firm hand. Oikawa chokes when Kuhara's dirty fingers are forced inside his mouth. “I ain’t fucking him no more if he ain’t pretty.”

Oikawa fears the remark.

These people get off on destroying beautiful things.

“Give him another dose. This crap wears off too quickly,” he hears someone else say with a grim
and almost disappointed chuckle.

“What did you expect from cheap shit from China?”

Oikawa doesn’t feel the syringe needle in his arm, his mind too preoccupied with the pain surging from everywhere else but the foreign substance running through his veins. He finds himself quietly wishing that all of his open wounds get fatally infected, or that he’ll suffer from an accidental overdose. It’s more likely he’d die from those than escaping from this hell.

Death sounds like such a nice idea right now.

"This isn't fair, man! He's gonna be bleedin' and shittin' down there once you fags finish—!

"Boss!

The door flings open and the obscene party stops. There's a man by the doorway, his hands on his knees, panting as if he had been in a marathon.

“Goddamn it, you fuck—! We’re busy here!” Kozlov halts his abuse, and Oikawa feels the need to look at the man responsible for the disturbance. Frantically, Kozlov hurries to pull his pants back up. “What the fuck do you want, shithead?”

“W-We found Jirou's corpse downstairs!”

Kozlov freezes. “What? What the fuck happened?!”

“There’s a fucking psycho killing all our—!”

In a way, the erratic flashes of pink neon made the starburst of blood and flesh quite exquisite.

The man that was in panic and breathing and alive just seconds ago drops slowly, knees first, then awkwardly drops across the floor, face down, although not much of his head is left in there.

“Ah, sorry. My hand slipped,” Iwaizumi mutters, twisting his shoulder back a bit. His arm had hurt a bit with the impact. “That guy downstairs was Jirou? He has a pretty hard skull. Took me two blows.”

Iwaizumi strides forward, making sure he doesn’t step on the man making a mess with the insides of his skull. The tufted lavender padded panels compliment the bright pink tiles, and the wide one-way mirror covering one side of the room gives a lovely view of the nightclub’s lively dance floor below. It’s the perfect place, Iwaizumi thinks. Private, cramped, but allows enough party lights to pass through the luminous glass.

“Impressive,” he says blankly, looking around the room.

With every step forward, the men who had just been playing poker and getting fucked up on crystal methamphetamine would take one step back. It’s almost like an artistic, comedic display. Except no one is laughing. Iwaizumi lets them frantically get their guns from their pockets, from their bags.

He lets them.

“Who the fuck are you?!” one of them screams out, pointing a pistol at Iwaizumi’s direction. Another one has a bulky shotgun on him. The room’s small, and Iwaizumi is close enough to see the small details. Trembling hands. He stops, smiling menacingly. “Stay right there, fucking
bastian! Drop your weapon!”

“You mean this old thing?” Iwaizumi asks, raising his fist holding a bat. He looks at it. The cracks in the wood is barely visible, simply looking like it’s made out of red aluminum. “I think one more swing would break it.” He relaxes his shoulders, as a way to show them submission. His eyes say otherwise though. “Wanna try it out?”

They didn’t have the chance to pull the trigger as Iwaizumi throws the bat as hard as he could, spinning in a way that had hit both the man’s face and hand. The pistol drops on the floor just as its owner falls. Iwaizumi walks closer to another mob, each stride threatening. One of the men pulls the trigger of his shotgun. Click. Click. No bullets coming out. Click. Click. No brains being blown away.

“Be careful with big toys like that,” Iwaizumi warns, smirking, still walking toward him. When he’s close enough, he wraps a hand around the barrel. “The safety’s on, you stupid piece of shit.”

Iwaizumi redirects the barrel towards the ceiling, left arm stretched up with great strength, his free hand sweeps forward and grabs the stock and twists it around, the man bending to Iwaizumi’s will. As soon as he is disarmed, Iwaizumi hits his head hard with the side of the muzzle.

There are two more guys cowering in one corner. Both unarmed and scared to death.

Iwaizumi hears his own breath, could feel his bone and muscle ache into a biomechanical expedition. His face is warm with blood and sweat, only one of each belonging to him. His eyes travel down. Wrong. Three guys. In his line of vision, he sees a young man, stark naked, skin rose-colored but bespeckled in black and blue. Stripes of neon curve on the surface of his skin. Dazed and unmoving, insipid eyes stare up at him. Iwaizumi holds his breath—

Oh, so his eyes are brown.

Unlike the other two, his gaze had no traces of fear. No fear of the bat-wielding killer. No fear of death. The gaze is blank, the radiance from that photo in yesterday’s paper gone and extinguished. Kill me. That’s what his brown eyes say. There’s no dramatic framework about it, no waves of emotion, just the pure desire to end his miserable, insignificant life.

Iwaizumi puts the gun down for a minute.

He takes off his mint-black jacket.

“You’re gonna catch a cold,” he says. He flops the jacket once to get rid of the dust, although that’s not what he should be worried about. Then, he covers the young man with it - a warm, contrasting veil that might’ve been enough to release Oikawa from his hypnosis. Iwaizumi stands up, one knee first. “It’s got Jirou-san’s brains all over. Hope you don’t mind.”

“You’re fucking dead—!”

The butcher knife that Iwaizumi has been hiding behind him hits the man mid-threat, straight in the face, the thick wide blade chopping his face. Red diagonal line. His eyes are wide open before it rolls back into his head, then it goes back in the same front position, looking at every direction but him. Half-dead hands opens to drop a pocket knife, then tries to grab Iwaizumi’s hands. Iwaizumi keeps the knife firmly in place. Blood slowly begins to gush from the insides of his mouth, and when Iwaizumi pulls it out, his face spurts out a fountain of red. The body falls, twitching, his entire head blossoming into a nice red flower of jumbled teeth and meat, pink, red, and glistening.

Iwaizumi is a bit shocked, honestly. He didn’t expect the guy to wake up from his concussion so
early. Clicking his tongue, he shakes the blood off the knife. He sighs, annoyed.

This is why double tap is a thing.

His blood surges at that sudden attack on him. His heart races just as wildly, the mechanisms in his brain summoning the remaining reserves of a raging rampage. In a heartbeat, Iwaizumi grabs the shotgun, pump-action, double-barrel, and shoots the guy he had just slashed in the face once, blowing his head further into ground chunks of meat. Then another to the stomach, exploding into mashed up pieces of human organs, intestines smeared across the floor like bloodthirsty purple alien worms. The nightclub’s deafening music resonates around the room, muffling the gunshots.

It’s almost as though it’s part of the song.

The floors are slowly turning into a lovely shade of red when Iwaizumi looks at the remaining witnesses. He wonders which one of them is under the Nightcall’s hit list. They both look strange enough to be half-breed mutts. He’s tempted to just gut them right there, slice their stomachs open, or maybe sever a spine. But the temptation to kill them is replaced when hears the man he had knocked unconscious crawling on the floor. Iwaizumi’s eyes wander and sees a hand that’s reaching for a short-barreled .38 pistol.

“Don’t get too carried away.” His screams are horrible and guttural, interrupted with chokes and sobs when Iwaizumi strikes down with the bloody butcher knife, slashing a clean cut across his wrist. “Shut up already, will you?” He tries to crawl away but Iwaizumi cuts his jugular next, so his screaming stops instantly, blood spurting and spraying everywhere like fucking jets. The muscles stiffen, the mouth fills in with blood, entire body quivering spasmodically.

“Are you Kazuo Kozlov?”

The man jumps and shrieks at the question. His trembling finger points to the other living, breathing creature on the opposite corner. “I’m not Kozlov! He is!”

“W-What the—You fucking bastard! I’m not Kozlov! He’s Kozlov!”

Iwaizumi lets out a loud dragging sigh as a little gesture of impatience.

“Which is it?”

It’s funny because it doesn’t matter, because they’re both going to die anyway, but they keep pointing at each other like children blaming the other one of breaking mom’s precious flower vase. Iwaizumi rolls his eyes and comes back to Oikawa.

There’s something else in his eyes now - hope, delight, the very prospect of liberation. He’s not quite sure, but it’s getting there. Iwaizumi squats next to Oikawa, puts a gentle hand behind and helps him sit up.

Right next to him is a cigarette, unlit, and crunched up, some splatters of blood here and there. Iwaizumi reaches for it and takes out a lighter from his back pocket. Inhaling the nicotine and tasting the iron of whoever’s blood is in his mouth, he adjusts the stained mint letterman jacket so it covers the shoulders and falls over the young man’s back. He mutters a soft apology, and wipes blood from his cheek. Sorry I got their dirty blood on your face. Sorry my jacket’s covered with their flesh.

The sudden kindness made Oikawa flinch. He’s probably not used to that, Iwaizumi thinks.

“Is he Kazuo Kozlov?” Iwaizumi asks him a second later, his voice changing drastically. He gently
positions Oikawa against the wall so he can lean on it.

Oikawa might still be in the process of waking up from the acid trip, but he sees where exactly Iwaizumi’s cigarette is pointing. And he knows the nightmare hasn’t ended yet when he sees his captor at the edge of the room, face twisted in absolute horror. That’s Kazuo Kozlov. The other guy is Kuhara Cheung. Oikawa wants to tell him, but his voice won’t come out, still enslaved by whatever’s stirring his senses into depths of spiraling neon colors.

Oikawa just nods.

Iwaizumi shoots the man that’s not Kozlov in the face.

“F-Fuck—! Jesus fuck—!”

There’s a gaping hole in the middle of Kuhara's face, blood flowing down like chocolate pudding. The explosive boom of the shotgun still echoes in Iwaizumi’s ear, as he pushes a finger in and twiddles it around to get rid of the ringing. He wants to fire another shot. Double tap. But it just clicks. Nothing comes out. Iwaizumi pumps the slide back, frowning in disappointment when he sees the loading flap empty. He throws the shotgun on the tiled floor.

This is taking way too long.

He sees Kazuo Kozlov, finally, a sad little brokeback half-breed crippled with a goatee and years of swindling and debauchery. In the midst of his fear, Kozlov kneels down, pleading, his head touching the floor in shame.

“P-Please! Don’t kill me! I’ll do anything—anything! Is it money? I’ll pay more than what they’re paying you! I’ll double it—no, triple it!” He raises his head slightly, mustering a sick smile. "C-Come on—W-What do you say, champ?"

“Cut your dick off.”

“What?”

Iwaizumi takes a drag of his now tiny cigarette. The smoke clouds his vision for a moment before he kicks a butcher knife towards the mangled man.

“You said you’ll do anything, didn't you? Cut your dick off.” He feels the man staring into him pathetically, his mental and emotional being about to collapse. There’s a long silence. Kozlov doesn’t know what to say, trembling, too afraid to do what Iwaizumi wanted him to do. He’s frozen on the spot. Iwaizumi breathes out a loud sigh along with a mist of tobacco smoke. “Ah, shit, I really have to do everything around here.”

The neglected baseball bat on the floor didn’t break the last time Iwaizumi had used it. It feels so frail he was so sure it’d be break when he had thrown it earlier. Nevertheless, he picks it up again. Iwaizumi kicks the man from his dogeza position. His movement is slow, steps easy and tired until he’s standing in front of the lying figure on the ground. In this very second of fear, Kozlov doesn’t even notice when Iwaizumi raises the bat above his head.

"N-No! Please—!"

Kozlov screams, hands clenching his crotch. The bat finally broke in half when it hits Kozlov directly between his legs. Though to be fair, it did hit two balls and a cock before its demise. Kozlov convulses and wails in nothing but pain and terror, yelling out something garbled, eyes glinting with death and lips a sickly red. The man cries and vomits in his mouth, and Iwaizumi
hopes he doesn’t choke on it yet.

“Where are the diamonds?”

His face is wet with tears and sweat, puke dribbling on the side of his mouth. “W—Where’s… What? What the fuck—Why are you doing this…! Fuck—!” The curses broke down into whimpers.

“Diamonds,” Iwazumi says simply. He doesn’t really know anything about it but that. “You have them, don’t you?”

“I—I don’t—I don’t have diamonds!”

“I got intel that you have them.” Iwaizumi drops the cigarette and steps on whatever’s left of it. “Pretty reliable stuff.”

“I don’t know where it is! I swear! Fuck—I don’t know what you’re talking about! P-Please!” he pleads. Fetal position. Hands in his groin. Vomit bubbling in his mouth—

Iwaizumi is losing his patience. He turns to the other person who’s still alive besides Kozlov.

“Hey, you, who did that to you?” His voice is vengeful, the low growl sending chills through the other man’s spine. “Was it this guy?”

Eyes big, Oikawa opens his mouth, but nothing’s coming out. “I—I...”

Iwaizumi scratches the back of his head and sighs, tightening the bandages on his knuckles. It's obvious. He squats next to the dying man. “Alright. I’ll be generous. I’m giving you ten chances to tell me where the diamonds are. Okay? Let me ask again, where is it?”

Kozlov shakes his head wildly. Same thing. I don’t know. What are you talking about. Iwaizumi forces one hand out of him and grabs one finger, pinky first. He bends it on the opposite direction. He asks again. Kozlov doesn’t answer coherently this time. I don’t know, I don’t know. He breaks the next finger. The bone cracking is like music to his ears. Where is it? I don’t know. Another finger. Same thing, again and again. It took him a while to notice he’s out of fingers, all of them morbidly broken and bent into crazy angles.

“I don’t have time for this, alright? I want to go home and sleep. Just tell me and I’ll even call the fucking ambulance for you.”

“I swear! I don’t know anything! P-Please—!”

His eyes stay open for a second, tearful and desperate, even after Iwaizumi had hacked his face with the only acceptable weapon available. Iwaizumi pushes the butcher knife up from his forehead, then to his nose until it slides out the flesh from his head. The eyes had gouged out with the pressure.

It’s a sweet, sweet thought. Perhaps for years, this guy has been tricking women, deluding them with hopes of a great job and a great salary only to end up in massive debt, and the only way to pay them is by working for seedy massage parlors and nightclubs which offers more than an ear to listen and a hand to pour drinks. And now he’s dead, face barely recognizable. Dead. His dick and balls pulped into mashed potatoes. Dead. Blood pooling beneath his head. Face broken into two like freshly cut watermelons.

The dark red pool that’s building up matches the pink tiles, Iwaizumi thinks.
But among all that’s happened, no one is probably as relieved as the young man sitting behind him, head resting against the wall, seemingly disinterested, vaguely affected at this morbid horror show. This man Oikawa had probably wanted to kill for days, weeks, now lifeless.

Dead.

Oikawa looks at Iwaizumi again, his eyes singling out among the red splatters of blood and neon pink. His face had twisted in some kind of drugged confusion and fear and joy, maybe? God knows what he’s been through. Does he think he’ll be killed next? Why does he have such expectant eyes?

The job’s been awful so far, and frankly, Iwaizumi just wants to leave. With a grunt, Iwaizumi stands up straight and peeks at the dance floor, all the drunken night owls below still oblivious on what’s happening. But despite the flashing lights and thumping music, Iwaizumi catches suspicious-looking guys come in from the main entrance, their padded white suits and crew cuts unable to blend in with the young hedonistic crowd.

“Shit—” Iwaizumi mutters under his breath. “We need to go.”

Without hesitation, Iwaizumi picks up the unused pistol from the floor and grabs Oikawa’s wrist, pulling him up with a brutal tug. He pulls down a curtain hanging by the doorframe and drapes it over Oikawa before running off.

Oikawa’s mind stumbles, his feet, legs, knees faltering with it. The criticality of it all delivers an immense amount of oxygen and energy to his body, but it’s not enough. A throttle of an engine. It’s all quiet and slow-motion. The music is gone. Someone had entered through the back door. Iwaizumi shoots him in the head, blood splattering on the walls, on the ceiling. There’s another one. Bullet to the head. One more unfortunate guy blocks their exit. Same fate as all the others.

By this time, the dark seedy alleys are dying and empty, the remaining nightcrawlers are too drunk to care, the paper lanterns have burned out. Someone’s passed out drunk and sleeping on the sidewalk. Iwaizumi just runs, never stopping, dragging Oikawa by the wrist.

“W-Wait—I can’t—!”

Oikawa drops hard on the asphalt. He lands on a bad knee, scraping the surface and tearing the skin off. His sobs indicate that his cosmic consciousness had returned to normal, and the drugs and adrenaline had partly subsided, skin and hair slick with blood and perspiration. Without the pink flushes of color, Iwaizumi is finally able to notice his true colors.

“I can’t…” Oikawa mutters in choked sobs. Shaking hands. Shaking knees.

But he wants to move.

He wants to run.

Iwaizumi clicks his tongue. “Can’t what?” he yells out, yanking Oikawa’s wrist so he could get up on his feet. His voice is so very different again. It's fatal and frantic. “Do you wanna go back to that shithole?”

Oikawa shakes his head desperately like a child, face wet with tears. His breath comes in short huffs, hot and flustered. His bare feet would kiss the rough pavement painfully but it’s okay. He had never run this far from the club before, and realizing this he’s able to concentrate all his energy to his legs despite the limp and follow his liberator’s grueling pace, although his weight
would always end up relying on the other’s iron grip. He doesn’t know where they’re heading. Don’t think of anything. Maybe it doesn’t matter.

Don’t stop for anything.

☆ ☆ ☆

It’s three o’clock.

The first bite of the threatening daybreak nips Iwaizumi’s skin, the shadows of the parking lot blending into the reflections of neon lights over the puddles. It’s quite a sharp contrast from where they had come from. The loud electronic music is replaced by the crisp gentle sound of trees swaying against the breeze. Iwaizumi doesn’t have his jacket on, so it’s colder than usual. The other guy needs it more than he does anyway.

“Get inside,” Iwaizumi tells him, even opens the car door for him.

He watches as Oikawa stares at the car’s dark interior, wordless, motionless, brows crunched with mistrust. When he breathes, the air is visible. He pulls the mint jacket closer. His eyes waver back to Iwaizumi to look for any hint of reassurance—asking if this is okay, asking if this isn’t a trap.

Iwaizumi takes a deep breath. “Relax. I won’t hurt you,” he says almost in an annoyed voice. It doesn’t work. He scratches the back of his head. What else does he want him to say? This time, he schools his tone down, softer, thinner. “I promise.”

There’s a loud gulp in his throat, then a small nod. He says “okay” with a trembling voice and a seemingly dubious heart. Iwaizumi closes the door and walks around to hop onto the driver’s seat.

He turns off the cooling and drives away.

“Do you know anything about Kozlov stealing diamonds?”

Oikawa snaps his head up. Iwaizumi stares at the rear view mirror, their eyes meeting through each other’s reflection. He sees Oikawa dip his eyes back down, shaking his head.

“No.”

“You don’t hear that ugly fuck talking about it?”

“No,” he says again. His voice is timid and clipped. “He doesn’t say anything about diamonds.”

Click of the tongue. Iwaizumi fishes the note from the Nightcall out of his back pocket to double check. He goes to the coordinates given. Maybe he’d get answers.

“Where are you taking me?”

Iwaizumi doesn’t respond. His dark green eyes flicker back up to Oikawa’s reflection, finding it harder and harder to look at the tragic scene. Some people deserve to be treated like shit, but he doubts this kid is one of them. Iwaizumi finds himself going back to that previous thought. Kid. He scoffs at himself because he doubts Oikawa is that much younger than him.

HK-107. That’s what’s written on the note. He doesn’t have the target, but maybe he can explain
himself. You guys are wrong. You guys gave the wrong target. Yeah, that should work. The drive itself isn’t too long, although Oikawa occasionally drifts off to sleep, only to wake up during sharp turns and at Iwaizumi’s rough driving. He stops at another empty parking lot. It’s a dead street. Dark. Empty. They’re across a hotel. It has ‘Hotel Ki’ above the subtle entrance, but it’s so dim and quiet it feels like there’s no one inside.

Iwaizumi swears he felt that sudden mass of anxiety behind him.

“It’s not what you think,” he explains himself first. Although a love hotel isn’t really a good place to take someone like Oikawa to, he really doesn’t have much of a choice. They’re both covered in blood and bits and pieces of human organs, and even with all that Iwaizumi wasn't able to procure his target. “We need a place to clean up. This is discreet enough.”

He throws a bunch of clothes at Oikawa.

“Here. Wear these.” Iwaizumi comes out to light up a cigarette. He leans back outside car door until Oikawa is ready. He has on Iwaizumi’s old dark gray hooded sweater and sweatpants. They fit him quite nicely, much to Iwaizumi’s surprise. They would’ve looked normal if it weren’t for their bloodstained faces. But there’s no need to worry, Iwaizumi tells him. No front desk staff. No cameras. No security guards.

That's the beauty of love hotels.

At the end of the lobby, a vending machine greets them instead of a manned concierge. There’s a horizontal slot where the cash should be put in, but Iwaizumi simply presses the button without putting anything in. It makes a mechanic sound, gears turning, electronics working. Finally, a loud metallic clang echoes. Iwaizumi gets the keys. It has the number “107” embossed on it.

“No one’s here,” Iwaizumi says as he scans the empty room.

Shit. He should’ve expected it. The Nightcall is ridiculously private it’s fucking insane. They're not going to appear just like that. He dials a number on his phone. It’s ringing. No one’s answering. He keeps the phone in his ear, then looks at Oikawa who’s sitting quietly on the edge of one of the two beds. “Are you sure you don’t know anything? Kozlov isn’t hiding any diamonds?”

Oikawa’s eyes flutter nervously. Looking at him, then looking down. They really are brown. “If I did, I would’ve told you by now,” he says, voice honest. Believe me, his eyes scream out. Iwaizumi looks away. It seems like he still has a hard time talking. Might be the drugs still swimming in his veins. “B-But I could—I could probably tell you some other stuff.”

Okay, that’s good. It’s a start. Iwaizumi gives up the phone call and sits across from him. The incandescent lamp between them makes his eyes even more lustrous. It looks like honey at this point. “What can you tell me about him? Did he steal anything recently? What's his business around here?”

His dry lips purse, the slight gesture opening a little cut in the middle of his bottom lip.

“He’s part of some... kind of group called Yaponskaya-kai. He runs the nightclubs in the district,” Oikawa starts, even though his voice is audibly strained. He fiddles with his bruised fingers. Iwaizumi wonders why he’s still shaking. Is he afraid of him? Then again, who isn’t? “He doesn't steal diamonds,” he continues, pain evident under the hood of his lids. “He steals people.”

Iwaizumi’s features are etched with empathy suddenly, scratching his nose. “What's your name?”

There’s a long silence, and Iwaizumi is able to catch the other’s eyes brimming with uncertainty.
Oikawa Tooru. That’s his name. That’s what the papers say. Why does he look like he doesn’t know?

“I think it’s Oikawa. It might be my last name,” he says, lips trembling with hesitation. Oikawa knits his brows tightly together, as though he’s trying to remember something. He’s scratching at an itchy abrasion between his knuckles. “I-I don’t know. They just started calling me that.”

Iwaizumi flashes the young man another moment of silence before standing up. Oikawa’s gaze follows his movement.

“Wait here. I’ll get something in the car.”

There’s a hushed roll of thunder overhead when Iwaizumi steps back outside, the parking lot muggy with a soft mist. It’s going to rain until the sun comes up seems like. He sits inside his car for a little while, hands gripping the wheel tightly. He’s nervous and he needed something to hold onto. The Nightcall hasn’t contacted him yet. They’re never wrong. That’s their goddamn slogan, their business model. They should be calling him back by now.

Did he kill someone who had no connections with those diamonds? But then again, wrong guy or not, bastard deserved to die anyway. He never killed outside a contract before. Iwaizumi shakes his head. No. It’s not outside of his contract. He didn’t do anything wrong. They gave him the wrong information. They’re the ones responsible for this shitfest.

He bumps his forehead on the wheel, stumped, and when he turns his head, sees the newspaper with Oikawa’s face on it, a headline dedicated to him. Missing college student. That’s one interesting thing that came out of his job. Iwaizumi grabs the paper and looks at the photo again. Same hair. Same eyes. Fuck. That’s definitely him. Oikawa doesn’t know that though. He might’ve lost his memories in the middle of his captivity - brain repressing memories or some other bullshit like that. Just like the movies.

His phone tells him he has less than twenty percent battery left. He should probably go check up on Oikawa again. Iwaizumi opens the glove box and grabs that half-empty bottle of hydrogen peroxide and antiseptic wipes. He remembers having bandages and gauze in the trunk, so he steps out and walks to the back of his car.

When Iwaizumi comes back to their room, Oikawa is still sitting in the same place where he had left him, like he’s afraid to move. He’s crying. Those are definitely fresh tears. His eyes sparkle in relief when he sees Iwaizumi by the door. Did he think he had left him? Iwaizumi kind of wanted to apologize, but he simply decides against it. Instead, he grabs Oikawa by the sleeve and drags him to the bathroom.

The thunder roars and Oikawa jumps at the sudden sound.

“It’s raining.

“Don’t move,” Iwaizumi grunts, angry, jaw tight. He’s in the middle of cleaning a deep wound on the edge of Oikawa’s eyebrow. It looks like it needs some stitches, he says. He seals it with gauze and tape as a temporary dressing.

His hands are all jittery and blotted with tiny cuts and bruises that Iwaizumi might as well just wrap his entire hand with bandages.

Oikawa turns his head to the side. There’s a large window right above the moldy bathtub. The cheap hotel room they’re in isn’t that high up, so the rain glows neon even in his view, capturing
the city’s flashing lights in red and blue and pink. It drinks in the surrounding colors, and Oikawa feels his shoulders relax. He looks back at Iwaizumi. His face is so much clearer now. No more blood or any other unmentionable things. He seems like a man of his regiment; sharp edges that could express benevolence, ultraviolence, unforgiving hazel eyes, bearer of cruel tidings, knuckles firm and ruddy – all of which disproportionate to the way his hands would gently graze over his deathly pale ones. His touch feels certain and cautious and safe.

It’s a brand new feeling.

“Thank you,” he blurts out, mustering up a small smile despite everything. He should’ve said it earlier, and he has no idea why he’s saying it now. Iwaizumi looks at him, at his eyes first, then at his smile. Oikawa sees the slight wince in his sharp eyes. Still, he doesn’t say anything else after that.

Iwaizumi then asks him to roll his pants up, so he can see the bruises on his knees, but his phone rings before he could.

“About fucking time,” he hears Iwaizumi whisper. “We’ll leave in a moment. Take a bath. Clean the rest of yourself up,” he tells Oikawa before walking out the bathroom and slamming the door behind him.

“Ten missed calls? Really? It’s four in the morning, Iwaizumi!”

“The Nightcall gave me the wrong target,” Iwaizumi says in between gritted teeth when he realizes it’s not the Nightcall on the other line. He cuts to the chase. “It’s been more than an hour since I took out Kazuo Kozlov. That asshole doesn’t have anything to do with diamonds.”

“What? The Nightcall’s never wrong,” the man on the other line says, sounding like he can fall back asleep anytime soon. “If they say he has them, he has them. Are you sure he’s not hiding anything?”

“Crushed his dick and broke all of his fingers. No mention of diamonds.”

He hears the other make an uncomfortable sound. "Cruel as always, Iwaizumi.”

Iwaizumi sits on the bed, rubbing his temples. He did not just lose sleep to get absolutely nothing. “I got one of his guys, well, some... kid from the nightclub. He says the same thing. I was given the wrong place, Hanamaki. They’re not calling. They’re not closing the job. You’re from Aobajousai-kai. Do something about it.”

“Okay, okay. Relax. We can’t do anything about the Nightcall, but I’ll talk to Matsukawa in the morning and see what we can do—” Hanamaki pauses for a yawn. “Go home for now, Iwaizumi. I’ll keep you posted.”

☆ ☆ ☆

Outside, the heavy rain falls like poetry, drops short and whimsical, but somehow still feels heavy in a way Oikawa can’t quite figure out. Each drop perches on the surface of his skin, like a hail of bullets, cool and warm at the same time. It’s refreshing against his cuts and bruises. He can’t remember the last time he had experienced a thunderstorm like this, not that he remembers much from his past anyway.
“Hey! Get in already!”

Iwaizumi’s voice snaps him out. The car horn honks impatiently, and Oikawa hurries inside the car.

It’s another short drive.

Oikawa asks where they’re going again, to which Iwaizumi replies with silence along with the sounds of a windshield diligently wiping the wall of water that comes rushing down. Blurs of light. Relentless pitter-patter. The night’s coming to an end, but the sky doesn’t want people to notice.

Rear view mirror. Oikawa is asleep. The rain is stopping. Iwaizumi drives slower.

“Wake up.”

Iwaizumi’s voice rouses him up again. The sleepiness quickly fades, Oikawa sitting up in alert. The interior lights of the car die down, just as the engine stops. Iwaizumi slides off the seat, leaving Oikawa inside to observe where they are.

It’s another parking lot, an indoor one, the dim green overhead lights not really helping in easing his nervous heart. The door opens for him. Oikawa slowly slithers out.

“Follow me,” Iwaizumi says before heading to an elevator. Oikawa does just that.

The elevator ride is too long and too quiet, and Oikawa can’t help but wonder which floor they’re in. He looks at the buttons, noticing Iwaizumi had pressed “30”. That’s really high up. It feels like there’s no end to it, the pressure in his ears making it hard to hear. Oikawa waits patiently behind Iwaizumi, watching how his shoulders would heave up and down, how the wet shirt had clung to his back. The man in front of him is tall, but not as tall as him. Looking down, Oikawa sees a gold watch on his wrist. That wasn’t there before.

Ding.

He walks out, and Oikawa obediently follows.

Iwaizumi’s home is subtle, monochrome, almost geometric. White walls, black furniture, dark hardwood floors. Full-height windows wrap around the majority of the space, the city lights looking more like a painted mural behind it. High ceilings. Browns, grays, and blacks. Empty bottles of beer by the door, same space where Iwaizumi leaves his soaked sneakers on. More bottles of juice or water or whatever on the corners of hallways. Boxes of pizza stacked up like towers on the carpet. Disposable convenience store plasticware. Used syringes. Unidentified white powder on a coffee table.

Their clothes had gotten wet from the rain, so Iwaizumi takes the initiative and pulls his shirt off, dropping it on the floor and not really caring where it ends up on. His completely inked back is exposed, taut and olive underneath, an exquisite display of blacks and reds and greens creeping up from his back to his shoulders blades up to his chest.

Oikawa turns his head away.

“Can I really stay here for the night?”

Iwaizumi stiffens. His sigh slices through the silence that comes after the question. Why would he ask that? Isn’t it obvious enough?
“Come on,” he says instead, then leads him to the bathroom.

Same colors. The floor is light hardwood. Flat-panel cabinets. Oikawa leans back on one of the white quartzite countertops, resting his palms on the cool surface.

Iwaizumi stops to eye him head to toe, noticing Oikawa’s hair had substantially flattened, then clicks his tongue.

“You’re soaked. Take that off. I haven’t washed that for days.”

He feels Oikawa staring at him. Still, he complies timidly and pulls the hoodie off.

Oikawa Tooru is a garden. There are tangled thickets of purple sage on his chest, blotches of hawthorn along the curve of his arms, wisteria vines constricting his neck and wrists, honeysuckles growing on his collarbones. Clusters of defiant spring roses scattered, blooming south until they disappear below his pelvis.

He’s a neglected, unweeded, unmown garden of misery.

Dark green eyes cruise further below, noticing stitches carving his skin in shapes of centipedes – one above his elbow, a vertical one along his abdomen, small raised keloids on his forearms and sides. They look sloppy and might’ve been done by an amateur. Chemical burns. Cigarette burns. He notices that the discoloration on his body greatly contrasts his face. It makes him sick. They were careful not to fuck up his redeeming feature. Iwaizumi understands somehow.

He’s heartbreakingly beautiful.

The cut by his brow had opened again, perhaps due to the rain, the gauze he had messily taped earlier barely able to contain the fresh blood. “Let me see that,” Iwaizumi says as the other bows his head lower. He removes the gauze, then notices that his flesh had split open real bad. That’s going to be an addition to his collection of stitches. Iwaizumi tells him this, and Oikawa just nods like he had grown used to such things.

The green in his eyes softens when Iwaizumi leans closer. He’s near enough that Iwaizumi can feel the other’s breath hitch, near enough to see his long eyelashes flutter in uncertainty, but then he skids to the side, plaintive, and extends a hand to open the cabinet above Oikawa’s head. Iwaizumi grabs his suture kit.

Iwaizumi is by far, not gentle when sterilizing his equipment. His crude hands had pulled out a basin from the cabinets behind Oikawa’s legs. He proceeds to pour an entire bottle of hydrogen peroxide on it and dumps all of the instruments there; scissors, tweezers, needles, everything.

“Does it hurt?” Iwaizumi asks, pinching the edges of the brow wound together. It’s good that the cut itself isn’t jagged. No need to cut bits of flesh. A little bit of blood drips from it when he squeezes it tighter, so he can figure out how to stitch them back together.

Oikawa blinks up then looks down at his hands again. “Not… really.”

“Your nerves are probably dead,” Iwaizumi half-jokes, voice monotone. It might’ve made Oikawa more anxious by the way his eyebrows had creased. It could be the previous drugs that are helping numb the pain, or he actually ended up with severed nerves. Iwaizumi irrigates the wound with antiseptic fluid, careful it won’t drip down to reach Oikawa’s brown eyes.

“Is that—Is that bad?” Oikawa asks in worry.
Iwaizumi guesses that his stale delivery didn’t really quite help his dry humor.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Iwaizumi holds a hemostat, a curved needle clasped at the tip, a thin black nylon inserted at the small hole. At the first puncture, Oikawa flinches, eyes squeezing shut. He asks him if it hurts. Just a bit, he says. He drags the thread, punctures another dot of flesh. Does it hurt? No. He knots the first suture into place.

“Have you done this before?”

Iwaizumi redirects his gaze from the wound to Oikawa’s mouth for a second. He can’t tell whether his lips are naturally that rouge or swollen from another cut. It’s most likely the latter.

“I’ve done it to myself,” he replies, then continues weaving his flesh back together. “Not to other people though.”

It took only about three sutures to close the cut entirely.

That should be good for now.

Oikawa hovers his fingers over the new gauze by his brow bone. It stings, but the pain subsides after a long while. It’s nothing compared to what he had experienced for the past week.

Iwaizumi doesn’t bother tidying up the bathroom and leaves the bucket of medical apparatus swimming in hydrogen peroxide, mentioning he’ll clean it up the next day. He walks out of the bathroom without saying anything. Oikawa follows him by instinct. They don’t have shirts on, but the bottom of their pants still leaves drips on the floor.

“Get anything from the closet,” Iwaizumi states, pushing open the door to a bedroom.

It’s pitch black without any lights on, and even more so with the light rain going on outside. Oikawa carefully steps inside the spacious area. It has the same tall windows on his living room, ceiling to floor, dark curtains covering them. Glass divider on the left. Small visible office behind it. Smooth dark timber furniture. Oikawa opens one out of four. Tank tops. Henley shirts. Denim jackets. Expensive sportswear.

Once he had changed into a simple shirt and joggers, Oikawa sees Iwaizumi outside, lying on his back on one side of a sectional sofa. He has his bulky arm over his eyes, shirtless, a thin blanket covering his lower body. One pillow behind his head. Lights off except for one lamp on the other side of the room.

“I can sleep on the couch instead,” Oikawa insists. “You—You must be tired.”

His shadow looms over him when Iwaizumi removes the arm from his face. In the dark, his piercing eyes still gives Oikawa a slight chill, the hairs on his skin standing up.

“Probably not as tired as you.” Iwaizumi then rolls over to his side, wanting to end the conversation and avoid looking at Oikawa. “I’m not the one who looks like death right now.”

“B-But—”

“Take the bed before I change my mind.”

Oikawa blinks, shoulders sagging. In all honesty, Oikawa would be okay with a mat on the floor,
or just the floor even. He’d been sleeping on cold cement for the past few weeks, so he really wouldn’t mind whatever’s thrown at him. Looking at Iwaizumi’s figure one last time, his thoughts began to topple over. It’s anything outside of what he knew, what he had experienced. There’s a fear boiling in his stomach. Who exactly is this guy? What does he want? What does he want from me—

He walks back to the bedroom, quiet this time, and closes the door.

Oikawa earnestly grazes his palms along the silken mattress, then presses his cheek to the softest pillows he had ever had the luxury to lay on. Pulling up the thick cloud of the comforter up to his neck, he rolls to the other side, rubbing his feet together. The room is cold, but the sheets are so warm it’s making him cry. He couldn’t remember that last time he had felt this soothed. The pillows smell good. The chocolate-colored comforter smells good. They all smell like sage and rosemary. This is probably how he smells like. Oikawa hugs the duvet a little bit tighter.

His brain races in anxiety, his limbs tingling with it. Is this a dream? Is this a hallucination? If it is, Oikawa isn’t sure he wants to wake up. Because they’re all dead. Brains blown off. He’s lying on the most comfortable bed in the world, relying on the kindness of a stranger. What is this? How did this all happened? It's too good to be true, he thinks. Oikawa doesn’t want to get his hopes up, doesn’t want this bright star of trust to explode into an empty universe. Yet, the feeling brewing inside him is warm and potent. And for the first time, Oikawa is able to let his body rest, his muscles loosen. The warmth around his body cradles him until he finally succumbs to the exhaustion and falls asleep.

☆ ☆ ☆

At ten-forty, Oikawa bats his eyes open.

He doesn’t know the sun has already risen until his vision catches a clock mounted on the opposite wall. The entire room is still so very dark, and only a few threads of light are able to get through the slits between the curtains.

His limbs and joints feel like they don’t belong to him, each movement more of a plea than an order. Sitting up is a trial itself, the ache getting worse the more he tried. Oikawa looks at the clock again. Then he looks at the door when he hears clamoring from outside it. His hands press against the pain on his right knee. Despite the lovely bed that he had gladly taken for granted, his brain still won’t let him forget about what happened to him last night and the nights before.

The doorknob is ice cold when Oikawa turns it.

It takes a while for Oikawa to drink in the sight of the same man, who had by the way mercilessly butchered a couple of gangsters last night, trotting around in a crisp suit; dark gray with notched lapels, pure wool, tailor-made perhaps. White basketweave shirt. Chevron midnight blue tie. He hasn’t noticed Oikawa standing in the room yet. His charcoal hair is swept up with moose, showing a high and bony forehead. Above his perpetual frown, Oikawa sees the brief flash of hazel in his eyes when he finally meets his gaze.

The man in the suit walks to him. Oikawa doubts it's to say good morning.

“You’re not allowed to leave. Someone knocks, ignore it,” Iwaizumi warns, his face dangerously
close. The black patent wedge Derby shoes he has on allows him to be almost the same height as him. “Don’t answer any call or messages, and don’t listen to the voicemails. You can’t use the phone, internet, and television. Got it?”

Oikawa blinks, eyes wide. His words slip out quietly when Iwaizumi hopelessly try to get some seemingly important papers beneath empty bottles and silverware he might’ve used to cook dope.

“W-What am I supposed to do all day then?”

Iwaizumi stops and stares back at him, raising an eyebrow.

“Wait for me to come back.”

Oikawa looks down, a pout bursting from his mouth.

“What happens if I break your rules?”

Shit. Maybe he shouldn’t have asked that.

Oikawa stumbles back when Iwaizumi glares at him, eyes sharp, brows drawn.

“You know damn well what I’m capable of.”

His gaze is a knife deep in his gut, a bullet wound, an iron chain. Oikawa presses his lips together and studies him more, listens carefully if there’s any sarcasm in there. There isn’t any. He’s definitely not joking. Seconds had gone by, and Oikawa barks back with miserably scrunched sutured eyebrows.

“But you promised you wouldn’t hurt me.”

The late morning sun casts a golden stripe across Iwaizumi’s face just as his features soften. You’re right. That’s what his face is saying. Oikawa can tell.

He blows out a defeated sigh.

“You shouldn’t trust the words of someone who likes hurting other people.”

With that, he turns and heads to the door. Oikawa bites the insides of his cheeks, a sudden frustration blossoming from his chest.

But before Iwaizumi steps out completely, he peers back to Oikawa.

“Eat whatever’s in the fridge.”

The echoing sound of the door closing made Oikawa jump. He makes sure to wait a couple more seconds before blurring out, “Fine. I’ll eat all of your food then.”

Now that he’s alone and driftless, Oikawa doesn’t know what to expect, really. The kitchen is only a few steps away from the living room, and he goes there first. It has the same subtleties as all the other rooms. Glass panels. Lengthy kitchen islands. Mirror backsplash. Stainless steel. Black cabinets. Steel. Black. Steel. Black.

It feels like opening large French doors when Oikawa pulls open the fridge.

Beer and energy drinks take up most of the space. Bottled water. Rotting fruits. Plastic containers with dried up vegetables and two-day-old leftover rice. Then there’s a carton of eggs, but with only
one egg inside. The crisper below doesn’t have anything on it besides a small container of uncooked tofu.

“Nothing much to see here,” Oikawa mutters, sighing, disappointed. Muscles still aching, he struggles to sit down in front of the open fridge, cross-legged, shoulders dipped down.

The guy seems normal enough. He thought he’d have to stomach finding intestines and livers and human bones in there. But really it’s just a guy who’s too lazy to go to the grocery store and lives off on instant noodles and Pizza Hut. Oikawa wonders how he could keep in shape with food like that. Murdering people just might be a good workout routine.

He couldn’t properly recall what had happened last night. It’s a blurry but rhythmic experience; blazing colors, pounding walls, screaming, whirling masses of movement. He remembers the strain in his joints, the burning of his skin. He remembers all the faces before they were brutally disfigured. But what really stood out was the vibrant mint green of a stranger’s jacket, and the glint in his rabid green eyes.

Oikawa shakes his head to unburden himself from his thoughts. The important thing is that he’s out of that wretched place, and that he had slept on the most comfortable bed in the world, and that this mysterious guy is kind enough to let him stay in his home.

By instinct, his fingers go up to touch the stitches by his brow bone. It’s a lot more painful now, unlike yesterday. It must mean it’s healing. It must mean his system had flushed out the drugs. Oikawa’s heart flutters when he remembers how calming his savior’s hands felt like. How could a man who’s able to crush a human skull with one swing of a bat be so gentle? Oikawa wonders if it’s even the same person who had cleaned his wounds. Take the bed. Wear anything. Eat whatever’s in the fridge.

Except there’s nothing wholesome in the fridge.

Just when Oikawa thinks he’d just starve to death while waiting for his morally ambiguous knight, he notices a pink box hidden below the fridge’s wine rack. Curious, he pulls it out. It’s big and rose-colored. Golden trims. Pastel and cute. ‘Camellia’s Pastry Shop and Restaurant’ is embossed beautifully on the top.

“It expires today…”

Oikawa opens it, a little bit of excitement twirling with his fingers. His eyes widen. It’s filled with assorted pastries; chocolate brioche, mini croissants, cream puffs, cinnamon rolls. The very sight of them makes his stomach growl until the gnawing inside him is no longer tolerable.

He unapologetically eats them all.

Four o’clock in the afternoon. He’s still alone.

It starts when Oikawa lies down on the sofa. It’s not very comfortable to sleep on, so he just sits up. He wants to rest his bruised feet on the table, but it’s so cluttered it seems like there isn’t a table existing underneath. And so he picks up the empty bottles of beer, some of them still half-full and lukewarm, and puts them on one side.

It really didn’t do much and is still an eyesore.

Oikawa ends up spending half an hour looking for garbage bags, cursing the abundance of cabinets, yet when they open them they’re mostly empty. He gathers all the trash from the poor center table – cartons, plastic spoons, used syringes, pizza boxes, water bottles, and many other
things. There’s a small ziplock with white powder in it. Oikawa wrinkles his nose in disgust. Trash. No one needs that stuff. Oikawa puts it all in one black bag. By the time he’s finished, the plastic bag is full and the table spotless.

In the midst of cleaning all that, Oikawa spots another pink box by the sink, next to a basket of aging fruits. It has the same name as the previous one. It looks newer too. There are scones inside when he opens it. Oikawa observes them, smelling them and realizing they’re really fresh. It was probably bought only yesterday.

He had consumed all of it when he starts to feel full and the call of sleep nags at him. Oikawa hopes the owner of the place doesn’t mind that he had eaten all his cakes and pastries. He did say he can eat anything. Oikawa goes back to the bed for an afternoon nap, feeling incredibly bloated.

☆ ☆ ☆

It’s entirely a surprise for Iwaizumi when he comes back home.

His footsteps are quiet and he's not sure why he's acting so cautious in his own home. The first thing he checks is the bedroom. It’s dark and awfully cold, even though the May sun is just setting. Oikawa is sleeping peacefully, sinking in the center of the bed, completely covered in layers of comforters head to toe. Iwaizumi sighs. He could’ve adjusted the thermostat if it’s too cold.

It’s surprising enough that Oikawa didn’t even make an attempt to leave, and now he sees his living room clean and free from clutter, balanced with a ridiculously huge garbage bag by the entrance. Oikawa could’ve gotten out and thrown it into the trash chute. He’s allowed to do that much at least. Iwaizumi makes a mental note to rewrite a few rules.

He huffs within his not-so-empty abode, exhausted. Then he sits on the now decluttered sofa; the blanket and pillow he had used last night folded neatly on one side. His vision focuses on the bedroom door he had left ajar. Honestly, Iwaizumi had no idea why he had taken him in. It could be a lot of things. It could've been pity, mercy, a sudden streak of compassion - like when he sees a wounded stray puppy in the street. It could be anything.

Iwaizumi guesses that it might be the way his eyes shone on mere newsprint, followed by the odd look that had left him frozen in place when Iwaizumi finally saw them up close, fearful and disdainful at the same time, like a young deer lost and wounded in the forest but determined to get out. Maybe it's the small smile he had first given him. Maybe he's just lonely. Maybe it's none of the above.

Yanking out from his own thoughts, Iwaizumi takes off the suit jacket, observing his surroundings as he unbuttons them.

Oikawa didn't touch the television just as he had told him not to. The remote is still where it is, voicemail untouched, laptops off. When he cranes his neck back, he sees the kitchen is just as orderly, except for the missing flash of color - a missing flash of pink. Iwaizumi raises a brow. Had he eaten it? He had a lot of baked goods from Camellia's. Could Oikawa have eaten all of those in less than a few hours?

He checks the fridge just for the hell of it.

All of his pastries are gone.
Iwaizumi frowns, running a hand through his hair when he slumps on a bar stool.

"At least he's eating."

Chapter End Notes

hello i love gore and crime dramas and hurt/comfort
i've been wanting to work on this for so long like i know i suck but bear with me so uh well there you go. will continue it depending on the feedback
official playlist (updates regularly)
holla at yo boy here:
twitter & tumblr
Maybe it’s time to wake up.

Oikawa had grown accustomed to letting his dreams wither, instead of mercilessly holding onto them and end up beached on a shore of false hope. But he’s not dreaming. Not anymore. And he can simply tell that it’s just too early in the morning. He can tell because the sun isn’t forcing its way to get past the black curtains. He can tell because the slightest rustling of the sheets is as loud as a gunshot, while the hushed chant of the air remains bashful.

He’s still not used on sleeping in such a nice bed. It feels like he has no right to be on it, and his heart lurches with a slow ache. Oikawa clamps his eyes shut and waits for it to pass. The seconds melt and his senses flare after a few pointless ruminations, his vision finally settling on the door. It’s left slightly ajar, and the world would’ve been as silent as the night if it weren’t for that creak in its hinges when Oikawa pushes it open, if it weren’t for the water running in the kitchen, if it weren’t for the footsteps trodding. The hardwood floor is cool when his own two feet had touched it. There isn’t much light, and with only one lamp alive, Oikawa finds it hard to not bump into legs and trestles. Just as he had suspected, the sun is still below the horizon, the tall windows of the living room providing a front-row seat for an approaching sunrise. Immediately, his eyesight drinks in the foggy air, drinks in the room that’s bathed with a sad, washed out blue, lathered with a natural electric glow on the inscrutable edges of the furniture, on the inscrutable edges of a person standing by the kitchen sink.

There he sees the man of the house, neck hunched down, hands scrubbing some kind of fabric. Clothes. Possibly stained with blood. A slight wrinkle gathers between his eyebrows, obviously expressing a distaste for the chore. Barefoot. Black tank top. Inked taut arms. That unceremonious mint green jacket is tied to his waist. He’s as deceptive as the stillness of the early morning, and Oikawa doesn’t realize he’s walking towards a sharp knife until the green in his eyes pierces back.

“Do you ever sleep?” Oikawa asks. His voice is an onshore wind, cutting through the silence in one flawless sweep. He sees a liquor bottle half empty on the island behind the young man. It was full the last time he had seen it.

“I try to,” he responds, voice solemn, eyes focused on the stained shirt.

His answer feels like an understatement. Oikawa wonders if it’s guilt that’s keeping him unnaturally awake, or the lack thereof. He wonders what the inside of his mind looks like. Is it a typhoon? Is it a dust devil? He could be entirely wrong. It might be filled with tropical sunshowers for all he knows.

“If you can’t sleep, maybe you’re awake in someone else’s dream.”
Iwaizumi shuts the sink off and looks at his guest.

The quaint scrutiny lasts for a second or two before he speaks.

“Then maybe it’s time for that person to wake up.”

Iwaizumi had tried everything – from legal drugs to illegal drugs, sleeping aids, cigarettes, therapy, alcohol, more illegal drugs, television, more pills, more alcohol. The more potent the better. He intentionally spruces up the rooms to be cool and pitch black, not a single light seeping through, not a single sound. Curtains thick enough to block even the twelve o’clock sunlight. It doesn’t make the situation any better despite his efforts.

“Is it because of me?” Oikawa asks, then swallows the possibility of the answer being yes.

Iwaizumi raises an eyebrow at him. He hasn’t been sleeping well in years, today is no different. “What do you mean?”

“The couch,” he hears him say in a quiet murmur. They both look at the unsuspecting piece of furniture. “It’s uncomfortable to sleep on.”

“It doesn’t matter where,” Iwaizumi tells him, wanting to get rid of that guilt pulling Oikawa’s already sullen features down. “I won’t be able to sleep that long anyway.”

Iwaizumi leaves the shirt soaked in the sink, leaves Oikawa leaning on the kitchen isle. He walks to the sofa, to the table that’s beginning to form another mountain of clutter, and cooks up a warm shot with a clean spoon. It’s laughable. He’s trying to be all sterile and careful about something as unhealthy as dope.

“You should stop using that.”

Oikawa’s still has his elbows on the kitchen counter, and he’s wearing his black crew-neck Kenzo sweatshirt. Did he pick that out because it covers all the traces of misuse all over his skin? It appears darker against his complexion.

But he ignores the warning and ties up a tourniquet around his arm. “It helps me sleep.”

“It’s not good for you.”

Oikawa says this just before Iwaizumi inserts the needle, aimed in the direction of his blood flow. He hears a disapproving sigh from the other man before throwing the now empty syringe on the floor. It’s subtle at first, the way the bliss just starts rushing in. Then he feels his nerves running on fuel, his brain streaming loud music until it gradually mellows down into a ballad. It travels fast.

Life seems so much better, and Iwaizumi sits back, closing his eyes at the sweet sedation.

“Why do you even care?” he asks, voice slowing into a drowse as the narcotic streams deeper.

“Iwaizumi keeps his eyes shut, but he can already imagine the other’s face.

“There’s no rule against caring,” Oikawa replies cleverly. “I’m allowed to worry about you.”

Curious, Iwaizumi opens one eye to see the other’s expression, then another. Concern sits below Oikawa’s lips, breezing across his features. Even the slightest movement is hard to do, the satisfying numbness creeping beneath his lids like it’s trying to gain greater access to his subconscious resources. But even so, Iwaizumi keeps his dreary eyes peeled.
“You don’t have to,” Iwaizumi says simply, then takes a deep breath. “Worry about yourself.”

Oikawa keeps him awake to a certain extent, so his earlier statement isn’t quite wrong. His mental bliss is telling him to close his eyes and bask in the rush that he knows won’t last for too long, but he wants to keep them open to watch every meaningful change in Oikawa’s face. Then he hears footsteps getting nearer, and again, Iwaizumi fires up his senses.

Suddenly the young man is standing in front of him, arms folded over his chest. He looks more disappointed than concerned now. Iwaizumi slides into an angle and puts his feet up, arm behind his head, the other over his stomach. It’s not as comfortable as laying on his bed, but it’ll do. He can’t help but feel like his bedroom isn’t his anymore. Not that it’s been doing a very good job at lulling him to sleep, because frankly, his insomnia seems to be getting worse day by day and the soft mattress and pillows aren’t doing much.

“Can’t you go back to sleep or something?” Iwaizumi snaps before the other can say anything else.

Oikawa shakes his head.

“I’ve been sleeping way too much.”

Iwaizumi feels a little jealous, but he figures Oikawa probably needs it more than he does. He needs at least a thousand more hours of good sleep to compensate for his horrific weeks with those scumbags back in Valhalla.

He breathes in through his nose.

“Good for you.”

For Iwaizumi, time always takes a different form – whether he’s asleep or haunted by the late hours of the night. Turbulent. Constantly Inconstant. It’s a sunrise that signifies a new day, a ticking clock that mocks him constantly and tells him the exact position of the sun even if it’s hiding behind thunderclouds. And in all his wakeful hours, Iwaizumi can’t help but think Oikawa is an illusion that just won’t leave him alone and an illusion he himself can’t leave alone, the result of his non-existent dreams, a personification of his guilt.

But he’s real. Very real.

Iwaizumi knows he’s real because two hours of dreamless, opiate-induced sleep later he’s still there, and he had angrily thrown away the paraphernalia from his coffee table.

Two hours.

That’s not too bad.

Iwaizumi takes a deep breath and sits up, stretching like he had just woken up from a healthy eight-hour sleep. The sun has arrived. A harsh little potion of light. He begins to breathe in more deeply as the air becomes lighter, sweeter. He chooses to ignore the headache and stands to get a glass of water, but finds an unfinished bottle of whisky instead as he walks past the long kitchen island. He inhales the smell that only an oak barrel can achieve before taking a swig from the bottle. Single-malt. Aged in Osaka. He savors the amber liquid, letting it slide warmly though his throat before breathing the alcohol fumes out.

“Hey, mind if I drink with you?” Oikawa pops in, taking Iwaizumi by surprise when he appears in front of him, leaning on the opposite side of the counter.
Iwaizumi blinks at him, his eyes narrowing. “It’s six in the morning.”

“That’s not stopping you.”

“You’re not telling me to stop.”

“You wouldn’t even if I tell you to,” Oikawa mutters, voice low and somber. He looks at the dark brown whisky bottle with keen interest. Alcohol isn’t good for you. Drugs aren’t good for you. Where did all of that go? He then brings up an innocent question. “Can I have some?”

Iwaizumi watches him for a second before sliding the bottle to his direction. He shrugs. “Go right ahead. You’ve been eating all my pastries so I don’t see why not.”

“Sorry… about that,” Oikawa says, head dipping down. His eyes flick back up again, the gauze on his brow casting a unique shadow over them. Iwaizumi sees a dark red crust forming in the middle of his bottom lip, where a cut was just the night before. Oikawa unknowingly bites it off, nervous. “I-I didn’t want them to expire, and you don’t seem to be the type to eat stuff like that anyway.”

The morning glow gives his eyes of zelkova husks just the right amount of dew. It’s satisfying to watch Oikawa in daylight, to finally see his honeyed chestnut colors without the glitzy neons and the vivid violet flashes of terror.

“They’re too sweet,” Iwaizumi admits, looking to his side belatedly.

Oikawa hums a curious tune and looks through the bottle’s orifice, just so he could take a peek at what he’s about to drink. Then he snaps his big brown eyes back at Iwaizumi.

“Why do you have them then?”

“Someone gave them to me.”

He’s probably thinking that he has a girlfriend, or a wife, or a mistress. The sudden halt in his movements gives it away. Oikawa’s quite easy to read, Iwaizumi learns. His lanky fingers are grabbing the bottle by its neck, his grip riddling with hesitation.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“No.”

“What’s your name?”

Iwaizumi stares at him, his eyes narrowing, a little crinkle inviting itself between his brows. It’s quite unexpected, but he does wonder why it took him so long to ask. He crosses his arms.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Why?” Oikawa repeats the question like it’s something ridiculous. His eyes are huge, and Iwaizumi can tell Oikawa is struggling to repress a hundred more questions. He gulps, unsure how to word his answer. “Well, you—you saved me. I just—I don’t know why, but you did. And you’re even letting me stay here. I can’t just keep calling you ‘hey’ every morning.”

Iwaizumi simply shrugs his shoulders. “That’s fine with me.”

“It’s not—” Oikawa stops and sighs through his nose. “It’s not fair. I told you my name, didn’t I?”

“You’re not even a hundred percent sure Oikawa is your name.”
Oikawa.

It rolls nicely in his tongue. It’s a rather unique surname, as uncommon in Tokyo as any other, sounding more like a name of a ryokan than a person. But that’s his name. That’s what the news says. That’s what the internet feeds to their apathetic market. Oikawa has no idea, and Iwaizumi is unsure whether telling him would be beneficial for his mental stability.

The other man opens his mouth to retort, but closes it almost immediately. Oikawa lets out a frustrated growl and purses his lips. Is he giving up? He doesn’t seem like the type to though.

“I’ll get it out of you soon enough,” Oikawa says, sounding more like a warning than a promise, and tips the liquor bottle to his mouth.

His face comically twists into disgust like he had just tasted the vilest creation to ever exist, but he had managed to swallow quite a mouthful with large gulps, much to Iwaizumi’s surprise. It burns his throat – the kind of burn that made him want to vomit. That’s what it looked like. But even so, Oikawa squeezes his eyes shut and takes another brave swig.

Iwaizumi snatches the bottle from Oikawa’s hand.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough.”

Oikawa has both of his hands over his mouth like he’s trying to keep the liquor from spewing out of his throat. He falls into a coughing fit right after, shaking his head in utter repulsion.

“It tastes horrible,” Oikawa chokes, wiping the side of his mouth. His eyes had teared up from the coughs and gags. His expression is a varying mix of disgust and frustration, eyebrows in straight lines as though he had suddenly recalled a bad memory. “I thought it would taste—I don’t know, good. People back in the club would spend so much money on these.”

Iwaizumi stares at the young man. Back in the club? Is he trying to find a way to get rid of awful memories or remember them?

“It’s not going to magically fix your problems, dumbass.” Iwaizumi screws the cap back on. “It’s still a drug, and not a very capable one at that.”

“Why do you drink then?” Oikawa asks, tipping his head to the side, genuinely interested. His prying gaze travels to the midpoint of Iwaizumi’s muscular arms, to his recent injection site. “Are you—Are you an addict?”

Iwaizumi scowls at how frank he is.

“No, I’m not a fucking idiot,” Iwaizumi barks, his frown getting worse. Why does he bother answering every single question anyway? He offers an annoyed, half-hearted grunt and rubs his temples. “An addict builds up a tolerance. The more you abuse, the higher your tolerance gets. By the end of the month, the high won’t be there anymore. You’ll take in more and more until you reach the same feeling after trying it for the first time.”

“And before you know it, you’re dying from an overdose,” Oikawa adds with a slight tone of realization.

“Exactly.”

“Why do you do it then?”
His efforts to look annoyed doesn’t seem to work on Oikawa. “Some drugs make you feel like you’re the king of the world, some makes you feel satisfied as the king’s servant,” Iwaizumi explains, stopping when he notices the clock behind Oikawa’s keen gaze. It’s six-fifteen. He thinks he has too many clocks. “And some drugs help with my inability to sleep.”

“I think it worsens it,” Oikawa tells him, words quick and curt. His brevity makes it sound like he’s speaking from experience. Is he? Iwaizumi watches him closely. “Isn’t it better to go to a doctor?”

Oikawa’s probably right.

He is very much aware that he’s using diamorphine as some form of self-medication. Iwaizumi already knows that. He already knows it’s not good for him. He already knows it’s a surefire way to damage him. But it’s the only one that fucking works. Now, Iwaizumi wouldn’t call himself dependent on them, but the doctors have no idea what else to give him, and a particularly shady one had suggested this. He just wants to sleep properly. That’s it. He wants to sleep for more than an hour. He wants something that works better than sleep aids, better than Drewell pills.

Because he hates Drewell.

He’s jealous of the cat sleeping peacefully on the packaging.

“What about you?” Iwaizumi turns the question around.

Oikawa only looks down at his bruised hands, while Iwaizumi looks at him head to toe, particularly at his chipped fingernails, then his knee. He had noticed he’s been limping because of it.

“W-What about me?”

“I told you to see a doctor.”

An obvious panic seeps through his eyes. Oikawa presses his lips together, eyes downcast, hands rubbing both palms as though he’s cold, his features being replaced with a dense layer of anxiety.

“I don’t want to see anyone.”

A distaste for human interaction.

That’s understandable.

“Besides,” Oikawa adds then bends down further, resting his chin in the crook of his folded arms. “You shouldn’t worry about someone like me,” he murmurs quietly – a short, breathy laugh slipping out along with a self-deprecating voice.

Iwaizumi doesn’t look away.

“I’m allowed to worry about you, aren’t I?”

Oikawa stops, staring at him with wide eyes, looking like he’s about to say something. He changes his mind then looks away, finding it difficult to confront even a tiny fraction of kindness as his brows creased in confusion. He shakes his head.

“You really don’t have to.”
The orange twilight burns away the dullness of the day as the city begins to operate in a mechanized process – lit by neon and robots disguised as people, bright lights reflecting on rain-kissed sidewalks. When Iwaizumi pulls over at a small parking space on a corner between an InterContinental and a Protestant church, a dull flash of red light douses his clothes and skin, splashing from the big red sign that simply says ‘Camellia’s’. He takes a moment to listen to the sirens and the fervent buzz of the city before getting out of his car.

The restaurant is full when Iwaizumi steps inside. There’s a couple on one table, glasses of wine in each hand, chatting and laughing at their non-existent money problems. On one corner is an old man, reading a book while taking a sip of his genmaicha tea. Two men, mid-twenties, enjoying a cherry almond cake. Three college girls giggle in one corner, slices of strawberry shortcakes between them. The people are just as diverse and affluent as the cakes and panna cottas gracing their tables.

“Iwaizumi!”

Then came a tall figure of Hanamaki Takahiro, suit jacket clean and black and symmetrical, his meringue-like skin seemingly ideal against his short-cropped crown of pastel hair. The color reminds him of wilting camellias, burnt pink and sickly faded.

“Thanks for dropping by.” He slaps him hard on the shoulder, but rushes to the kitchen’s double doors right after. With his back turned to Iwaizumi, he speaks out in postscript. “I have something to give you, so wait in my office, will you?”

Hanamaki’s office is spruced up in rosewood, no windows, cooping up a rum-like tobacco smell. Large pieces of antique furniture occupy the small space – an old mirror over a walnut dresser, tacky lamps and vintage sconces, shelves of vintage wine, framed chalkboards instead of sticky notes. It’s a room full of mismatched items, but somehow Hanamaki made it work.

Iwaizumi sits on a leather loveseat, the loud squeaks warning him of its old age. There are magazines from two years ago by his feet, stacks of newspaper on the coffee table. He grabs one, noting the date as the day before.

Oikawa Tooru’s face isn’t on the front page this time – and it’s all Iwaizumi’s fault.

Shinjuku, Tokyo — an unknown assailant gunned down thirteen people at a Russian nightclub in Kabukicho early Thursday. Police investigations conclude the victims were members of the Yaponskaya-kai, a Russo-Japanese crime syndicate operating in the red-light district. Kazuo Kozlov and Kuhara Cheung, high-ranking members of the group, were among the thirteen killed—

“Look who’s famous.”

Iwaizumi looks up at the deep voice. Hanamaki approaches him, his gait laidback and undemanding. He’s holding a box, rose pink and trimmed with gold.

“Here,” he says, handing Iwaizumi the box. “It’s not on our menu, but boy, this must be our best one yet.”
Iwaizumi glares at content. Cream puffs. Freshly baked. He actually relaxes a little at this, although it isn’t the purpose of his visit. His friend seems to have noticed the displeasure.

“Oh, but I guess you’re not here for my killer cream puffs, huh?”

“Nightcall never closed the job,” Iwaizumi says straightaway, leaning back on the sofa with a sigh as he drops the box on the table for the meantime. “I basically killed a bunch of Ruskies free of charge.”

The upholstered vintage armchair across him didn’t match the sofa, and Hanamaki plops on it like he’s sitting down on a flowering meadow. There’s only one light source, and it’s from a swing-arm sconce by the wine rack. Streaks of warm yellow light crease over Hanamaki’s face as he puckers up a grin.

“Relax, Hajime-kun. I told you Matsukawa is already taking care of it. He’ll get your money,” Hanamaki says, waving his hand before popping a cigarette from a pack. He offers one to Iwaizumi as he reluctantly accepts. “The Nightcall is a totally different entity, and you know that. We have no idea how they get their information, but the administration trusts them enough.”

Iwaizumi clicks his tongue, then pinches his mouth sideways. He stares down and doesn’t light the cigarette Hanamaki had given him. He hates this particular brand. “They gave me the wrong target,” he says, almost in disappointment. “That never happened before.”

“There’s a first time for everything.” Hanamaki blows out smoke until a rich oak smell fills the space between them. “But for now, just take the cream puffs. I worked hard on those things. It has a gelato filling this time.”

“Give me two boxes.”

Hanamaki blinks, uncertain if he had heard it right. “Pardon?”

“Give me two boxes,” Iwaizumi repeats. His vision catches a familiar green bottle on one of Hanamaki’s western red cedar shelves. “Plus that bottle of Vermouth.”

“Oh, wow, take all the cakes in the display while you’re at it.”

“You know what? I will. You guys owe me four million yen after all.”

“Ah—” Hanamaki groans indignantly, throwing his head back. “I told you our dear Matsukawa’s on it, alright? It’s not our fault the Nightcall is turning into horseshit.” The cigarette between his lips had gone short, so he pushes it down on an ashtray before staring back at Iwaizumi. “Why two boxes though? I’m pretty sure you only accept my gifts out of courtesy. You’re not much of a sweet tooth if I recall.”

Iwaizumi relaxes, his thoughts easing into a serene realm.

“I know someone who might be.”

☆ ☆ ☆

Iwaizumi opens the door to his high-rise apartment. The silence only lasts for ten seconds, during
which his eyes roam to the right where he sees his coffee table clean and spotless yet again, the carpet beneath it pristine and lighter in color, like it has finally tasted the agitators of his unused vacuum cleaner.

“Oh, hey, welcome back.”

He’s still here, and his prisoner's voice is tight with forced cheerfulness, emphasizing his insecurities rather than disguising it. Iwaizumi doesn’t respond and walks right past Oikawa and a singularly lit floor lamp, catching a pout before he walks to his kitchen of black marble and steel, two paper bags swinging from both hands. That area has been cleaned too; the empty bottles and weeks-old takeout boxes no longer gracing his countertops.

“Oh, I know you told me not to go out, but you said I can throw the trash in the chute and...” Oikawa’s words float in the nightly air until he can’t hear them right anymore. Why is he still here? Why isn’t he trying to escape? Why is it that even in a dark room, Oikawa still seems like a resplendent unrepressed light? Iwaizumi studies him as he talks. His mouth moves smoothly against the shadows of his home, the countless pulses of energy from the city lights crowding the comely chasms of his face.

“Iwa-chan.”

Iwaizumi snaps his wide eyes at the name that had the same impact of an explosion, his reverie breaking with one simple word.

“How did you—”

“Oh, uh...” Oikawa trails off with a nervous chuckle, his gaze wandering down. “Well, I found old notebooks in your dresser while I was looking for—”

“Don’t call me that.”

His expression is set, firm, eyes rigidly serious. Iwaizumi momentarily looks down to see Oikawa’s finger curl inwards, then looks at his mouth, clamping together almost angrily.

“What am I supposed to call you then?” Oikawa asks almost desperately, his voice louder with every word, raw and raspy from lack of use. “You’re not telling me anything, not even your name!”

“Because it’s none of your fucking business,” Iwaizumi spits out, surprised at his own patience. He’s trying hard to sound intimidating without making the other feel uncomfortable. Is that even possible? His annoyance overrides his embarrassment, dragging his hands through his hair.

“New rule,” Iwaizumi snaps, his glare enough to burn a hole. A threatening index finger points at his face. “Don’t go through my stuff.”

Oikawa scoffs. “Don’t just make up new rules as you go!”

“I can make as many rules as I want! This is my house!”

There’s a short moment of silence. Oikawa is breathing heavily through his nose, his brows
crunched in what seems like petty anger. It’s ridiculous. This guy should know better than to blatantly throw himself in a lone wolf’s den by taunting the man who had killed thirteen people a few nights before.

“Can I still call you that, though?”

Iwaizumi’s eyebrows shoot up to the ceiling. He stares back at Oikawa, shocked, confused, but mostly shocked. His brown eyes are hopeful, expectant. I won’t hurt you. I promise. He sees his previous words flashing like neon signs in the other’s eyes. Oikawa believes in them one-hundred percent. For a guy who’s supposed to develop trust issues, Oikawa trusts him a little too much.

An exasperated sigh slices through the hushed space. Fucking unbelievable. Does he actually think he’ll agree—

“Do whatever you want.”

Iwaizumi spots a triumphant smile that accentuates the pleat in his cheeks. Oikawa has dimples. He takes note of this useless information before shoving the boxes of cream puffs onto the other’s hands.

“Here,” he grumbles, then takes out an expensive bottle of Vermouth he had low-key stolen from Hanamaki. Oikawa blinks at the familiar pink box, then blinks at him. “Don’t ask.”

Oikawa ignores the warning and pulls the top off. His expression significantly lightens at the sight of the cream puffs.

“You don’t like sweets?”

Iwaizumi chuckles. “Do you?”

He nods, slow and uncertain. “Kind of,” he mutters, then stares up to study Iwaizumi’s face. There’s an air of anxiety around him again. Oikawa blinks at the items, incredulous, his unfamiliarity with simple acts of generosity causing his voice to shake. “Can I—Can I really have these?”

“Help yourself.”

It’s fifteen minutes to nine when Iwaizumi walks away and holes up in his home office.

Oikawa watches as Iwaizumi retreats, noting the center vent on the back of his suit jacket. He’s also starting to think that he may have developed a weird affinity for fancy pastries because of him.

In a small piece of mint paper, a handwritten *bignè alla crema* is written. Beneath is the date of the cream puffs’ creation, Oikawa assumes, and a batch number, making it seem like a prototype of some sort. He seats himself on one of the bar stools on the other side of the island and takes out the bumpy round puffs from its box.

It’s light and airy when Oikawa bites onto them. Perfectly round and plump. The filling is some sort of vanilla cream, and it’s strangely elastic and rich and heavy. He already had dinner, which consists of hundred-yen riceballs and a bowl of beef stew Iwaizumi had randomly picked from FamilyMart’s frozen dinners section, but the puffs are delicate enough that he’s able to finish an entire box of them without feeling like his belly is about to burst.

The flair of the surroundings change when a mechanical lamp is lit up. A blinding white fluorescence seeps from the office and onto the corners of all the rooms, and Oikawa bends
forward a bit to take a peek. It’s an illusion, because at first glance Iwa-chan's home office looks like a separate room, but it’s the full-height glass panels that provide a physical boundary – a little area walled in within one side of the bedroom. Maybe he really wants it that way. Isolated from noise but still in visual contact with the entire household.

Oikawa slides the panel of translucent glass.

The large Mac display illuminates Iwaizumi’s attentive eyes, which slides over to look at the intruder before fixing his gaze back onto the scrolling mountains of text and numbers. Oikawa’s not quite sure why he has two other laptops open, convoluting into different colors with each passing second.

“Um, I forgot to say thanks,” Oikawa blurts out, not quite sure on how to start. He’s holding the second box of cream puffs because he completely devoured the first one. “It’s, uh—It’s really good.”

The busy man looks closely at him, before leaning back on his swiveling padded office chair. “I didn’t make them,” he tells him, his shoulders shrugging. “You’re talking to the wrong person.”

Oikawa breathes out a sad, soft chuckle. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

He takes Iwaizumi’s silence as an invitation to step inside. Too cautious. Too slow. His heart is pounding and he doesn’t even know why. Iwaizumi glances up just as the industrial desk lamp ignites his facial features in harsh strokes of light and shadow.

“Don’t you want some?” Oikawa offers, hopeful. He admits eating them alone in the dark is a little too despairing for him, and he’s craving for companionship. “I can—I can make coffee or… whatever.”

There’s no response.

When Oikawa thinks he’s about to refuse, the man turns the monitor off and rises from his seat. “I have ground coffee beans in the cabinet.”

Oikawa regrets his words right after.

With his hands on his hips, he stares down at the coffee machine. There are way too many buttons and settings that he needs to fine-tune and he’s not sure where to start. It doesn’t help that the button labels are in English. Oikawa quickly looks behind him to catch a glimpse of the person waiting for an espresso. This is fine. He can figure this out.

“Press the red button on the left.”

Oikawa narrows his eyes at him, but follows his instructions anyway. Soon enough, the machine whirrs and steam is beginning to come out. The cup fills up slowly. When it’s almost full, Oikawa wraps a careful hand around it. He feels the warmth of the coffee when his banged up fingers snake around the cup. Purples and blues smear and stain his pallid skin. It still hurts when he moves the joints of his fingers, hurts when he flicks his wrist or moves his arm, and his mind fogs up when he remembers—

“Shit—!”

Oikawa hisses in pain as the stillness of the night is breached by the sound of breaking porcelain,
coffee and thousand little white knives falling against the floor. Before his brain can register the awful burn on his hands, Iwaizumi had already leaped off his seat, yanking his wrists to inspect the injury. Oikawa instinctively stretches all of his fingers, so that they’re all straight and red and trembling.

“I’m—I’m sorry… I-I didn’t—I’m sorry—”

He chants more and more apologies. He doesn’t know what else to say, a fog of nothingness whirling his brain into a daze, feeling like something bad is going to happen next.

It’s not your fault, he says. Relax. It’s not your fault. It’s fine. Oikawa flinches at these words. His brain has been conditioned to expect some kind of punishment whenever he breaks something, like getting dragged and locked inside a suffocating room, a slap to the face, or a hand pulling his hair by its roots. But this man is talking as if it’s the espresso cup’s fault for falling, fussing over his damaged skin rather than the broken cup and spilled coffee all over the hardwood floor.

Iwaizumi whispers a curse, followed by a click of his tongue and an everlasting frown. There are angry lines in his brow when he hurriedly tugs Oikawa’s hands towards the sink, letting water run against the mild burn. It’s cold. The water’s really cold. Stunned, confused, Oikawa apologizes again.

“Just—Just be careful next time,” Iwaizumi snaps, obviously holding back an angry growl and an insult. The intensity of his voice greatly contrasts his kind touch, as he delicately kneads his own thumbs over the back of Oikawa’s flushed hands.

Both their hands are discolored, Oikawa notices. Iwa-chan’s knuckles, in particular, are perpetually red, swollen, so his hands feel like worn-out leather; warm and calloused and raw – a harsh comfort Oikawa can’t get enough of. It’s impossible to remember the last time someone had touched him like this or treated him like a human being. Whenever he tries to recall a good memory, he’s met with blank space; a white wall of photographs that have been stripped off.

Perhaps it’s the brain’s natural anesthesia – a defense mechanism that wipes out memories that discharges an immense amount of heartsore. Oikawa likes to think that’s the case, but then there are still moments of clarity, between nightmares and daydreams, and suddenly he can see every particular detail and every particular feeling of a certain memory. Why didn’t his brain wipe the rest of his memories too? It would’ve saved him the trouble of having to endure constant breaks from reality.

He always struggles to find the way back.

“Iwa-chan,” Oikawa says plainly, sounding more like a statement than a call for his attention. The name soothes him, while the other cringes at it. Still, this Iwa-chan continues to help water down the first-degree burn. Oikawa feels the cool water spilling down his skin, soaking the sleeves of his sweatshirt. He’s not sure why he’s bringing the topic up now. “W-What does it stand for? Iwata? Iwakuni?”

“Iwaizumi.”

Oikawa blinks back in reply, unaware that a smile had slipped into his expression. But it fades just as fast, and Iwaizumi must’ve noticed. His hands are pushed aside, then dried with a paper towel, and all Oikawa can do is stare at how pink his hands had become. It is, by no means, not the most painful thing he had ever experienced, but he admits it does sting a little. Oikawa sucks in a breath, closing his eyes to stop the mild pain from retrieving horrifying images from his brain.
Somehow every new pain he experiences turns into a cruel time machine, and he looks back on the trembling hands which support this claim. Oikawa doesn’t know what he had done to deserve what they did to him. He didn’t know because he couldn’t remember the time before he was taken. But he recalls how their eyes were animalistic and how their hands were demeaning, preying on him like he had committed a mortal sin.

“Oikawa?”

Then there’s a tentative palm on his shoulder. Oikawa snaps his head up. He sees a flicker of stifled concern in Iwaizumi’s eyes, his furrowed brows implying that worrying is something unorthodox for him. From this proximity, Oikawa spots the very faint freckles dotting the bridge of Iwaizumi’s nose, reaching under his eyes until they fade. There’s that moment of understanding that never fails to slip through his robust features, and Oikawa can’t help but be drawn to it like a moth to a flame.

How can he not? Iwaizumi’s presence burns bright, chasing away estranged shadows of days gone by. He’s a beacon fire. He’s soul food for a starving heart. With him, Oikawa doesn’t have to endure the misdeeds and defilement. It feels like being a prisoner, but without the desire to break the chains that bind him. He keeps thinking this is a dream. All of it. Because suddenly real life is stranger than his dreams.

And so, Oikawa breathes out a shaky sigh, trapping his thoughts in his throat to keep himself from completely breaking down.

“Are you okay?” Iwaizumi asks, his palms firmer.

The burning sensation under his skin is still there, but the tremble between his fingers stops.

Oikawa reels in his gaze and offers a nod and a small smile.

“I’m okay now.”

☆ ☆ ☆

Several days drag by, and Oikawa learns he’s not quite satisfied with their daily routine of mutual silence and occasional chit-chats. The good thing is that he has finally mastered the skill of making brewed coffee without breaking expensive porcelain like a fucking idiot. He’ll always make two cups. One is decaf, obviously, and the other with too much milk.

Iwaizumi is rarely home, leaving early then coming back late either half-drunk or dead tired, but even so still has a hard time sleeping. He has some kind of day job, where he wears a suit while carrying a heavy-looking leather briefcase. But he’s also moonlighting as a hitman of some sort. Maybe he’s a member of the yakuza. That would explain the tattoos.

It’s been quite a while since he had come home at dawn soaked in blood, like the first time he had seen him, and Oikawa isn’t sure if it’s a good thing, as he noticed that Iwaizumi is finding it harder and harder to fall asleep. At least he’s not destroying his clothes by bleaching the fuck out of them.

It’s seven-forty when Iwaizumi picks up the phone to order takeout bentos from a nearby fast-food restaurant.
For a guy who lives in an affluent neighborhood in a luxurious apartment, he’s surprisingly satisfied with cheap pizza and 800-yen bento boxes filled with old rice, fish that had gone cold, and soggy pickled vegetables. Iwaizumi is sitting on the sofa and has two laptops open again, the same screen with flashing graphs and numbers. Oikawa makes his way across until he can warily study him. Dark circles. Bloodshot eyes. Loss of focus. He really hasn’t been sleeping much.

With peering eyes, Oikawa tucks his legs under the coffee table and rests his chin on one hand.

“What do you do anyway?” he asks out of the blue. Iwaizumi turns to stare down at him, his expression impassive as ever. He seems like the sort of guy who’ll say he’s a licensed troubleshooter when asked.

“I help people with problems.”

Oikawa studies the sleep-deprived man even more, brows drawn together in a curious line.

“Oh, like a problem solver.”

“Problem eliminator,” he corrects.

Oikawa huffs, not quite sure if he meant that as a joke.

“I’m serious,” Oikawa drones, tipping his head to the side. “I mean besides that. Iwa-chan always goes out in the morning, fancy suit and all.”

Iwaizumi frowns. It’s that frown that crinkles the top of his nose bridge. He does that whenever he asks personal questions, and frankly, Oikawa’s not sure why he acts all grumpy but answers them all anyway.

Instead, Iwaizumi stands and walks to a glass pane where a wall should normally be, high and wide and imposing. His brown eyes follow his tall figure and loud footsteps until he finds himself standing up too, and walking to where Iwaizumi is standing in front of the windows.

Oikawa thinks the man in a rich black slim-fit suit harmonizes perfectly among the objects in this dim environment, as though he’s part of the metropolitan ecosystem beneath them. Below, the enigmatic lights of human invention sweep the ground, and only then Oikawa realizes that they’re standing in the pulsing center of the city. It’s prolific with skyscrapers and tinted glass windows. Luxury automobiles. Rows of expensive shops. They’re on that side of the city. And they’re really high up.

“See that building?” Iwaizumi points a finger to the east. “The one with the word ‘Keyaki’ and a tree beside it?”

He sees it and nods. The neon green tree-shaped light stands out among the columns of skyscrapers.

“That’s where the headquarters of the Tokyo Stock Exchange is located. Aobajousai-kai controls them,” Iwaizumi explains, putting his hands in his pockets, eyes fixed on that certain tower. “That’s where I go every morning.”

Oikawa grows quiet, his eyes falling back to the streets below. Aobajousai-kai. Is Iwaizumi part of that group? Oikawa had heard that name countless times – from the guys at the nightclub, from the frequent patrons, from high-profile politicians who each has a strange interest in young trafficked Southeast Asian hookers. It must be a pretty well-known syndicate.
“So, you’re like an office worker?” Oikawa asks with harmless mock. “I never would’ve thought.”

“I’m an executive officer for the stock exchange.”

Oikawa tilts his head, a puppy hearing a weird noise. “Which means?”

“I don’t do much. Sometimes, I just help paint the tape. Artificially inflate stocks. Aobajousai-kai makes market players buy and sell among themselves, to make it look like there’s significant trading activity. The trading volume lures in rich idiots to invest. When it’s at its peak, we sell the stocks. We get the money, they lose them.”

His sutured brows comically furrow in confusion.

“I don’t get it, but it sounds illegal.”

Iwaizumi stares at the view, a little smug twitch evident on his face.

“It’s not illegal when I’m the executive officer.”

Oikawa’s lips twist to stop a smile. “Great, I’m living with a yakuza member and a market manipulator,” Oikawa huffs, a genuine laugh eventually finding its way out.

It’s beautiful, Iwaizumi realizes.

The short sound came out like newly sprung peach blossoms – timid at first, then a bite of a lip. In a heartbeat, it sprouts into a field of cosmos, and it shows in his sunbaked eyes, shows in his features that had softened into a relaxed smile. Unrestrained. Honest.

Iwaizumi turns, not quite sure how to voice out the accidental spell that was cast on him.

“How can you smile like that?” Iwaizumi asks, utterly at loss. He’s not exactly a very enjoyable companion. “How can you laugh after all that’s happened?”

Oikawa turns to him with wide eyes before looking back at the city, a different kind of smile emerging. It’s tender, morose. “I’m happy that I get to be with Iwa-chan instead of Kozlov, instead of those assholes. That’s something to be thankful for. That’s why I’m smiling.”

“Smiling won’t do anything.”

“Is that what you think? Is that why you’re frowning all the time?” Iwaizumi doesn’t answer, the corner of his mouth twitching in annoyance instead. “You’ll get wrinkles faster if you keep that up, Iwa-chan.”

The childish nickname rolls off his tongue like a marble rolling on the floor, as though Oikawa was designed to say it. He has a nice little smile on when he speaks – warm and lovely, timidly hiding a sad soul with good intentions. He regrets asking about it. Seconds melt by until there’s a knock on the door, and Iwaizumi is able to catch the very last second of Oikawa’s smile.

☆ ☆ ☆

Two floors down, there was a large traditional room with tatami mats and sliding doors. It was a complete contrast from Valhalla Nightclub’s extravagant Nordic decadence of ‘oath-breaking’
cocktails and carved figureheads of sea serpents and krakens. But this particular room was
different. It was more of a reception area for guests and footsoldiers; highly traditional, oriental, a
low table on the center, a recessed alcove by the east, an okimono of a goat filling an empty space,
and a hanging calligraphic scroll with obscure kanji that even Oikawa couldn’t read it.

Oikawa sat in the corner of this room, his legs tucked under. There were no light fixtures on the
ceiling, and the only reason he could see was because of a pair of incandescent lanterns,
spotlighting a bonsai tree sitting on one side of the alcove. It was enough of a glow to illuminate
the sweat dripping from a man’s forehead, his body hunched in dogeza in the middle of the room,
heavy-set, facial hair thick, his cheeks damp with tears.

“I promise, Kozlov. I’ll get you the money on Sunday! I already talked to Hase—”

“Say, Kawabata-san. Do you have a daughter?”

Oikawa looked at the inquirer. In the midst of heavy smoke and tobacco ashes, Kazuo Kozlov sat
on the only floor mat in the room, legs crossed. It appeared, truly, that he was the one with power,
the one with the choleric temper, the one who could order death with one click of his burly fingers.
There were two more sitting behind him. Jirou was one of them, a man with a tattoo on his face, a
bodyguard who had given ten years of his life working for Kozlov.

The poor man named Kawabata snapped his head up, nodding and nodding. His small eyes were
pitiful, bloodshot from crying. “Yes—Yes, I do! P-Please! Without me, she’ll be all alone. She’ll
have nowhere to go!” He stopped with a choke and pushed his forehead to the tatami again. His
whimpers echoed throughout the small room. “I’ll get the money! So, please—please don’t kill
me! I beg you—!”

“How old is she?” Kozlov asked calmly.

It took him a while to answer.

“F-Fifteen…”

Kozlov’s shrewd features kindled with a fleeting red when he lit another cigarette between his thin
wrinkled lips, giving him a sinister appearance. And when he smiled, he downright transformed
into an entirely different monster.

“If you bring her in, I’ll forget all about your debt.”

It was silent for a while; a good solid minute. Kawabata panted through his nose, lips tight. He
struggled to find the words until he finally answered in a quiet voice that greatly conveyed his
shock. “Why would you—You know I can’t do that, Kozlov!”

“We’ve already given you a lot of chances. Week after week, we just end up like this, Kawabata-
san. Where’s the three million yen you promised last Sunday? Huh? See what I mean? But if you
let Jirou here fuck your daughter like a filthy whore, you won’t have to pay anything,” Kozlov
snickered, his wicked grin stretching even wider. The man began to cry, face twisting so pitifully
Oikawa couldn’t bear to look at it anymore. “It’s a pretty good deal, really.”

“Kozlov, please…! I can’t do that! You know I can’t—!”

With one motion of his hand, the two men behind him stand up.

The scent of tobacco grew stronger.
“Suit yourself.”

“W-Wait! I—!”

Oikawa wakes up.

He wakes up to lilac water that had turned lukewarm, and slowly he sheds himself from the glimpses of the nightmare, eyes still squeezed shut. His toes flinch when he touches the cold ceramic edges of the bathtub. That’s when he flutters his eyes open.

A heavy exhale escapes from his mouth, breathing out the memories he wished he had never remembered. He’s not even sure if that nightmare happened for real, and his head hurts just thinking about it. It’s way too vivid, even for a dream. Because everything felt so clear; the sounds, the smell of cigarettes, the pain in that man’s face.

The thin layer of soapy water flows down his fingers when Oikawa raises them, cascading down to his battered arms, along with an old stitch that runs from his wrist bone up to his elbow. His hands are crinkly and pale, trembling from the cold, trembling from an awful dream. How long has he been in the bath? Oikawa wades slightly against the bathwater to take a peek at the small clock by the sink, quite confused on why it’s placed there.

“It’s been an hour,” he mutters in slight disbelief.

By this time, the steam and the mint from the bubble bath had been long expelled, the mild smell of tobacco permeating in its place. Is Iwa-chan smoking? The bathroom door’s closed, but the faint smoke still managed to get in.

Oikawa doesn’t mind it at first, but as it becomes stronger, the repulsive scent throws him into a panic, bile threatening to rise up. He gasps in rapid and short breaths, heart hammering. The pace is lecherous and loud. It’s a sudden cluster of electricity in his brain, causing his limbs to rebel against him. Oikawa’s not quite sure of what’s happening. All he knows is that he needs to get out. Quickly, he shuffles out of the bathroom, a large towel wrapped around his waist and a loose bathrobe snaking around his body.

He runs to the bedroom.

The cigarette smoke hasn’t reached that part yet.

In an attempt to block it even further, Oikawa covers himself with the comforter, curling in on himself before the repugnant scent is able to ransack his brain for dreadful memories. Because that’s exactly what it’s doing. It’s a clawed hand that’s painfully digging up the insides of his brain, forcing him to remember – forcing his body to remember.

That’s probably why he had that dream.

He hears heavy footsteps, loud with urgency, and Oikawa flinches. Please don’t open the door. There’s a knock against the wood. Angry. Obtrusive. Leave me alone. Oikawa coils even further into himself, the grip on the sheets getting tighter.

“Hey, what happened?” Iwaizumi shouts from the outside.

Oikawa wills the hysteria to die down before speaking. He must’ve heard the loud thud when he slammed the door closed.
“I-It’s nothing!” he croaks, trying to make his voice louder. “I’ll just—I’ll sleep it off!”

On the other side of the door, Iwaizumi backs away, shoulders stiff. He puts a cigarette that had burned halfway back between his lips and sits on a bar stool.

There’s no other sound coming from the bedroom, except for the rustling of sheets and the soft whirring of his centralized air conditioner. It’s disconcerting, because the worst part of breaking down is that Oikawa can do it so quietly, a silent tempest of unnoticed human emotions, and Iwaizumi is forced to fill the silence with his own interpretations.

Maybe he should go in. Maybe he should offer a glass of water, offer something to eat. But he sweeps away the thought and huffs. He’ll just make a fool of himself even if he does try. Comforting people isn’t exactly listed in his militant skillset. And although he had learned from the very beginning how easy it is to read Oikawa, there are times when he’s an abstract narrative – either eating too much or starving himself by sleeping the whole day away, either a machine of endless questions or a completely aphonic robot.

One ring from the phone is enough to cut through the silence.

Iwaizumi picks it up.

“Good evening, this is Keisuke speaking. We need an electrician real quick. There’s been a power outage over at Hishigata Tower. Can you take a look? We already sent someone a while ago, but it seems he didn’t do a very good job.”

Strings of curses slip through his teeth.

“Aren’t they just so fucking full of themselves,” Iwaizumi grumbles, then angrily slams the phone down.

He still didn’t receive the money from the previous job, and now they had the audacity to call him for a new one? It’s bad enough that they didn’t contact him after to tell him what he did wrong or what he did right. There were no diamonds. There was nothing to procure.

His tight lips press together to stop himself from laughing. He sounds like a psychotic girlfriend. Iwaizumi sighs out his frustrations and kills his current cigarette on an ashtray.

It’s strange that the Nightcall had already sent someone before him. What does that even mean? Did they let someone finish his Valhalla job from before? Will he be doing the same thing now?

Iwaizumi thinks this is the best excuse to check on Oikawa.

Slowly, the door opens, a delicate rosy hue seeping through the bedroom. Ribbons of light cascade across Oikawa’s cocoon of sheets and pillows.

“I have to go somewhere,” Iwaizumi informs him. It’s a light voice, but still hints a mild roughness that he simply can’t get rid of. “Go to sleep and rest.”

Oikawa comes around when he never expects to.

He peeks from his covers, only the top of his head visible. Their eyes meet for a fraction of a second before Iwaizumi can notice that his hair is still wet. He frowns at this.

“Wait,” he murmurs, voice thick with a drawl. He almost sounds sick. “Where are you going?”
Where? Why would it matter to him?

“I have a business meeting,” he answers anyway.

☆☆☆

Vertical lines of white light streaks on every parked vehicle, advancing from the ceiling into the polychromatic interior of the parking lot. Iwaizumi walks along a row and stops. The silhouette of his Lexus sedan is an exhilarating sight. Caviar Black. Alloy wheels. The metallic paint finish glimmers when the light hits it, accenting the thick, minty number ‘4’ embroidered on the back of Iwaizumi’s jacket as he climbs onto the driver’s seat.

The ride to the Palm Plaza Hotel is slow.

It’s the same locker, same sea-green note. The only difference is the mask that came with it. Iwaizumi scrutinizes the thing, curious because it’s not a wolf like before. No snarling, bared teeth. No raging gold eyes. The rubber smells horrible, and the design is even worse. This one’s less angry, less menacing. It’s a dog, perhaps, or a coyote. But it doesn’t really matter. He closes the locker and leaves the mask inside.

Your target is Tsukamoto Ivan. Penthouse. Eliminate all witnesses. Failure is not an option.

His eyes chafe over the last part, the space between each word disturbing him. Failure is not an option. The Nightcall never wrote that in before. Iwaizumi chooses to ignore it and carefully wraps a bandage around his fists before leaving.

It’s a little after ten when he turns the radio on. Iwaizumi drives through the electronic music, pointless talks shows, news, skincare commercials, music again, then another talk show, then more news. The twenty-second commercial about Koolfever patches comes up next, and he wonders if Oikawa has already fallen asleep. That’s when Iwaizumi turns the radio off and parks to a curb – the looming shadow of the Hishigata Tower slowly unfolding from his limited view.

At this hour of the night, the shadows become more rugged. There are no guests roaming in the lobby, service employees too busy to stay awake. But Iwaizumi dismisses the front desk altogether and travels through a damp alley, going around the back where the flickering streetlamps are, along with the dumpsters and other city filth.

The inside is very different. It’s pristine and bright. White walls. Beige carpets.

Two armed guards blemish the snowy passage, automatic weapons in hand, ready to fire at the sight of an intruder. They don’t look like the building’s security. Behind them is the only elevator that has access to the penthouse. It’s too obvious.

Just as he had expected, they’re quick to point their guns at him when Iwaizumi casually springs out from a corner.

“Stop right there!” one of them yells out immediately. His voice bellows throughout the empty
Iwaizumi acts surprised and raises both his hands, like a civilian who simply got lost. “Oh shit, sorry. Holy fuck. I don’t—I don’t suppose you guys can help me find the right way? I’m looking for—”

“The main elevators are on the opposite wing.” the other guard cuts off, voice heavy and irate. This one is gaunt and erect, and he lowers his gun a bit, his shoulders slackening, scaly face normalizing. He goes back to pointing the rifle at Iwaizumi’s face when he continues walking forward.

“You’re not allowed in here! Get lost, kid!” the man yells out, stepping forward.

Iwaizumi hopes that was meant as a compliment. Within seconds, Iwaizumi is able to observe them carefully but dispassionately, then gazes down to their feet to see if the distance is just right. Point blank. One wrong move and the gun will go off. Range is good. Approximately more than a meter.

The guy on the left, the one who’s also closer, is on the bigger side. A bull seal type. Not very fit. He’ll be slow. No scars, no cuts, his knuckles untainted, so hand-to-hand combat may not be his style. He's a brute, the type who may be skilled in judo.

For a moment, a foreboding quiet pervades the hall.

He’s faster than them. Iwaizumi knows that. With one big step, he surges forward. Head low. Back hunched down. A strong thrust of his arm deflects fat man’s rifle. When it’s pushed and pointed elsewhere – pointed at the leaner one, fat man reflexively pulls the trigger. The gunshot pierces through his senses for a second, but Iwaizumi recovers quickly. Several bullets fly, and it made quite a mess. Some had hit the ceiling light fixtures, the walls, but one bullet catches the slimmer of the two in the face, a puff of red mist spraying from his head. His legs crumple like gelatin, his body plunging to the floor like a ragdoll.

But fatso relaunches himself, pushing Iwaizumi back with almost no effort. The wall hits his back. The stubborn man doesn’t let go of the rifle. Iwaizumi grunts and elbows him to the cheekbone. One, two, three. The guy doesn’t budge, still growling and attempting to yank the gun from Iwaizumi’s grip.

Iwaizumi readies the sturdiest part of him. It’s the perfect weapon, he thinks, a hard robust plane balanced with the right amount of neck and back muscles. He headbutts him full in the face. Finally, the fat man staggers back on stiff legs and hits the opposite wall, his pudgy fingers slipping off the rifle.

That could disorient his tiny brain for an hour or so, but that’s not what Iwaizumi’s here for. This guy is a witness, and he doesn’t want to get on the Nightcall’s bad side again. With locked shoulders, Iwaizumi prepares for the recoil and shoots him straight in the face. Fat man’s last breath is a loud grunt, the impact causing his entire head to explode, sending him down completely. The bloodied insides pour out of his cracked skull. Dead as shit.

Kneeling down, Iwaizumi searches their clothes, hoping to find a keycard or something of value. There it is. The electronic key. Then, a 9mm, semi-automatic and compact, but it could be of use. The AR-15 he’s holding is almost out of ammo, and he’s not a fan of big guns.

Iwaizumi takes a breather. He walks away before their dead organs would flush out whatever's in their bowels and bladders, wanting to avoid the revolting smell as much as possible. The hall is quiet again, but not as immaculate, when he jumps into the elevator. Blood is everywhere. The
brains and red stains on that carpet will be hard to wash off.

This Tsukamoto guy sure is a big shot.

Living in the district’s tallest accommodation, it has everything one would expect from a penthouse suite. Contemporary furnishings, a pool in the very center of the living area, phenomenal views. He can see the entirety of Tokyo from here. His own apartment in Roppongi dulls in comparison.

The large space is dark, although the rectangular pool is illuminated with underwater lights that dye the shadows with aquamarine.

The romantic ambiance all goes to waste when he’s greeted by more armed minions. They’ve been waiting for someone – waiting for him. Iwaizumi can tell by their unsurprised faces and their black automatics that pointed at the single entryway.

But Iwaizumi had expected them, too.

It’s a common mistake to let the recoil from the first shot jerk the gun up, causing the next bullets to travel higher. But Iwaizumi did not make that mistake, and he fires just as the elevator doors open halfway. All of the bullets blast in perfect angles, perfect centers. It’s deafening. Blood and bone and brain spray into every direction as the bullets go straight through flesh, skulls, and glass frames.

He misses one, spotting a man in an ugly white suit running away. Iwaizumi likes it when they run. Pulling out the semi-automatic, he lets the lucky guy scream Tsukamoto’s name for a short moment. With zero hesitation, Iwaizumi aims and fires, putting a bullet through one leg. It’s bizarrely gratifying to watch the man squirm on the floor as he walks to him. Quiet, calm steps.

“Still feeling lucky, punk?” Iwaizumi chimes in and shoots a final bullet through his head.

Eleven o’clock.

There’s a gigantic clock on the wall, looking more like an art student's sculpture than anything else. He realizes he had forgotten to put on a watch before leaving his place. Iwaizumi counts the seconds in his head instead and walks towards the first door on his left. It takes a while for him to find his target, with all the doors and rooms in this goddamn suite. The double doors on the end of the hall look promising.

Then he hears a shrill scream, a clear indicator that he’s in the right room. There’s a woman, lean and tall and Caucasian, red lips and red dress and scared to death. She must be the wife – or the mistress.

The master’s bedroom is wide and upscale, just like the rest of the abode. Tsukamoto Ivan is at the very center of it, the terror within him growing as he points a gun at Iwaizumi. Quite hefty and big; definitely someone who eats three dinners every night. His dry skin is sunburnt, his neck bulging over his collar. Iwaizumi can smell the shochu from him.

“W-Who sent you?! Tell me!” he yells out, hands clearly shaking, already thinking of who to kill if he happens to get out of this alive. He knows everyone outside is dead, and there’s nowhere to hide. It looks like it’s his second time to experience his life being threatened, but it’s obvious that it’s his first time holding a gun. “D-Don’t fucking move, you crazy fuck! I’ll shoot!”

Sweat dribbles from his gray head, rolling down his thick furrowed eyebrows. Iwaizumi eyes every movement, then catches a glimpse of the woman crawling frantically behind the edge of the bed. He then looks back at the man with the gun.
“Go ahead, asshole, make my day.”

Tsukamoto Ivan’s deep nervous laugh bounces off the walls.

“Don’t you know who I am?! I have friends in Kyoudai-krug, you fucking brat—!”

Iwaizumi reaches behind him and throws a knife at his face. But it wasn’t meant to harm him. No, he’s not a professional knife-thrower. The swift movement causes Tsukamoto’s figure to flinch. Iwaizumi sweeps forward at that crucial moment, grabs his wrist and twists it in an inappropriate direction. That crisp sound of bone cracking sends chills in his spine, and Tsukamoto shrieks in pain. The gun drops. Once disarmed, literally, figuratively, Iwaizumi hits him, vicious fists to the face. He steps back a bit to drop a kick to the groin. That’s his left foot. But with his dominant right foot, he smashes Tsukamoto’s ribs as the final blow. The man falls down as easily as the pistol he had been holding, curling on the floor like a dying insect.

Then Iwaizumi stops. He takes a deep breath, murderous gaze rolling towards the only woman in the room.

He heaves a sigh.

“Get out of here, lady. You wouldn’t want to see me crush his skull into bits now, would you?”

It’s enough to make her slide to her feet, head perpetually dipped down as she scrambles to get out of the room. Her hysterical screams can still be heard. She must’ve seen the bloodbath outside.

Iwaizumi turns his attention back to the man by his feet. Tsukamoto’s struggling up on his working elbow, one eye swelling, blood running down his nose. His weight proves to be detrimental as his joints give in, his head hitting the floor with a loud thump.

“That fucking whore—!" Tsukamoto howls between excessive saliva and blood from his mouth. “I’ll kill that goddamn rat—!”

Not a wife, then.

She might’ve been a spy, the token seductress from a rival syndicate, or just a regular hooker. Who knows. Iwaizumi just shrugs and scans the room. Framed movie posters. Pornographic sculptures that allude to the man’s provocative tastes in women and how he treats them. Venetian blinds disheveled enough to allow the electric blues and greens of the urban jungle seep in like petroleum. Tsukamoto’s M9 is a foot away from them. But even so, Iwaizumi wishes he had a baseball bat handy. Tsukamoto doesn’t seem to be the kind of guy who plays the sport. Instead, he catches the sight of a golf bag. That’s not very surprising. This guy seems like a pretty heavy hitter.

Iwaizumi grabs the best golf club from the bunch.

Titanium. Black metal crown. It’s heavier than it looks, and the clubhead is partly responsible for its remarkable weight. Iwaizumi tightens his hold on its rubber grip, swinging the shaft one or two times, mimicking a man enjoying a day in his favorite golf course.

This could work.

Tsukamoto writhes on the floor, gasping for air, gasping for answers. “Y-You—What do you want from me? Who sent you—?” he asks again in ragged breaths. His bottom lip is swelling from Iwaizumi’s jabs and had grown two times in size, making it hard to talk. “It’s that bitch, isn’t it? Fucking cunt ratted me out—!”
Iwaizumi only blows out a sigh. He’s getting a little annoyed.

“This isn’t her fault, nor mine. It won’t matter who sent me or who killed who. I’m going to smash your head in anyway, Tsukamoto-san. Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

The golf club smashes right into his face, it’s thick heavy base cracking the side of Tsukamoto’s head. His eyes look up to Iwaizumi, morbidly blinking in berserk, head and neck twitching like a defective robot. There’s no gushing blood for the first few seconds, no orchestra of fractures, and Iwaizumi decides to fix that with another blow. Blood finally pours out. First from his mouth, then after the third chop, it starts spraying out in dark red geyers. On the fourth, fifth, sixth, and so on, the sporadic squirms stops, his blood pooling on the rug, painting it an ugly, sticky brown. The pressure forces out weird noises from his skull as his mouth of scrambled teeth hangs open, his jaw no longer connected to anything.

Iwaizumi steadies his heavy breathing and drops the golf club on the floor.

When he thinks it’s quiet and decides to leave, he finds a flimsy blood-stained door on the west side of the bedroom. It doesn’t look like a closet. Cautious, Iwaizumi approaches it, and with a rifle ready, kicks the door open.

The sickly-sweet odor almost makes Iwaizumi gag.

Almost.

“Fuck happened here?”

Despite the darkness, the red-orange light from a lonely sconce blends into the scene, blends into a figure of a dead man tied to a chair. Iwaizumi glances down and slowly enters the dim room. This poor guy’s been dead for a while. Could be twelve hours or more. His hands are cuffed behind him, ankles tied around the pegs. He’s unsure which chunk of this grim display had disturbed him the most. It could’ve been the rubber mask of a pig still on his head, could’ve been the implications that he was beaten up and raped until his body is just a vile mess of soft clay, or that there’s blood, thick and dark and heavy, still flowing from his crotch and his missing genitals.

It smells like a million pigs rotting.

Iwaizumi had encountered this smell several times. He had seen a corpse over and over. But this one’s different. This guy could’ve been him if his luck had run out. Iwaizumi just looks away, walking out of the room before the smell could stick to his clothes, suddenly finding the need to mindlessly spend the night in a pachinko parlor.

☆ ☆ ☆

“How was the business meeting?”

It’s seven in the morning. Iwaizumi hasn’t slept a wink and lost about ten grand on pachinko machines. He does not need this right now. Because strangely enough, he can’t help but feel like a cheating husband coming home from a fake company outing. Iwaizumi sees the stray he had taken in, arms folded, hair messy and fluffier than usual. He had forgotten to put a gauze on the sutures above his eye, but he seems fine now.
Iwaizumi just hopes this guy didn’t sleep with his hair still wet last night.

“Tiring,” Iwaizumi answers lazily, walking right past Oikawa. He flops down on his sofa, dropping the duffel bag of blood-stained clothes by his feet. Without delay, Oikawa follows him with small, uneven steps, his limp slowing him down.

“Execs gave you a hard time?” Oikawa shuffles into a seat across him and rests his arms on the table, eyebrows knitting in suspicion, legs tucked under. Iwaizumi thinks it’s Oikawa’s favorite spot.

God, he’s too tired for this.

“Yeah,” Iwaizumi says with an exhausted sigh. “I must say they have a lot of guts.”

He’s glad to have caught Oikawa’s expression, his face twisting in disgust. It’s amusing how fast a wrinkle appears on top of his nose.

“Is that supposed to be a joke?”

Iwaizumi raises his brows. “Why? Is it funny?”

“To ex-convicts and serial killers, maybe.”

Iwaizumi intends to shoot him a scowl, but his lip twitches in the middle of it, almost quirking into a smirk but decides against it on the last second. Oikawa must’ve noticed. His eyes stretch wide, blinking at Iwaizumi in pure surprise.

“Ah—Iwa-chan smiled,” Oikawa mutters, disbelief renders his voice into a soft sound.

The accusation catches Iwaizumi off guard, and he tries to think of a response, disproof, anything. He hates his brain for knowing exactly how to kill a man with his bare hands, but can’t even think of a snappy retort.

“I-I didn’t,” he ends up saying. That slight stutter makes him want to punch himself. Iwaizumi frowns deeply to further invalidate Oikawa’s words.

“I saw it.” Oikawa smiles with satisfaction. “I’ve never seen you smile before.”

“I didn’t smile.”

“If you say so,” Oikawa says with a melodic lilt, pushing one elbow up to rest his chin on his palm.

He gives Oikawa another scary look, a grumpy scowl clicking into place. But he lets it go. It never fucking works on him. It’s annoying. An amber sunrise ambitiously lights up his entire space, lights up each crevice in Oikawa’s face, surrendering a golden crown above him that fits in quite nicely.

Iwaizumi bends down and goes to reveal the contents of the duffel bag, taking out the mint green letterman jacket that’s not quite green anymore with all the sticky red liquid and bits of flesh sticking to it, still fresh and pink. He pushes it inside a plastic laundry bag.

Oikawa covers his nose, the smell of death mixing in with the air.

“It’ll be harder to get the stains off if you let it dry like that,” Oikawa tells him, voice nasal. “Want me to take these to the laundromat?”
Iwaizumi blinks at him, noticing how Oikawa had inched further away, which goes against his offer. “No, I’ll have it washed later,” he answers, walking over to leave the laundry bag by the sunken entrance, next to his shoes. He goes back to his spot. “You’re not allowed to go out, remember?”

Oikawa knows better than to disobey, so he puffs his cheeks instead and frowns. Iwaizumi feels his brown eyes on him, studying his every move, every blink.

“You haven’t slept yet.”

It’s an indisputable observation, drenched in concern. The bloodshot eyes probably gave it away. Even more so when Iwaizumi fishes out a ziplock of light brown powdery substance and complementing paraphernalia – syringes and tin foils and stuff like that. Oikawa rolls his eyes and frowns even more at this, his gaze wandering down to Iwaizumi’s hands.

Iwaizumi ignores the stretch of silence and cooks up a dream, turning dirty diamonds into snow.

“Coffee tables are for caffeine, not cocaine.”

Either of the two won’t help him sleep, but Iwaizumi lets it pass, keeping his apathetic expression.

“This isn’t cocaine.”

“Not the point.”

Iwaizumi doesn’t look up to face him when Oikawa speaks again, his voice low and confident.

“I’ll make you something better.”

He has no idea why he’s rethinking all of a sudden, curiously snapping his head up. Iwaizumi raises one eyebrow at him, then at the dope he just whipped up. Oikawa doesn’t give him time to decide and stands up.

“Wait there,” he instructs before marching over to the kitchen.

That’s when Iwaizumi realizes Oikawa didn’t dry his hair last night, and that he’s still in a messily tied bathrobe and didn’t bother to change into sweats, hair unkempt, the strands sticking out on weird directions. Oikawa is not at all subtle, or quiet. His steps are heavy and the clanging of utensils imply his heavy grip on things, as if he’s making sure he won’t drop them this time around.

Iwaizumi grunts, exasperated. He gives up and flings the syringe already filled with gold liquid across the table. This is ridiculous. He impatiently waits for Oikawa’s concoction and observes him from afar. The marble island is blocking his view, but he can see Oikawa pouring a carton of milk he doesn’t remember buying onto a small pan. Then he’s getting something from the upper cabinets, reading the labels one by one. Next, he gets something from the fridge, the foil from its wrappers loud and obtrusive.

After a few minutes, just as he promised, Oikawa brings a small tray and sets it on the coffee table. On top of it are two cups of brown liquid, frothy, dark. Steam rises up from each one, blowing up warm mists of a rather sweet toasty aroma.

“Caffeine is supposed to keep you awake,” Iwaizumi points out, his narrowed eyes fixed on the mysterious cup of something. Is this even coffee? Oikawa isn’t trying to poison him, is he?

Oikawa folds his arms over his chest.
“Can you at least try it first?”

Hesitantly, he brings the edge of the cup to his dry lips.

Iwaizumi almost spits out the drink as soon as it hits his tongue.

“What the fuck is this?”

“It’s hot chocolate,” Oikawa chides with a soft smile. He kneels by the table again and tips his head sideways and sips some from his cup. “You have some old chocolate bars from Camellia’s. I thought it’d be nice to make these for a change.”

Iwaizumi is self-aware. He’s definitely not the nicest person in the world, but Oikawa looks so happy that he doesn’t have the heart to tell him that he actually can’t stand sweet beverages. It’s not so often Oikawa is able to gather up that expression – all soft smiles and dimples. And so, he lets out a sigh and declares a blatant white lie.

“It’s good.”

There’s an easy silence that comes after, and Oikawa’s short velvet laugh streams through it.

“You should switch up your morning routine.”

He can already feel the warmth rising, and his risk of diabetes doubling. His breathing steadies, and he takes one strong whiff before drinking again. It has a different effect from his usual morning vices. They drink in quiet, letting the air play a soft song. Before he knew it, Iwaizumi realizes that his cup is completely empty, the warmth under his skin making him feel a tad bit sleepy.

It’s almost magical, and Iwaizumi is unsure whether it’s the hot chocolate that’s keeping him warm or something else entirely.

☆ ☆ ☆

The self-service coin laundry shop on the fifth floor has a fragrance like no other.

It’s the familiar smell of detergent, the strong balm of fabric conditioner, and wisps of clean clothes that dissipates lovingly into the air. It’s a complete contrast to the metallic scent of blood and a human’s bodily fluids being flushed out of their bodies after their brains die. Iwaizumi’s nose tingles at the sharp minty ambiance before he walks over to the farthest washer in the back.

“Oh, Iwaizumi-san. Good evening.”

Iwaizumi turns at the monotone greeting. It could only be from one person.

“Hey,” he greets back, quickly throwing his bloody laundry inside the machine. Then he puts a hand on his hip, eyes back on Kunimi Akira. “Watching the shop tonight?”

“Yes,” he answers politely. He kneels down to check on one of the machines, making sure they’re working fine and is free from any lint or filth from the previous customer. His dead fish eyes blink as he lets out a tired sigh. “I’m here until six.”

Iwaizumi knows Kunimi is not much of a night creature, even though the young man has been
working at this 24-hour laundry shop for a year now.

“It’s hard to get enough sleep during the day,” Iwaizumi agrees.

“Yeah. I could barely stay awake in class, much less now.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

Kunimi nods in agreement. “Hm.”

Their conversations end abruptly, but comfortably. This particular shopkeeper isn’t the talkative type, a huge contrast with the waiters from the breakfast place on the ground floor. Just like swimming, working night shifts is something one can learn, even though it’s unnatural. Iwaizumi tells him this. After that piece of advice, Kunimi offers his thanks and a final bow before walking away, and Iwaizumi only nods in return.

Just as he puts in coins into the machine, the small television hanging from one corner of the room blasts with the evening news. Iwaizumi waits for the water to fill up the washer, turning his attention to the middle-aged anchorman on the screen.

“International movie producer Tsukamoto Ivan was found dead in his home in Hishigata Tower early this morning. Tsukamoto, 57, was well-known for producing feature-length films including ‘Let Sleeping Dogs Lie’ and award-winning Russo-Japanese films ‘Dolores’ and ‘Carmen’. However, police investigation shows evidence of possible criminal activity linked to Tsukamoto, as several members of the Russo-Japanese mafia, Kyoudai-krug, are also found dead on the scene. He was believed to be tied to several high-profile Russian personalities and mob bosses. Data from the CCTV has been erased and no suspect has been identified—”

Iwaizumi turns away and plays deaf, finding it weird to watch. After what seems like an eternity, the water reaches the right level and he goes over to the counter to buy Haiter bleach.

Two bottles of them.

Kunimi squints suspiciously at Iwaizumi. He can be quite perceptive at times.

“Lay off the bleach this time, Iwaizumi-san. It fades the color.”

Chapter End Notes

MAH DUDES thank you for the amazing comments on the first chapter what the fuck!!!! can u spot like million movie references in here haha i promised to myself it’ll be 10k per chapter look what happened let me know what u think!!! i love all ur comments my dudes!! ;;o;;

playlists: 01 / 02

holla at yo boy here: twitter & tumblr
Cruel World

Chapter Notes

Based on Hotline Miami and artworks by me.

Cruel World by Lana Del Rey

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Iwaizumi frowns at his old drawings.

It’s funny how Oikawa had managed to find them, since they lay on the very bottom of his most unused dresser beneath piles and piles of his most unused clothes. Soon enough, its fleeting importance worms beneath his skin, the faint smell of old crayons forcing him to recall the years passed and the people more or less forgotten.

He’s buttoning a clean cotton shirt with one hand, holding a piece of paper with the other - yellow and crumpled with age, stains of blue ice cream seeping through the thin material. Iwaizumi doesn’t remember how old he was when he had drawn it, but he remembers the other conspirator who had drawn it with him. Iwaizumi drew his father and mother in green crayon. Stick figures. The family dog, a Japanese Spitz named Maru, was drawn on the far right, larger than the stickmen like he was some kind of monster.

Well, he did bark a lot.

Right next to the dog is Iwaizumi’s own small stick figure. It wasn’t drawn by him, and the ‘Iwa-chan’ written in black crayon and hanging above his distinctly spiky hair was not his handwriting. Each cruel letter haunts its way into his musings until his grip finally loosens, slipping the paper back inside his chest of drawers along with a medium amount of other grade school doodles he’s been keeping.

His nostalgia burns away just as the pounding nine o’clock sunlight breaches through the room like a virus, the dark varnished Brazilian walnut of his bedroom furniture appearing lighter, more polished. Oikawa had been pulling the curtains away little by little to offer the sunshine some hospitality, and whenever Iwaizumi complains, the guy slides them to the side even more that he might as well rip them off their rods, talking about how the sun would do good for him as though Iwaizumi can harness the sunrays like fucking daylilies.

Iwaizumi casts a look on the closed door. Is Oikawa still reading the same magazine he had been flipping over for the past week? Is he still gaining a special kind of thrill by throwing away his dope and hypodermic needles? He must be. Honestly, if Iwaizumi earned a 1000-yen bill for every time Oikawa had tried to meddle with his daily routine, he’d have enough money to buy another condo unit.

With a sigh, Iwaizumi pulls open a cabinet to grab a two-button suit in midnight black. Double vents. Seishin cut. Slim sleeves and narrow pants. Then, his vision galls over the windows as he clicks his gold wristwatch into place. The view in his bedroom doesn’t let him see the Keyaki Plaza, his office building, the angle not enough to see that side of town. Today’s not going to be a good day, Iwaizumi can already tell. But he realizes that anyone can be having a bad day just like him. The art simply consists of knowing how to exploit it.
His phone rings while he’s adjusting his cufflinks.

“Passing by the office today?”

The voice on the other line is deep and lazy and rough. Iwaizumi would’ve assumed the man’s disinterested in the entire conversation if he hadn’t known him for years. His voice has been like that as far as he remembers. Iwaizumi finishes one sleeve before answering.

“Yeah. What time do you need me?”

“After lunch probably, around one,” the man says, pausing to take a drag from a what seems like a cigarette or a blunt. “Sleazebags from the Tokyo Prosecutors Office are paying a visit.”

Iwaizumi’s shoulders sink a bit. He scowls at the thought.

“They aren’t going to find anything, Matsukawa,” Iwaizumi assures him, rolling his eyes as though the other can see. He’s getting tired of the shittains meddling in their affairs, because the more they drop by, the more frequent Iwaizumi has to come to the office - which he absolutely abhors.

“Oh, I know,” the caller retorts with the same level of confidence. “But I get the feeling someone’s paying these brokers to fuck with us, to delist my holdings from the stock exchange. Whoever it is, he’s pretty damn determined to prove that the unbooked funds in the statements had gone to Aobajousai-kai.”

“Which is true,” Iwaizumi replies and skims over the dresser for a tie. Blood red would be perfect for burying an accounting scandal. “But they don’t know that.”

“And hopefully it stays that way.”

Iwaizumi breathes through his nose as he tucks in his angry red tie. “It will.”

Corporate crime isn’t the stablest of jobs, and Iwaizumi is aware that his position only remains anchored because he somehow managed to become an indispensable unit, and that Aobajousai-kai’s anonymity and main source of income would grind to a halt if he’s suddenly gone.

Iwaizumi monopolizes a specific skill, though he can’t quite figure out exactly what it is.

Too many important people rely on him. This is strange for a group with tight connections and undeniable transparency among members. It’s even stranger because he’s not a lieutenant, but not merely a foot-soldier either. Instead, he’s a revving engine in this particular machine of criminal enterprises - the go-to guy when a problem needs solving. And just like what he had told Oikawa previously, his primary job is to solve problems, although the process can be slightly different when night falls.

“Anyway, I’m counting on you,” he hears, then frowns at the pleased lilt in Matsukawa’s voice.

He sighs loudly in mock. “What will you guys do without me?”

“Oh, the entire Seijou group would fall.”

The semi-sarcastic farewell and the final beep that comes after reminds him to check the time. Nine-fifteen. He has a few hours to spare - not that he has anything else to do for the most part. There aren’t many things to do during the day aside from his usual morning workout routing and knocking himself out by all possible means to get a few hours of sleep. Iwaizumi finishes knotting his necktie in Full Windsor before stepping out.
“Going somewhere?”

Iwaizumi’s senses sharpen at the sound of Oikawa’s voice, echoing like a foreign object in the living room.

There’s that old magazine again, nestling against his slender fingers. His brown eyes slow to a halt over a tourism advertisement as he sits atop a tall barstool. One leg is perched up, and the other having no problems reaching the floor.

“Yeah,” he tells him simply, but doesn’t explain any further.

He expects Oikawa to pry, but he remains painfully quiet - which he has been the entire morning. Oikawa woke up early, though not earlier than Iwaizumi. He’s still carrying remnants of his sleep by the way he talks, dazed and quiet. Oddly enough, Oikawa barely touched his convenience store breakfast, which is unusual, because he gobbles up food like a beast. It’s quiet, and Iwaizumi thinks he might not be used to prolonged silence anymore. The dead air plagues him, as Oikawa distant words fail to liven it up.

Iwaizumi sighs and snatches a lighter from a kitchen drawer. He needs a cigarette break.

“He has you been here before?” Oikawa quips another question, finally, but this time he keeps his gaze on the magazine, not even bothering to look at Iwaizumi.

With a tinge of curiosity, Iwaizumi cautiously hops into the barstool next to him. Hawaii. He’s looking at a picture of Hawaii. Iwaizumi side-eyes him, furtively studying the other’s face. There’s really no word to describe Oikawa’s expression. It’s sort of blank, and everything else is at its place except for that vague interest under his lids.

“No.” His fingers reach up to his breast pocket to reach for a cigarette. His eyebrows crease in sudden thought. “I don’t have time for that.”

“You only think you don’t, Iwa-chan.”

Oikawa’s words fade in and out of his thoughts, his low disposition fragmenting his intentions that even his silly nickname didn’t sound at all silly. Iwaizumi fiddles a thumb over his lighter’s sparkwheel, slow and purposeful. He licks his lips before letting a cigarette sit between them as an unfamiliar flash of concern triggers inside of him.

“I can’t afford to think that I do.”

The click of the lighter breaks the short silence that comes shortly after.

“You’ll never find time for anything if that’s the case,” Oikawa says softly, flipping the page over to an article about a professional kickboxer. He skims through it and turns the page again. “You don’t have to count every hour in the day.”

Iwaizumi doesn’t comprehend, finding it unnecessary to say anything else, even though he’s tempted to ask what Oikawa had meant. Instead, he inhales a slow draw from his cigarette to cram some nicotine into his system, flicking the ashes off its end as if each piece is a memory he chooses to shear from his life. Iwaizumi looks at the lonely clock hanging on a bare wall. Nine-nineteen. His green eyes follow the hand that moves as each second pass. Ironically, time begins to dissolve into itself, reminding Iwaizumi that time won’t stop even if he kills it.

The screws under the barstool squeak when he notices Oikawa shift, catching how his eyes suddenly widen at the odd shapes of smoke in the air, as though he had seen a ghost. The wisps of
gray obscure Iwaizumi’s vision for a while, focusing more on the hot and cold feeling down his throat. But in between the clouds of smoke and the smell of cigar, the magazine falls on hardwood, and the abrupt thud makes Iwaizumi turn just in time to see Oikawa leap off from his seat and run to the bathroom.

“Oikawa?” Iwaizumi blinks in confusion. He then hops off in reflex, pushing his cigarette down the marble despite only getting three whiffs from it. Then he hears choking. He follows the sound with hurry and vigilance until he reaches the doorway. “Are you—”

He stops as soon as the faint smell of bile reaches his nostrils.

Oikawa isn’t able to reach the toilet bowl in time, his vomit ending up on the tiles like rotten clam chowder. The stench of stomach acid floods the bathroom just as quickly as Iwaizumi is able to rush to his side.

“Shit, what’s—”

Oikawa sinks down to his knees, hands on the cold floor, coughing and retching even though there’s nothing more to throw up. He hasn’t really eaten anything heavy, so Iwaizumi assumes this must be last night’s midnight snack. Oikawa heaves out in labored breaths, only noticing there’s someone else in the room when he manages to open his watery eyes. Iwaizumi drops down in urgency next to his crouched form.

“Oikawa—”

“N-No, don’t touch me—!” Oikawa whips back a weak elbow and hits Iwaizumi before he can even lay a hand on him. Iwaizumi halts. There’s some left trailing from his lips, viscous and lurid, as he tears up from the way his innards contract. His hostility waters down into fear a second later, his eyes wide in horror after glancing up at Iwaizumi’s face. “I’m—oh no, shit, I’m sorry…” Oikawa stammers, his remaining thread of strength fraying as he frantically searches for a rug or toilet paper or anything to wipe the floors with. “I’ll—I’ll clean it up—”

He freezes.

The hand on his forehead causes him to flinch.

Iwaizumi had a hunch that Oikawa might’ve been sick by the way he’s been acting all morning. Oikawa’s paleness is replaced with a mellow red, his face glistening with sweat and saliva and some other things. His skin is cool when Iwaizumi’s palm sweeps over his forehead. No fever. Iwaizumi then rests the back of hand along his jaw and neck to double check, noticing how Oikawa relaxes at the touch. His temperature seems to be normal. Could be something he ate. Could be the fluctuating weather. It’s been alternating between rain and shine these past few days. It could be that. It could be something else. June’s not too far away after all.

Looking down, Iwaizumi thinks he should be used to Oikawa’s face by this time - the only face that can stop him in his tracks, the only one that can derail his train of thoughts. Oikawa looks up shyly, his parted lips tremble out heavy breaths, lashes blinking heavy with tears, eyes half-lidded.

“Sorry,” he murmurs another apology, swallowing a hard lump in his throat. Iwaizumi isn’t quite sure why he’s apologizing in his state. Is it because of the pool of vomit on the floor? Oikawa should see the mess Iwaizumi leaves after a job. Hundred times worse.

Then again, it’s probably for the best if he doesn’t witness such a scene

“I can call a doctor—”
“No,” Oikawa chokes out. He shakes his head stubbornly. “No doctors.”

In spite of it all, Oikawa is still imprisoned by his fragmented memories, and Iwaizumi’s afraid he won’t be able to easily free himself from them. No one truly can. Eventually, Iwaizumi’s hand fall atop Oikawa’s shoulder, while the other pushes his tousled brown hair back, to keep them from sticking to his face. With skin as fair as his, it’s easy to spot fading bruises and orchids wilting on his body. He’d seen the way Oikawa would light up, and how quickly it fades out. How his forehead would crease when he tries to recall certain things. How he constantly touches the stitches above his eyebrow. How his lips would purse into a smirk after a clever remark. Then Iwaizumi remembers the varying shades of red of that night - that night when he found him, and he relives that memory until his mind becomes a spiteful undercurrent.

“What did they do to you?”

Oikawa freezes, too much to be considered normal, eyes big and lips now pressed tightly together. Shit. He didn’t mean to say that out loud. Iwaizumi can imagine the sparks in Oikawa’s brain, a possible short circuit rendering him wordless, motionless. He mentally kicks himself. That was stupid. And reckless.

“I don’t—I don’t know,” Oikawa breathes out, his voice on the brink of collapsing. Then he shakes his head, brows crunching miserably. He speaks in a hushed, weak tone. “Please don’t ask.”

Iwaizumi lets him go out of guilt, leaning back to get something from a cabinet under the countertop basin. “Here,” he says, wiping Oikawa’s mouth with a towel as an apology. His big eyes stare up at him as he cleans off any moisture from his face. Iwaizumi then sets one knee up and stands. “Stay there for a second.”

Solanax, haloperidol, olanzapine - he should have at least one of these. Iwaizumi clicks his tongue in annoyance as he hastily fishes through a disorganized medical box filled with expired aspirins and empty boxes of Salonpas. In the midst of shuffling through the medkits and bathroom cabinets to look for antiemetics, the telephone in his office starts to ring like a thunderstorm.

“Fucking hell,” Iwaizumi mutters under his breath, still frantically looking for medicine, not really in the mood to leave a sick Oikawa alone. Still, the ringing persists. It might be those assholes from the prosecutor's office. Fuck them. Can’t they wait? Can’t they just call back? He ignores the annoying noise for now, but the impetuous ringing violently cracks the air it almost makes him want to smash the phone with a baseball bat.

“Iwa-chan, it’s—it’s fine,” Oikawa says weakly, propping a knee up in an attempt to stand. He uses the toilet bowl to help himself up, then places all of his weight on the countertop edges. With trembling hands, he pulls out a long trail of toilet paper to wipe the floor with. “I’ll do it. I’m really sorry about this. Just pick up the phone. I’ll—”

Iwaizumi frowns at him. Is he fucking insane? Oikawa’s almost ready to pass out. He grabs him by the arm to stop him from moving. “Look, I’ve seen worse, so just let me—”

“I said I’ll do it!” Oikawa snaps, voice rivaling the phone’s incessant ringing. He rips his arm from Iwaizumi’s grip. “Your suit will get dirty! Just pick up the phone!”

Green eyes widen. Oikawa's unwarranted tone cuts the last strings of Iwaizumi’s patience, a growing annoyance biting him like a viper. His irritation demanded release, and it’s in the form of impulsive violence as Iwaizumi grabs him by the collar of his sweatshirt. With great force, he drags Oikawa into the other side of the bathroom, shoving him into the bathtub and immediately
turning the shower faucet on until Oikawa’s too soaked to walk out.

“You do as I fucking say!” Iwaizumi yells back, his voice bouncing right through the walls and as loud as eight telephones ringing. Oikawa flinches at the sound. He slams the glass panel shut before Oikawa can say anything, then angrily throws in a bunch of towels on the floor before leaving the bathroom.

The ringing stops.

Beneath him, Oikawa can feel the cold puddles of water gathering, slowly being absorbed by the heavy fabrics of his borrowed clothes. When the flash of shock simmers down, Oikawa sighs heavily in relief. The fear that comes from Iwaizumi’s loud voice still settles inside his ribs, inside his racing heart. He thought he was going to hit him, and Oikawa just falls to the ground in utter relief because he didn’t. Iwaizumi wouldn’t do that.

By now, his sweatshirt and joggers have been soaked all the way through. Oikawa pulls his knees up and wraps his arms around them, feeling his stomach constrict again as he lets the warm shower engulf him until he drifts off from reality.

☆☆☆

On the left side of the nightclub, there was a flight of stairs that led straight to the third floor. It was another entrance to Valhalla, and it only opened once the sunlight had been drained from the sky, so there would only be room for shadows and the blinding glares of neon signs.

Just like how the moon and the stars would cower behind thick layers of clouds, Oikawa could only wait inside this tiny windowless room in fear and resentment. It was more of a bunker, a bomb shelter, where he had to bend his long limbs to actually fit in. His perception of time gradually distorted, and Oikawa only knew it was nighttime whenever the door to his quarters was pulled open.

It was always opened by a cheerful young woman with delicately soft features and an olive complexion, clearly from an Indonesian cast. She had sad eyes, but she had a lot of spirit - a good enough reason for Kozlov’s men to allow her into doing menial tasks. She would bring in food to the yardbirds under Kozlov’s orders. Convenience store biscuits and canned coffee. She’d even sneak in a steamed meat bun with it from time to time. Oikawa told her to stop, as it might get her into trouble. She never listened, and tonight she apologized because she wasn’t able to get some extra food.

She gave him the usual biscuits and coffee. Oikawa didn’t care for the most part. He was starving and he crammed it all down in less than a minute.

Once he started to feel a bit of energy creep in, Oikawa was allowed to walk out of the dark space, relieved to have finally stretched his legs and arms. The lady who had fetched him said there would be important guests from Thailand tonight, and that all of the VIP rooms needed clearing.

Before the patrons could come through Valhalla’s infamous second entrance, the girls bound for night shifts would riddle around in an empty VIP room, carefully putting on their fake eyelashes and staining their lips with red gloss.

Oikawa was only there to make sure the rooms are spotless and the glassware clean. He was one of
the yardbirds, alongside two foreign workers from Myanmar who were tricked into working there through a fake recruitment agency, their passports and travel papers confiscated. There used to be four of them, but the last one made the mistake of stealing food from the pantry while he was asked to clean it. In the end, some asshole ratted him out, and the ladies gossiped how Kozlov’s gang members had beat him to death.

Oikawa never saw him again after that.

The padded walls and the metallic finish in each piece of decor correlated with the black leather furniture, and the wide window on the left gave them the luxury to view the nightclub’s dance floor down below, highlighting the night crowd's ignorance, completely oblivious on what was happening upstairs. As the muffled bass of the music thumped, red neon flashed on the skin of a young woman he had never seen before, as the room filled with chit-chats and droning sighs was suddenly silenced by a glass breaking.

Oikawa turned to find pieces of broken porcelain on the floor, a miserable white contrast against the pink tiles. The girl in question only stood in shock right next to it. She knelt down when she realized what she had done, her entire body trembling in horror as she tried to get the shards off the floor with her hands.

He rushed in quickly before she could cut herself.

The other girls stopped for a moment to gossip. That’s the new girl. She’s gonna get in trouble. I feel bad for her. But after a while, the whispers stop, and they went back in concealing their depression with cheap concealers and bright lipsticks. None of them bothered to help, afraid they might be swept in with the blame. Oikawa stared back down at the shards of white porcelain, discovering then that it was one the Chinese vases that decorated the room. It would be a good idea to clean it up before any of Kozlov’s men would find out. He knew from first-hand experience how Kozlov dealt with broken wine glasses and dirty floors.

“Ah, don’t touch it. Let me do it,” Oikawa warned her, gesturing the girl to stand up so her knees wouldn’t accidentally dig into the sharp bits. He could tell she was scared of him. With a smile this time, he adds, “And don’t worry. I won’t tell Kozlov.”

She smiled back shyly, grateful.

The worried girl watched as Oikawa swept the broken pieces with a counter duster, not realizing that Oikawa was watching her, too. Her glassy eyes stared down, on the verge of tears. She didn’t want to be here. No one wanted to be here. Her round face was framed by dark hair that seemed like it was carelessly chopped off, and under her straight fringes were dark brown eyes that showed none a sign of happiness. Despair was the only thing that made her eyes glisten.

The light makeup she wore made her lips fuller, eyes sharper, and her cheeks rosier, as if she was painted to look older.

Because she was young.

She was so, so young.

“What’s your name?” Oikawa asked out of curiosity as he swept the mess toward a dustpan, not forgetting to smile so as to not scare the girl. His voice was gentle, like he was talking to a child.


“That’s a cute name.” His eyes darted up to her standing figure, not bothering to stand himself as
she might get intimidated by his height. “How old are you, Hiromi-chan?”

She looked straight into his eyes before casting her gaze back to the ground.

“Fifteen.”

His eyes widened, a flicker of shock and pity crossing his features. Fifteen. He honestly didn’t expect that answer, initially thinking that she just looked young for her age. She was too young. What was she doing here? She was literally just a child, and possibly the youngest call girl in this godforsaken place. Oikawa isn’t sure what to say next, wanting to hug her more than anything.

“Oh, look at that! Is Oikawa-san making friends?”

The voice that came from behind exuded an animosity that streamed like acid - potent and caustic, enough to burn the surface of Oikawa’s skin. As soon as Kazuo Kozlov walked in, the ladies in the room all succumbed into a fearful silence, hiding their faces with their long black hair and feigned innocence. The fifteen-year-old hid instinctively behind Oikawa’s tall figure when he stands up. The door closes and Oikawa feels sweat surfacing from his palms. Kozlov looked at them both with interest, a vile glint bleeding from his eyes. When Kozlov raised a hand to touch Oikawa’s waist, he slapped him away before he could even set a finger on him, a glare replacing his previous smile.

"Don't touch me."

“My, my, how cold!” The other man mocked. He laughed boisterously, a sardonic grin gracing his awful face. “By the way, this is the ladies’ dressing room, you fuckwit. Ladyboys are in the other.”

Oikawa chewed the insides of his cheeks in an effort to remain silent, his knuckles turning white after clenching his fists too hard. He had thrown out the pieces of the broken vase already, making sure to get rid of the evidence. But just when Oikawa thought they were safe, Kozlov’s eyes sailed over to an empty bar table. He knew. This was why he came in. He must’ve heard it from outside. Oikawa gulps nervously, his muscles now frozen in place.

“I heard something break,” he announced, face twitching into narrow eyes and grim smiles. “Let’s make this quick, alright? Who broke my vase?” he asked, scanning the room and looking at everyone’s faces. Oikawa knew the girls would keep quiet, but even though there were no words coming out of their mouths, their eyes told a different story, because all of them looked at the young girl cowering behind him.

“I did,” Oikawa said too quickly and too boldly. He drew in a nervous breath, looking down apologetically to avoid Kozlov’s gaze. He gently pushed the girl behind him so she would step aside, glad that one of the ladies was brave enough to pull Hiromi away from them. They knew this wouldn’t end well. Oikawa knew it too. “I broke it. I’m—I’m really sorry, but I already—”

The slap was as loud a gunshot.

Oikawa staggered to the side. He had no time to brace for the impact. He didn’t move. He knew not to. It took a few seconds before he could feel the pulsing pain seep through, and just across his cheekbone was a small cut where Kozlov’s many gold rings had caught him. The neon-lit room fell silent. He was the center of attention now. It was fine. He was used to these measly acts of violence. Oikawa craned his neck up quietly, tempted to punch that fucking goatee off his face. He sees Kozlov’s face already crunched up in anger.

His heart raced, but his body could barely move an inch.
“It was from Beijing,” he told him, taking a step forward. His voice had this fake calmness to it, low and ominous. Oikawa grew more anxious. “Do you know how much it cost, Oikawa-san?”

Oikawa felt his stomach drop before he shook his head, eyes towards the ground. “No.”

Slowly, Kozlov walked a few steps past him, like he was pacing, waiting for a moment, pretending to suppress his anger. Then he stopped and turned around, reaching forward with his left hand and putting it on Oikawa’s shoulder from behind. Oikawa couldn’t push him away. Not this time.

“Oh, Oikawa-san…” he chanted with a low chuckle.

It was a strong blow.

Kozlov twirled him by the shoulder and crashed his fist into his cheek. Oikawa’s head snapped to the side, and his legs gave in as he fell to the ground. It fucking hurt like hell. His brain felt like it rattled inside his skull. Before he could recover, Kozlov grabbed Oikawa by his shirt and hauled him up. His vision clouded with black spots and blurred lights as he desperately tried to clear his head in order to fight back.

Oikawa couldn’t ward off when Kozlov dragged him out of the room. They reached the corridor, and his body could only follow like a puppet with no strings. It felt like swimming in a heavy sea, as his feet stumbled against the waves. The vividly lit hallway seemed like there was no end or beginning. Kozlov shouted obscenities at him, but he couldn’t make up the insults he was spitting at him at this point. Other than their heavy breathing and the stomps of their shoes, the room he was pushed into was as silent as a graveyard. Oikawa panted in short breaths, forced his eyes to open to see where he was taken. It was another lounge, a private room, but this one was smaller, darker, and reeked of methamphetamine and tobacco.

But what scared him the most was the fact that it wasn’t empty.

Red. It was the only color of the room, and it hails from an idle karaoke machine mounted on the opposite wall. Then there was black, and the two colors continued to fluctuate until his vision grasped the dark figures nestling behind the shadows. These obscurities started speaking when Kozlov shoved him in. Oikawa fell to the ground. Voices. He couldn’t understand them. They were talking and arguing and laughing in another language, and it made his heart thump nervously in dread.

He didn’t know what to expect. He didn’t know what they were saying.

“These are very important guests, Oikawa-san,” Kozlov warned him between clenched teeth. He knelt down on one knee and grabbed a fistful of his hair, forcing his neck to crane up and his eyes to look at the other men. The tallest among them stared at him in strange fascination. “This ugly bastard came all the way from Bangkok, yeah? He doesn’t like my girls here, but maybe he’ll like you.”

Oikawa’s eyes went big. His breath hitched, and his lips trembled. “W-What? No—What are you —” He shook his head frantically, his thoughts spiraling into a whirlpool of fear. “No, don’t do this, please—!”

Kozlov released his grip by driving Oikawa’s head down on the floor, to display the image of him bowing down. He stood up. “Hey, you speak Japanese?” he asked one of the men, who nodded in response. “Tell your boss Kwan that this one’s fresh and a little feisty. Could need some taming first. Seems like his type, yeah?”
Oikawa didn’t bother to listen anymore, his mind reeling in on the situation. He focuses more on his only course of action. Escape. He needed to escape.

“He’s all yours, boys.”

When Kozlov opened the door to leave, a strip of turquoise light seeped in, and Oikawa was able to see their faces clearly. These were the faces of people who were eminently aware of their power. They talked, loud and condescending, and they tried telling him something, ordering him to do something, but Oikawa couldn’t understand. He stayed low to the ground as their ringleader approached.

Sudkwan “Kwan” Sinlapachan had high shoulders, his build tall and heavy, and even with a summer suit his features were menacing. His eyes were pouches and small, his nose flat, his face square and firm. Oikawa wanted to remember him. Then, he was able to catch the glimmer on the side of Kwan’s head. It was a gold earring, pierced to an ear that has a triangular cut in the edges, like it was deliberately sheared off. Sudkwan was a fucking goliath, and there he left no external hints of weakness. With the red light, Oikawa concluded that he was the devil’s spawn.

Sudkwan’s large character loomed over him before Oikawa was yanked off his feet entirely, shoving him face down onto a table. It hit the side where Kozlov had punched him, as his cheeks dug into a cigarette stub that was still ablazed. But the heat was nothing compared to the sheer desperation welling up. The hands that held him down felt disgusting, and it pushed him to fight back. He couldn’t see where he was hitting, but Oikawa persisted, struggled, kicking and whipping his elbows backward into his assailant until his wrists were grabbed by the other two men.

“What the fuck off me!” Oikawa growled and panicked, twisting his entire body in an attempt to escape Sudkwan’s grip. Clawed hands pushed the back of his head down. “Let go, you fuck—!”

Then he felt a painful grip on his shoulder, the next brute quickly pulling him up to flip him over. At that moment, he expected he’d get hit by something, like a whiskey bottle, a knife, or another fist to his face. Instead, he felt a heavy weight of a stranger against his body and viscous fingers wrapping around his neck. He couldn’t breathe, and the hand tightened until Oikawa could only let out a choked whimper.

His hands were too preoccupied tearing off the restricting grip around his neck that he couldn’t even retaliate when they pinned him down firmly in place. He heard the click of a lighter. Someone spitting. Belt unbuckling. Keys jangling. Laughing.

They laughed and laughed and laughed.

Oikawa couldn’t breathe, raw fear sending his brain into a tailspin. He suffocated at the hand around his neck, suffocated at the cigarette smoke being blown at his face. The strong smell of nicotine and opium made him nauseous, and he would’ve thrown his insides out if it weren’t for that pressure in his throat. Grimey fingers roughly trodded beneath his clothes, over his skin coated in goosebumps. Padded with panic, Oikawa jolted back into action, scratching Sudkwan’s hand with his nails. He kicked and squirmed, but the other two shoved him back down and pushed his legs back, digging their knuckles into his arms, shoulders, legs, grubby fingers clutching his hair.

“Stop—! D-Don’t—!” Oikawa managed to choke out, hot tears spilling from his eyes. But his words only came out as strangled sobs, and they paid no heed to it as they ripped off his clothes. Please stop. Oikawa hoped this was all a cruel joke. Please let go. His eyes watered, his fading strength thwarting his attempts to break free.

There was a knock on the door.
“H-Help—!”
The knock continues.

“Oikawa.”
Another knock.

“I already wiped the floors.”

Knock. Knock.

“Don’t stay too long in there.”

Oikawa awakens to Iwaizumi’s voice.

“I have to go.”

Noise.

There’s so much noise.

It’s blocking the only sound he wants to hear.

Oikawa opens his eyes. He slowly cranes his head up, only to see the shower head blasting water down on him. It bars his vision, clogs his hearing, and he decides to remain motionless under its rains. The fluorescent tubes are off, and there’s only a thin line of light coming in from the four edges of the door. His mind reels from the nightmare back into reality. Suddenly, he feels a phantom pain bursting throughout the entirety of his body. It burns inside and out, and Oikawa finds that he’s unable to mentally disconnect from the nightmare completely.

The hot water is a balm to all his past aches, and his skin has already flustered into a bright pink despite having clothes on for a longer time.

He gasps out a choked sob. His throat burns as if lava’s streaming through it. If he’d had any leftovers in his stomach, he probably would’ve thrown it up again. Oikawa gulps back miserable tears, gulps the terrible burning lumps blocking his throat. His head swims in a haze he can’t escape from, and so he curls on the empty tub, keeps his eyes shut. It’s cold. Hot. Cold again.

There’s still stomach acid in the back of his throat, and the sour aftertaste still persists.

Oikawa angrily wipes his tears with the back of his hand before he finally sheds off the clothing that still stubbornly clung to his skin. The tub is empty, small pools of water escaping through the drain. It’s fine. He lets the water wash off the filth that eerily latches onto his body. He vigorously scrubs his entire body with a bath sponge, the roughest one, thinking it can remove that utterly disgusting feeling of being used and defiled for days on end. But no matter how much he scrubs, no matter how much skin he scrapes off, Oikawa can’t get rid it. In the back of his mind, he knows not even a thousand baths could sterilize him. Still, he doesn’t stop, not even when blood starts to seep through the scratches, not even when his already bruised skin disfigures into a hundred little cuts and abrasions.

It doesn’t matter. The water washes the blood off immediately.

His arms and legs look like red and white marble by the time he’s satisfied, the surface of his skin relentlessly peeled off - a testament of his desire to escape from the pain physically, because he won’t be able to mentally. Oikawa struggles to stand, a non-existent pain pulling him down. He’s
able to lift himself up by propping his arms onto the edges of the bathtub. He turns the water off and slides the glass panel to the side. Lights on, he notices the spotless tiles first and foremost. It smells like fabric softener, too.

His vision wanders across the room. There are clean towels and clothes on the counter, and a bottle of water next to pink pills. Oikawa picks it up, noticing a miniscule bismuth subsalicylate printed across the blister pack. Oikawa has no idea what it is, or what it’s for, but he trusts Iwaizumi wouldn’t leave him with something remotely dangerous.

When he opens the bathroom door, Iwaizumi is already gone.

☆ ☆ ☆

Noontide loses its temperate demeanor to a sudden barrage of rain, dewing the roads in thick layers of puddles, turning asphalt into mirrors. It’s nearly twelve o’clock when Iwaizumi drives past the skyscrapers veiled in the most delicate of mists, its paintwork and tempered glass windows fogging with a blanket of white. The city’s colors all fade within the downpour, with the exception of the umbrellas that warily held people under it, looking like they have the intention of swallowing them.

Iwaizumi gazes past the windshield wipers, swiping left and right to keep the heavy drops of rain from obscuring his view. He tightens his grip on the wheel.

Guilt manifests itself between his knuckles, and the effect has been continuous so far. He blinks and drains all the blue from his vision, drumming his fingers against the smooth leather of his steering wheel, acknowledging that awful feeling for leaving Oikawa in such a miserable state once again, and that he might have been too rough on him earlier. Oikawa had never shouted like that before. He simply caught him off guard, and Iwaizumi’s cavalier instincts stepped up at the wrong time.

Iwaizumi humbles into the silence and lets the peculiar tune of the rain hitting his windshield pervade for one solid minute until a mix of irritation and concern overrides it.

Oikawa needs to be checked. He needs to go the hospital, see a doctor. He might have an infection somewhere. Blood poisoning. Intracranial injuries. High risk of HIV. Amoebiasis. Stomach flu. It can be anything. Iwaizumi doesn’t want to think about these, but he knows Oikawa has been through a shitfest and there’s gotta be an inflammation hiding somewhere in there.

He turns the radio on, setting the volume to just above the level of the rain outside. There’s something about the slight crackle of the news that fits the bill, and in this age of information, knowing the slightest bits of current events somehow gets him off. It’s no wonder the Nightcall does very good at its job. Their intelligence analysts must be having the time of their lives.

“Police found Takemura Masayoshi, a war veteran and the current Chairman of the National Public Safety Commission, dead in his car, with multiple stab wounds at around 9:30 that same morning, after his driver called—”

It’s not a surprise, Iwaizumi thinks. That guy has been putting up anti-gang legislations his entire life, exposing corrupt officials linked to the yakuza like he gets high from it - which was worthless from the very start, because everyone knows that the yakuza goes hand in hand with political
corruption. Iwaizumi’s been in Aobajousai-kai’s grand scheme of things long enough to know that even the prime ministers have participated in sale scandals and accepted bribes at one point in their lives.

Of all people, Takemura Masayoshi, the ultranationalist who literally controls the National Police Agency, should know better. It’s never going to die, especially with how entrenched the yakuza has been in business and politics. Maybe he does have a point though. Because even if a traditional group like Aobajousai-kai bans dealing narcotics and violence against civilians, it’s up to them whether to do these unsavory activities or not, whether to follow the rules or not. There aren’t any rules, and that’s the problem. There aren’t any guidelines or books on how to operate these sort of groups.

The idea has been so romanticized that even a small body like Yaponskaya-kai thinks they’re the absolute shit.

The radio anchorman then strays off from Takemura’s accomplishments against criminal organizations and mentions what his killer had looked like. Crocodile head, he says with a hint of hesitation. Iwaizumi listens more intently. Ah, a rubber crocodile mask. That makes sense. He wonders if the Nightcall has something to do with it.

The guitar riffs of his ringtone soon trample over the radio broadcast.

“Hey, this is Katya from the Summit Circle Hotel. We’re a little short on staff, and there’ll be important guests staying with us tonight. Can you come over and help?”

This woman’s voice deters him for a second. “ Seriously? Now?” Iwaizumi replies, but the other line has already capitulated into a series of beeps.

The Nightcall is named like that for a reason, and Iwaizumi doesn’t need to check his watch or look outside to know that the sun has yet to set. Sure, it may look like it’s six o’clock in the evening at this moment, instead of a sunny twelve, but that’s not enough of a reason.

It’s too early. Why would the Nightcall contact him this soon? Why are they giving him time to spare? The premature call echoes in his mind. Iwaizumi’s brow only creases in confusion, but it doesn’t let it eat him.

He’ll figure it out sooner or later.

His gray eyes under gray clouds wander across the saturated path, taking in the sight of the Keyaki Plaza in the distance, wonderfully muted in a cool shade of blue. Iwaizumi drives down to the underground parking lot as soon as he reaches the building’s roundabout, temporarily shoving the Nightcall’s untimely request off his thoughts. It’s bad enough that he has to deal with boardroom executives and brokers under a rival gang’s payroll in order to prevent a scandal from gracing tomorrow’s papers.

This really isn’t his day.

☆ ☆ ☆

It takes four whole hours of covering up unfathomable accounts and bribing creditors before Iwaizumi can leave the boardroom.
And it takes another hour for Iwaizumi to drive to the Palm Plaza Hotel through rainy streets. Shrouded behind a thick fog and the acid rain, the once picturesque resort barely looks like a tropical paradise now, looking more like a saturated block of cement. The palm trees are fake, obviously, and so is the indoor beach. Iwaizumi supposes it’s still better than having to endure a flight to the tropics.

Your target is Taizo Janiev and a Chopard briefcase. 18th Floor. Leave no one alive. Failure is not an option. Leave briefcase at point DB-328.

Iwaizumi rolls his attention back to the note and frowns. Leave no one alive. Did he see that right? That came out a little too vague.

“Well, fuck me,” he whispers, the expletive slipping out in a harsh tone. He wonders why the notes are starting to sound more like threats rather than a requisition. But he forgets about the grim note when he sees a bump over the rubber mask, like there’s something inside. Iwaizumi pauses for a second.

Underneath the coyote mask is a pistol. Polymer frame. Double-stack. Semi-auto. It even has a quick-attach suppressor. Nightcall’s pretty generous today. He then spots a whole pack of ammo at the farthest corner.

Fifteen cartridges.

Oh, this is going to be a long night.

Iwaizumi had no time to change out of his suit, so he drives to his destination in it. He’s going to have to avoid bashing some heads later, but it appears he might have to evade this seemingly endless storm first. This suit is too good to have blood and mud all over it.

Unlike the Palm Plaza, the Summit Circle lacks that island fiesta feel. Its sharp contours and tall frame exhibit a more sophisticated mood, the kind of place one can find premium steaks and imported champagne, being in the center of the vibrant capital. It glows in an incandescent mask, like it’s behind a waterfall by the way the rain flows down its vertical facets.

And so, Iwaizumi customarily avoids the main entrance - where the high-definition cameras and security checks are. The rear side of the hotel is a service area. Iwaizumi spots two trucks and a van parked by the back entrance, along with some guys in bowties carrying heaps of flowers and trays of ready-to-bake pastries. He sneaks his way among the busybodies, picking up a box of corsages made out of ivory roses and yellow orchids. There’s probably a wedding reception tonight.

Iwaizumi carries two boxes atop each other, so that it can partially hide his face. He casually walks in with no trouble, and the security guard is too busy watching something on his phone to even pay attention to that gun-shaped bump tucked behind his trousers. He follows where the cargo is being carried to, discovering a service elevator on the second right of the hallway. When he finds himself alone, Iwaizumi drops the boxes and goes straight up to the 18th floor.

Normally, he’d need a key card to be able to reach any of the guest floors, so it’s a good thing he’s riding the employee’s lift that takes him anywhere in the hotel. That’s one less problem to worry about. He looks at his wristwatch.
Six-thirty.

Iwaizumi soon learns the entire floor has been booked by his target. No wonder they gave him a silencer and fifteen extra bullets.

There are two hallways on each side; east and west. Iwaizumi walks over to the right first. There’s a glassed painting on one end of the hall, and it reflects like a security mirror. From there, Iwaizumi sees two guys, wearing sunglasses indoors like fucking idiots. They’re guarding one door. Could be where Taizo Janiev is staying, or someone important. Strangely though, there aren’t any heavy guns involved, although he sees the slight shine along their hands, hinting at the possibility of brass knuckles. That’d be a bitch to fight against.

Then he takes a peek at the opposite wing. This one’s worse. Six armed men, pacing back and forth along the hallway. Clearly, they had some kind of casual marching pattern prepared. Iwaizumi decides to take on the two guys first. He figures it’d be best to eliminate them as fast and as quiet as possible.

Iwaizumi loosens his tie a bit, stretches his neck side to side. It’ll be hard to brawl in a suit, so he unbuttons his suit jacket to enable more movement.

The two guys are very distinct, and Iwaizumi is able to see their faces once he got close. One of them could perhaps be Chinese, with that stubby nose, firm jaw, face pitted with pockmarks. The other leans more as South Asian, might be Burmese, deep eyes, legs stumpy, and a slightly tawny complexion.

Iwaizumi decides to go for it and treads like he’s taking a walk in the park. He likes acting lost in these situations, like he’s some guy who got off on the wrong floor. Straight ahead, he spots a three-shelf room service cart next to the two men. Dirty dishes on top, ready for retrieval. Seems like someone has just finished their dinner in that room.

But no matter how dumb they look, these guys don’t seem to buy it. On his left, the Chinese takes a threatening step closer. And on his right, the other does the same. They’re way taller than him, and Iwazumi sees the brass knuckles in their hands. Right-handed. Seems he’s right about knuckles part.

“You are one of them, aren’t you?” the guy on his right boldly asks in accented Japanese, steeling into a brawler’s stance. Iwaizumi slowly backs up until he reaches a wall, giving him at least a hundred-eighty degree view of the current arena. Both of them ready their fists.

“Huh, you’re not as stupid as you look.” Iwaizumi pauses a beat to see their faces wrinkle in growing anger. Looks like they’ve been expecting visitors. He treads carefully, and thinks about the first rule when an enemy has brass knuckles - don’t get hit. Those things can hurt like a motherfucker, can paralyze muscles and break bones with one strong blow. “I only need to talk to Taizo Janiev, so if you guys can—”

One of the guys didn’t waste a second. He surges with his right, a slow lumbering swing with a huge fist on the end of a bulky arm, aiming directly at Iwaizumi’s head. It would’ve been a painful hit if it had landed, but it didn’t. Iwaizumi pushes the cart towards him to halt the swing dead. He catches the weakened jab, his torso twisting at a ninety-degree angle to fracture the wrist he’s grabbing. He leans a bit to the side to catch the other man’s fist that swings at him right after.

He knows better than to risk fist-fighting against them, so Iwaizumi makes use of his resources and pulls out his pistol from his belt.
Iwaizumi angles the Chinese man’s face with a downward sweep of the bottom of the gun’s grip, smashing the top of his head. He jams the gun into his mouth, breaks his teeth, then immediately pulls the trigger. The sound of a gunshot would have boggled his senses a bit, but the silencer muffles the noise so efficiently that it merely sounded like a defective firecracker.

The very second he sees blood spray out in a mist of dark red, the remaining man lunges toward Iwaizumi with his left hand, palms outstretched like claws. Iwaizumi crouches, shooting his armed hand up. The gun’s muzzle crashes into the man’s jaw, cracking the bone in that area. Then Iwaizumi lurches forward, yanking the wrist he’s clutching downward, letting his body rise up again. He twists it at its highest arc clockwise. Finally, when the man staggers in pain, Iwaizumi shoots him in the head, giving the beige carpet beneath them a bright new color.

When he barges in, Iwaizumi is only met by an empty hotel room.

And an alarm.

He mutters a curse before he hears heavy footsteps raining down. If this was a trap all along, Iwaizumi admits that it worked. The handgun he’s holding is a nine-millimeter semi-automatic - brand new and oiled. He hates guns, certain that his aim isn’t the best. It’d be such a waste not to use these, though.

Four more men walk in, hard eyes and tense faces. Iwaizumi sees all of them, and he feels as if they’ve all been standing there for a long time, even though it hasn’t been more than a second.

“You’re dead, asshole!”

Not much of an accent. Could be a Japanese citizen, Iwaizumi thinks needlessly. He doesn’t move, and figures he has about another second and a half to establish an attack. Two of them have automatics, and the two other have open-bolted uzis. The final fraction of a second passes, and Iwaizumi makes a decision and angles his arm straight to secure a good aim.

His bullets are able to find their respective targets before their footsteps halt, some did, some didn’t. Six quick shots. Recoil pounds his hand, as one guy that got shot in the collarbone wobbles forward, his flesh splitting morbibly as crimson trickles down. The man drops his own pistol so he can place his hands on the gushing wound as if it can stop it from drizzling down. His knees finally hit the floor, and he falls right in front of Iwaizumi’s two-toned leather oxfords. The bullets caught most of them high up, chest, shoulders, neck - where the fat arteries and veins are. The luxury suite lapses into a scarlet mess in just a few seconds, thick pools of blood spattering the sugar pine doors and the sandy carpets.

Iwaizumi breathes out a heavy sigh, thankful he has a gun on him. He wouldn’t stand a chance against them wielding only a baseball bat. All the thugs seemed to be heavily armed. Must be from Taizo Janiev’s fat pockets. He hears the people at the Customs and Tariff Bureau gets paid well. At least Iwaizumi knows where the taxpayer money’s going to.

With the thumb of his firing hand, he presses the small button just beside his pistol’s trigger. Iwaizumi pulls it out of the grip. Gun’s double-stacked, so there’s plenty of bullets left.

The next suite he barges into has as much personality as the rest of the hotel - symmetrical, gold and ivory furniture, au courant, floors blanketed in patterned coffee-colored carpets. But it isn’t the room decor Iwaizumi notices at first.

“What the fuck? How did you—!”
Taizo Janiev turns to him in fearful surprise, stumbling against his suitcases when as he sees Iwaizumi standing by the door.

The ringing alarm halts.

“You seem to be in a hurry,” Iwaizumi says, voice calm and steady. His eyes dart over to his unpacked luggage. He might’ve caught the bastard in the middle of packing. He doesn’t point the gun at him. Not just yet. The door closes behind him automatically. “Going somewhere?”

His target is a brisk little man, carrying an air of a well-heeled bachelor. He has a nose that is shaped like a parrot’s bill, hinting a quarter of his Azeri blood. Small head, flat at the top. His deeply-furrowed face is plastered with nothing but panic, hysterically crawling backwards as Iwaizumi approaches in small, slow steps.

“Where is it?” he asks ambiguously, arms swinging to further emphasize that he has a gun, an advantage. Iwaizumi licks his lips before looking at the window north of the room. He sees his own reflection before his eyes steady its focus outside. The night sky is still venting its anger outside, the storm that’s clouding over the city still harsh and loud.

“W-What are you—What are you talking about?” Janiev stutters, his entire body trembling at the slightest glare Iwaizumi shoots at him.

“It’d be stupid to withhold anything at this point,” Iwaizumi tells him. He has two targets. Kill and retrieve. And this guy isn’t meant for the latter. “Don’t make me repeat the question.”

“Piss off!”

In that second, Iwaizumi is able to catch how the fear quickly dispels from his eyes, replaced by a kind of impudence. His vision dashes back to the reflections on the large bay windows and his pupils dilate when he sees two figures coming from behind. Iwaizumi spins around—

“Heisuke! Roman! Kill this brat!”

The new company whips a hand forward, a spear-point knife going towards Iwaizumi’s eyes. He evades into a low stance not a moment too soon, then slams his right shoulder into the attacker, propelling him hard against a wall. Eastern European. This must be Roman, Iwaizumi guesses. He senses another movement in the corner of his eyes, then whips around to see another one running to him, his blade ready.

It takes Iwaizumi by surprise, and the man easily rips the handgun loose. The pistol drops and spins away from him. Iwaizumi lunges back across the opening, an uppercut surging from his crouched form. His opponent blocks it, then skillfully deters his next couple of hooks and jabs in quick strings of defensive combat. It shows the precision of a master in some weird form of martial arts, someone who knows precisely when to parry and how to disarm. His stance reminds him of someone.

He reminds him of himself - and he can’t help but feel impressed.

Eskrima isn’t an easy technique to learn.

While the other bloke is recovering on one side, Heisuke gracefully kicks his ass, as a quick hook hits Iwaizumi right at his cheekbone. Iwaizumi fails to outspeed his opponent, snapping his body back as the razor edge of a balisong knife slices the flesh across his stomach. He grunts at the stinging pain, blood staining his suit and the hand that he holds against the fresh wound.
Fuck. Suit’s ruined now.

Iwaizumi counterattacks and lashes a right foot below, catching Heisuke off guard. The man slips and falls hard on the floor, and Iwaizumi springs right back up, kicking him straight to the jaw with a heavy foot. Heisuke crashes the side of this head to the ground as Iwaizumi hears the clatter of his butterfly knife. His head snaps toward the sound and he extends a swift hand to get it. Its sharp edge is caught in the thin stripe of light coming from the windows when Iwaizumi lurches it into Heisuke’s neck, piercing straight through his carotid arteries.

The man starts to choke and gurgle in his own blood, yelling in hopelessness and pain, his hands lashing at anything he can grasp, particularly at his killer. Iwaizumi tries to forget the cut across his stomach, as blood sprays from Heisuke’s slit neck. His eyes are blinded by the red spatters of blood and he doesn’t notice that the other guy has lifted himself off the ground.

“I’ll fucking kill you!”

Iwaizumi only notices when a blunt pocket knife digs right into his left shoulder blade. It feels like nothing but a mere pressure on his back. The incoming pain barely registers in his brain when Iwaizumi’s first instinct is to turn and beat the fuck out of his stabber.

The last thug standing only stares at him in nothing but complete shock, eyes gawking at him like he’s some kind of cyborg. Iwaizumi stands up slowly, a deadly glare fixed on him. In fearful instinct, Roman swings a powerful fist and aims at Iwaizumi’s face. The blow shoots over Iwaizumi’s shoulder when he skids into a sideslip. Quickly, Iwaizumi takes advantage of the opening, and he huddles down to send a fist crashing into Roman’s lower abdomen.

As the bastard coils and buckles over in pain, Iwaizumi pounds a left hook into the man’s eye, followed by a hard knee below his chin, pummeling Roman back as he screams in agony. Unlike the guy who had a taste for Eskrima, this one’s an amateur, Iwaizumi can tell, so he’s not required to exert too much effort.

Iwaizumi pauses to get his breath and his balance back, aware that the pain from the deep cut on his back is starting to seep through.

“Your friend really gave me a hard time,” Iwaizumi mutters bitterly, turning his attention to the knife in his hands. He admits it’s the loveliest knife he has ever held. The bite handle is possibly made out of abalone, so it’s like a thousand different gems sparkling in the dark.

He spins and twiddles the exquisite butterfly knife between his fingers before stabbing it straight into the man’s jugular.

Red liquid begins to flow down to the blade until he decides to pull the knife out. The thug’s writhing body falls to the ground beneath a shower of blood bursting from his punctured veins, crimson splattering all over his nutcracker face until there are no vestiges of a human mask left. Beneath his green eyes, the adrenaline-infused glint fades. Then Iwaizumi stops, breathless, pure exhaustion welling inside his chest and traveling to all parts of his body.

Shit. He remembers now. Two in the east hallway. Six in the west. Iwaizumi should’ve known there were still two bastards left. That’s some shitty recon work, he has to admit. He drags a hand across his face to wipe the blood off, but it ends up spreading all over instead.

Iwaizumi forgets the sharp bolts of pain in his body and turns to his original target.

Janiev can only look back in horror, groveling on the ground. He soils himself, begging for mercy.
It’s too late for that now. For the second time, Iwaizumi asks.

“What is it?”

He flinches at the deep sound of Iwaizumi’s voice.

“This whole thing…” Janiev starts, tearful eyes looking down. His shoulders sag, the last ounce of hope leaving his body. Then he laughs, desiriously, but at the same time coated in self-pity. He’s laughing because he knows he’s done for, because he’s at certain death’s door. “It all went to shit because of those fucking diamonds.”

Iwaizumi freezes, face twisting in interest. “Diamonds?”

“My briefcase. It’s in Room 1804.”

“Wait,” he breathes out, baffled. This guy has something to do with diamonds, and it’s clear in by the way the guilt in his eyes gleams. But he sees Janiev reaching out to something on the floor, and as if on cue, the city lights illuminate the barrel of a pistol - Iwaizumi’s pistol. His eyes widen when he realizes what Janiev intends to do. Iwaizumi rushes towards him. “What do you know about the dia—!”

It barely makes a sound.

The suppressed pistol drops on the ground, sliding from Janiev’s limp hand. The bullet had slid past Janiev’s skin and muscles, bursting into the cranial bones of his skull. There’s a hole on the side of his head now. Ripped out skin. Bloody fluids leaking down lavishly from the hollowed wound. Reddish brown in the darkness. Just red under the sconce’s soft light. It’s silent, and the cool air whispers a soft hum after the quiet echoes of the gunshot mellow down.

“Fuck,” Iwaizumi mutters. What the fuck was that? He could’ve interrogated him, could’ve found out something about those goddamn diamonds he was asked to retrieve before. His fingers drag regretfully through his hair as he picks up the handgun from the dead man’s hands and heads toward the other room.

Just as Janiev had told him, there’s a lonely briefcase sitting among several wheeled suitcases.

What he failed to tell him though, was the fact that there’s a dead guy in Room 1804, blood dried all over his clothes and his face like brown paint. Strange. He doesn’t seem to look like one of Janiev’s henchmen, as the man is only donned in a plaid shirt, jeans, and sneakers. Iwaizumi scrutinizes the figure sprawled on the floor, his body like a barrel implanted with unsightly limbs.

But even with the pools of blood and an obviously botched corpse, there’s no smell of rotting flesh. He might still be alive. Iwaizumi’s assumption is proven true when the body flinches at the sound of the door closing, bloody lids forcing themselves to open.

“This can’t…” the man utters, saliva and blood oozing from his mouth. Does he know he’s even dying? Iwaizumi can barely see a face under all the bumps and bruises as he waits for what he has to say. “This—This… can’t be… happening—”

It’s too late for him, and Iwaizumi is honestly surprised he had stayed alive for that long, even with his organs bursting out from his cavities and his stomach ripped open. He stares at the man that’s soaked with ten shades of agony until he gasps out his last breath. The dead man lays on his back, motionless, barely three feet away from a brown briefcase.

Iwaizumi grabs onto the briefcase handles and places it on top of the bed. Could the diamonds be
inside? He doubts it. Only an idiot would store them in a flimsy briefcase. Iwaizumi shakes it a little, like a kid guessing what’s inside his birthday present. It just sounds like papers and files inside. His thumbs search for a way to open it.

It’s not locked.

Surely, the Nightcall won’t be able to tell that he opened it.

As expected, the briefcase contains zero diamonds. Iwaizumi finds an airline ticket to Qatar with Taizo Janiev’s name printed on it. Seems like he was planning to leave the country tonight. Iwaizumi continues to shuffle through files. Company statements. Checks. Itineraries. Russian oil company bonds. Collaterals written in a foreign language. It doesn’t look Cyrillic, so it couldn’t be Russian. Turkish, maybe? Iwaizumi slams the briefcase close, slightly disappointed.

He stands up, ready to walk out until he feels something fleshy beneath his feet. Iwaizumi thinks he might’ve stepped on an intestine if he hadn’t looked down.

Rooster mask.

In an instant, Iwaizumi snaps his attention back to the dead person next to the mountains of luggage. Was he a Nightcall operative? What was he sent here for? Was he also looking for the briefcase? Looking for Taizo Janiev? Iwaizumi decides to answer his own questions by searching the body. He quickly kneels by the hitman’s remains, frisking the corpse and checking every single pocket until he fishes out a small piece of paper from his jeans.

Iwaizumi recognizes the note. It’s the same as the ones he receives. But this is a little different. It has a different color, and he can’t tell if blood had seeped through the paper or if it’s just originally painted in maroon. He rolls it out from its crumpled state.

He holds his breath, eyes barely able to focus on the words written on the paper. Then he feels a certain kind of unease curl up inside him, clinging to his skin. It’s fear, he realizes soon after. Iwaizumi has never felt fear for a long time now - it’s the same fear when he lost his mother, the same fear when his father was murdered, the same fear when—

Iwaizumi reads the note again, making sure this isn’t just a wicked game he’s playing.

Out of anger, he crumples the piece of paper in his hands, a sudden desire to drive back to his condo as quickly as possible rising up in his chest. He needs to go home, go back to his place. He has to. His hand makes a fist with the note inside, clenching it until his fingernails cut into his flesh, the words still hanging like a raincloud above his peace of mind.

Your target is Oikawa Tooru. 18th Floor. Eliminate all witnesses. Leave target alive at point PSH-3FV7.

Chapter End Notes

mannnnnnnnn sorry this took so long, this is such a weak chapter
im not too happy with it but let me know if it sucks ass or nah ill fix mistakes tomorrow
next one shouldn't take long i think
thanks for the amazing comments!! that some sparknotes kinda shit ya'll what the fuck

playlist: 01 / 02

holla at yo boy here:
twitter & tumblr
Burnt Norton

Chapter Notes

Based on Hotline Miami and artworks by me. 
Burnt Norton by Lana Del Rey

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Humid air clings to his face, seasonably warm as the summer storm smolders his thoughts into an unsettling haze.

His urgent footsteps skid over the cracked cement of the underground parking garage, heavy legs rivaling the pounding of his chest and the thundering skies. He runs faster. A mix of sweat and rain runs down his face by the time he reaches the corner of the square field of pillars and sports cars. Iwaizumi slams a solid fist on the buttons to call the elevator. The lift eases down slowly, torturously, the indicator lighting up in orange as it descends. It arrives with a pretentious thud and with no passengers. Iwaizumi throws himself inside and pushes the button several times as if the doors would close faster.

Iwaizumi looks up.

Two, three, four—

With each floor he ascends to, he prays that his apartment isn’t empty, that it isn’t void of music and activity. He hopes that his curtains are still pulled open, hopes that the convenience store bento he had bought a day earlier has been eaten, and that there’s nothing left but crumbs inside that box of meringue horns.

Ten, eleven, twelve—

He wants to see his goddamn drugs in the trash where it’s been dumped, and then he’ll pretend to be mildly angry at the perpetrator.

Nineteen, twenty—

Iwaizumi’s thoughts riddle at every possibility, his heart thrashing against his ribs. He doesn’t know what to do, what to do with this gnawing feeling eating him up from the inside. His brain is trapped in speculations, going down a haunting passage he never thought was there.

Twenty-four—

Green eyes dreadfully adjust to the brightness of the elevator, vision glued to the floor indicator as he balls his hands into fists until his nails dig deep crescents into his palms. Drawing in a long breath, Iwaizumi holds it in with neither arrest nor movement, the sodden air stuck in his throat. Why does he live so high up? Why is this thing so fucking slow?

Thirty.

Iwaizumi runs.
The pain from his wounds is replaced by a strong stream of adrenaline as he sprints across the dimly-lit hallway, running like he’s being chased by a monster. His body crashes against his door when he reaches it, cursing when he had frantically punched in the wrong combination for his electronic door lock.

He wishes he could calm down.

He wishes his fucking hands would stop shaking so he can—

The door opens.

“Oikawa—!”

His heart stops.

The fluorescent lights violently glare at him from above, his eyes squinting at the sudden brightness. His home is never this bright. It illuminates every swelled up edge in his face with a white electric discharge, lighting up the austere corners of his bachelor pad that are still graciously intact - apart from his furniture’s arrangement.

It almost seems like his place was thrashed.

His glass coffee table is bare and polished, but skewed in a distasteful angle, away from the carpets. There’s a used bathrobe thrown over its armrests, as though someone didn’t want to put any effort in getting dressed. Some of the shelves are empty, and all the books and magazines he pretended to read for that last three years are stacked not so neatly on the floor. His sofa is pushed away, cushions piling up on it as it sits on the opposite side of the room along with the theater system and television set. Then, standing in the middle of the living room, he sees the old unmanned vacuum cleaner he had bought several years ago when he was still living in a rundown apartment in Arakawa.

By and by, a touch of russet brown streamlines into his vision, as if it’s a natural inclusion that had walked into his minimalistic dwellings. Iwaizumi breathes out the nervous air he’s been holding in, and sees cinnamon eyes staring back at him, big and wide and blinking with surprise.

Iwaizumi’s relief cries out for some kind of release, and he doesn’t know what to do with his hands, doesn’t know what to do with his arms that are urging to be wrapped around this person standing in front of him. His fingers fidget grudgingly, and his hands swipe the sweat off his brow just for the sake of movement, then awkwardly rubs the back of his neck, twitching and craving for something to hold.

He settles this strange stimulus by clutching the sides of his suit jacket as tight as he possibly can.

“You’re… back,” Oikawa says with a slightly confused intonation at the last word, tilting his head to the side, eyes narrowing at Iwaizumi’s urgent entrance.

Iwaizumi quickly spots a clock on the left wall, thin hands insisting that it’s still early into the night and that maybe Oikawa expected him to be home much much later. He sees Oikawa straighten his back as soon as the door closes by itself with a gentle thud.

“Iwa-chan,” Oikawa calls with worry, his raspy voice lost within the noise of the heavy rain that taps persistently against the windows. It’s coarse, and deeper than usual. Concern swiftly floods his pupils and creases the tiny surgical tapes over his sutured brow. “Is everything okay?”

Iwaizumi blinks, then nods dazedly, uselessly wondering if Oikawa’s concern is real or if he’s just
conditioned to, like a puppy - because why else would he bother to care. Even then, Iwaizumi
doesn’t open his mouth to speak, keeping it shut so he doesn’t end up blurring his thoughts out
loud, doesn’t end up saying that it’s good to hear Oikawa’s voice, and that he’s still here. He
swallows the fear that’s been building up in the back of his throat. It’s easier now that it’s
dissipating.

Because the Nightcall doesn’t know.

Because the omniscient, systematic tyrant of information has no idea where Oikawa Tooru is.

Shoulders sagging, Iwaizumi sinks into a state of ease. He lets out a sigh through his nostrils.
Somehow seeing Oikawa’s face brings more relief to him than his heart can hold, and finally he
can let his tense muscles relax.

Oikawa doesn’t look as sick as he was this morning, the natural bloom of rose gardens back
beneath his skin. He should be feeling better now, too, hopefully. Iwaizumi watches how Oikawa
casts his eyes down towards the floors, and how his dry mouth opens from a faint gasp when he
hears thunder rolling overhead, the sudden sound making him realize what he had been doing
before Iwaizumi came in.

The young man snaps his head back up.

“Iwa-chan, about this, uh, mess… I’m—!” he starts with panic, but the next couple of words die
down before they reach Iwaizumi’s ears. As Oikawa explains, his eyes dart around nervously, left
and right. Iwaizumi follows where the other’s looking and spots a long trail of an electric cord,
lingering all the way across the room. He frowns at it before walking past Oikawa. “W-Wait, what
are you—”

He unplugs the vacuum.

“You don’t work here,” Iwaizumi tells him sternly. He looks back at Oikawa with a deep scowl.
“That’s not what you’re here for.”

“What else can I do?” Oikawa barks back and jerks his shoulders. His bare footsteps are rebellious
and determined when he approaches Iwaizumi. He then rams the plug back in before staring right
into Iwaizumi’s green eyes. “I’m not allowed to do anything. I can’t just stare at the wall all day!”

Iwaizumi frowns before pulling the plug again, but this time he keeps it in his hands, coiling it
around itself. His feet take him back to the living room, deciding to store the vacuum away. He’s
too tired to raise his voice, his words lacking the weight of his usual authority;

“Just go to sleep. Get some rest.”

“You’re the one who should rest. You look horrible,” Oikawa says with a loud sigh, pointing out
the rugged suit drenched with rain and blood and sweat. He follows Iwaizumi back to the area he
had been cleaning and snatches the vacuum away from his grip. His gaze moves up to Iwaizumi’s
level and stays there. “This is the least that I can do for you.”

The eyes looking back at him are anchored and resolute, glowing with a warmth Iwaizumi thought
he’d never see again. Without a doubt, Oikawa’s stare is profoundly bewitching.

“Besides, I used to do all the cleaning back in the club—”

But the spell wears off quickly when he strings Oikawa’s words together.
“You’re not in that shithole anymore, alright?” Iwaizumi snaps at him, his voice now dusted with irritation. He feels his anger rising up again, and Iwaizumi clears his throat to barricade it when he sees Oikawa stops breathing. He angrily yanks the vacuum cleaner from Oikawa and stores it away once and for all.

His heavy sigh slices into the quiet room of jumbled furniture as he begins to push them back to their original positions.

Oikawa can only watch.

He nervously curls his fingers together, wanting to help even with the high risk of Iwaizumi shouting at him again. He had no idea he’d be here this early, as he usually gets home after midnight or just when the sun is about to rise. The loud squeak from the couch scratching against the floor snaps him out of his thoughts, but his gaze keeps concentrating on Iwaizumi’s slack gait, and the dark stains on the man’s already dark suit, wondering what it could be—

“Fuck—!”

By instinct, Oikawa dashes over to him. Iwaizumi hisses as he falls to his knees, creating a loud thud as it hits hard against the hardwood. Iwaizumi winces from the sudden jolt of pain that the adrenaline temporarily made him forget. His hands try to reach into his back, but could barely reach his shoulder blades where the stains were. Oikawa kneels down beside him, bending to see how Iwaizumi’s features contort into pain - something he had never seen before.

“Iwa-chan? W-What happened? Are you hurt?” Oikawa asks, frantic, lips trembling in worry. Iwaizumi’s in pain, and Oikawa can confirm this judging by his face alone. He places a hand on his shoulder, but the other man pushes it away.

“I’m fine,” he replies through gritted teeth.

Is he insane? He looks far from fine! Oikawa scrunches his brows and purses his lips before taking a deep breath. It’s an opportunity to do something for Iwaizumi, and he’s not going to let the chance pass.

“Take off your clothes.”

Iwaizumi stares at him with surprise that lasted only a second before it’s replaced by a frown. The intensity of his gaze doesn’t affect Oikawa, especially when his face is quickly losing its color. He hisses, holding back the pain. “It’s nothing—”

“No, it’s clearly not!” Oikawa yells back stubbornly. He clasps a handful of Iwaizumi’s suit. “Take that off and let me see.”

Iwaizumi mutters a curse under his breath before sighing in defeat. Slowly, he slides his suit back as Oikawa helps him pull the sleeves off his arms.

From the very start, Oikawa had always thought Iwaizumi was invincible, desensitized by his cruel hobbies and moral ambiguity. But the moment he sees blood seeping through his white shirt, covering the entire expanse of his back, he realizes that Iwaizumi is just the same as him, and that he bleeds just like everyone else. Oikawa realizes he feels pain, too, his movement slowing down substantially by the way he unbuttons his dress shirt.

Walking with his knees, Oikawa moves behind Iwaizumi to inspect the wound.

“Shit,” Oikawa breathes out in a whisper, barely able to look at the injury.
All that blood came from one source. The cut stretches thin and deep, a maddened red oozing out of it, staining and swelling the whole area. Oikawa is unable to look at it for too long and looks away in reflex, his breath hitching when the smell of copper hits his senses. This is way beyond his comfort zone.

Without the fabric to absorb the blood, thick beads of fresh crimson begin to spill out from the incision, glistening against Iwaizumi’s back as they roll down the muted earth colors of ink that masks his olive undertone. Squinting his eyes, Oikawa blurs his own vision, a stream of nausea fluttering his eyelids.

“I told you it’s nothing,” Iwaizumi grunts, panting. “You don’t have to—”

“Can’t you see it’s bleeding all over!?” Oikawa cries out in exasperation.

“Actually, no,” Iwaizumi says. “I can’t see it.”

Oikawa rolls his eyes and scoffs. How can he joke around with that open wound on his back? He attempts to take another look, and sees the lumpy flesh from the inside throb and bleed, the tattoos surrounding it making it stand out even more. Coincidentally, the cut is right at the center of a pouncing tiger’s head, blinding its eye, warranting some kind of auspiciousness that it failed to ward off bad luck, failed to protect its master against evil spirits.

His stomach threatens to throw up his dinner.

Because now, his mind is as clear as day, unlike that night when he first laid eyes on Iwaizumi. He’s not under heavy drugs, not under the fraudulent effects of adrenaline, not under anything. It’s different. At that time, Oikawa could barely register his assailter’s faces, could barely register how Iwaizumi disfigured them with very little effort. He heard screams, heard the spatter of blood, bones breaking. His senses were cloaked with hallucinogens and neon demons that the murderous scene didn’t frighten him at all.

The hazy memory of his salvation hits him with a sudden streak of valor somehow, a tinge of courage mixing in. Oikawa forces himself to stay upright and alert even with the morbid view.

“Bathroom,” Iwaizumi says with a labored breath, reluctantly accepting the help. He looks like he’s on the verge of passing out just like him, although from a different and more severe reason. “Get the medicine box from the bathroom.”

“O-Okay!”

Oikawa doesn’t waste a single second and runs, swinging open the cabinet where he remembers Iwaizumi getting some medical supplies from. He comes back with clean towels and a wooden box filled with stuff Oikawa has no idea what to do with. Only now, he notices Iwaizumi holding his bloody shirt over his stomach. Oikawa draws an anxious breath. Could it be another wound? His worry triples and he opens his mouth to ask, but Iwaizumi tactfully cuts him off.

“Put some pressure on it,” he orders.

“R-Right,—” Oikawa stutters. He pushes a towel onto the huge tear, looking like he’s suffocating the inked tiger imprinted on his skin. Both hands, he says after, despite the miserable sounds he’s making. Oikawa hesitates, naturally, but he steadies his breathing before taking a deep breath. He nods in earnest and complies.

This is the only time he can truly appreciate the artwork permanently imprinted over Iwaizumi’s skin.
On his back is an inked masterwork of a predator, a tiger - posture aggressive and furious, nostrils flaring, baring its sharp teeth. Its charcoal black stripes and orange pigment mingles beautifully against the thicket of bamboo, swirls of the wind filling in the spaces between. Oikawa thinks it fits Iwaizumi. Magnetic. Authoritative. Just like him, tigers are solitary warriors - a strength magnified by loneliness.

While Oikawa is trying to control the bleeding on his back, he hears Iwaizumi huff out a loud tired breath. It catches Oikawa’s attention, which Iwaizumi had intended to capture.

“Sorry,” he blurs out.

Oikawa stays silent at first, partially confused at the apology that’s so out of the blue. How can he say that when he’s basically bleeding to death? Still, Oikawa kind of wished he had seen his face when he said it.

He tilts his head. “Sorry for what?”

“This morning, I—” He stops abruptly, bracing himself. Oikawa understands somehow. Iwaizumi isn't exactly the type to admit his guilt. It’s strangely heartwarming. “I shouldn’t… I shouldn’t have —”

“It’s alright,” Oikawa cuts off, sparing Iwaizumi the trouble.

For someone who’s capable of mercilessly committing cruel deeds, it’s only natural for Iwaizumi to have trouble atoning for any crimes. Oikawa laughs softly, a self-deprecating accent twirling in with it.

“I’m kinda used to it.”

Iwaizumi stiffens. Oikawa’s words sting more than his wounds ever did, adding insult to the injury. Even then, the deep incision on his back tingles with pain as Oikawa releases the pressure from his hands.

“Should I clean it now?” Oikawa asks, uncertain. He gets light-headed when he sees the towel soaked in fresh blood. His eyes narrow to cripple his vision. He'd like to avoid looking at the wound if he can. “I think it stopped bleeding.”

Iwaizumi cranes his neck back at Oikawa. “You sure?”

“Um…” Oikawa gulps and takes a peek, opening one eye fully to inspect the open cut one last time. It’s still quite gross-looking. “Y-Yeah. I’m sure.”

“Clean it with saline.”

Without a word, Oikawa obediently follows Iwaizumi’s directions, irrigating the gash by slowly pouring an entire bottle of sodium chloride on his wound. It cascades down Iwaizumi’s back as the red mixes in with the saline solution, staining the beige carpet below them. He might’ve been a little excessive, but Oikawa figures it’s better than holding back. He pats his back dry with another towel and smears some antiseptic over the cut. Right after, he hears paper being ripped off when Iwaizumi tears a packet of sterile strips with his teeth.

“Use this,” Iwaizumi tells him, handing over the skin closure strips. “You know how to do it, right? Don’t stretch the tape. Start in the middle. No tension.”

Oikawa swallows nervously. Iwaizumi had taught him how to clean his wounds, how to reapply
gauzes and tapes and all that, but this is way too different. His fingers reflexively chafe over the
sutures above his brow, the one Iwaizumi stitched, covered with adhesive skin closures. Then he
focuses back on Iwaizumi’s wound that’s waiting to be sealed. Oikawa hesitantly takes the sterile
strips.

“Aren’t we supposed to stitch this?” Oikawa asks with a worried tone. “Like what you did with
mine?”

“The strips are enough,” Iwaizumi answers almost instantly, the impatience and roughness in his
voice watering down. His apple bobs when he swallows. “I only stitched you up so it wouldn’t
leave a scar. You already have too many.”

Oikawa draws in a sharp inhale, nearly forgetting how to breathe. He remembers Iwaizumi during
that night - how slack he was, how dead tired yet considerate his eyes were. With that thought in
mind, Oikawa bites his lip, placing a hand on his chest as though he’s trying to keep his heart from
bursting out of the seams.

His determination rekindles. Don’t fuck this up, Oikawa tells himself. In his mind, along with a
few strings of self-encouragement, he chants Iwaizumi’s instructions over and over. Oikawa peels
the skin closures from their cards, his shaky fingers grasping at the very end. Oikawa thinks he
should really get used to all the blood if he expects to coexist with this man. Now, the hard part. He
sticks the first strip on firmly, apposing the edges of the wound together. By the second strip, he
can’t see the fleshy insides anymore, so it’s less disgusting to look at. Oikawa easily closes the rest
of the incision with five more strips, adding in another two parallel on each side to fortify it. He
tapes a gauze over as a finishing touch.

“There,” Oikawa says, admiring his handiwork. He sighs in relief before remembering Iwaizumi’s
other wound. “What about that one? Is it another cut?” he asks, skidding over to his side this time.
Iwaizumi lets out a pained grunt, pressing his palm more firmly against his stomach.

“It’s fine. It’s not that deep,” Iwaizumi pauses tentatively, hinting a follow-up.

Seconds melt quickly. Oikawa waits without complaint as the other turns to look at him, finally,
the hazel in his eyes more lucid than it ever has been.

“Thanks,” Iwaizumi says simply, his voice and expression clear-cut and unambiguous.

Oikawa blinks back until his eyes are the size of the moon. He presses his lips together, barely able
contain his smile. He knows Iwaizumi’s situation is definitely not something to smile about, but it
feels so good to finally do something for him - and have him appreciate it.

He smiles at him anyway.

“N-No problem!” Oikawa says a little too enthusiastically. His smile is just as distinct as his voice.
He tucks a loose fringe behind his ear, dipping his head down before looking back up with a slight
warmth over his cheeks, slightly surprised that Iwaizumi is still staring at him. “Is there anything
else I can do?”

Iwaizumi shakes his head, lifting the bloody fabric off his stomach. Oikawa takes a quick peek at
it, noticing that this cut isn’t as deep as the other, Iwaizumi dubbing it as an oversized papercut. His
words didn’t really make him worry any less.

Despite Iwaizumi’s suggestion to finish the cleaning tomorrow, Oikawa persists by pushing the
furniture back and whipping his living room back into shape. He feels guilty leaving the area in
disarray, and he’s not the type of person to be able to wait until next morning. Iwaizumi is the other way around, flaunting a bad habit of pushing menial tasks back until he forgets them entirely, until his apartment descends back into looking like an aftermath of a typhoon. Then again, Iwaizumi does have an overabundance of bad habits that are hard to shake off.

The rainy night softens into a stillness by the time Iwaizumi is done wrapping up the rest of his wounds. He pops painkillers and antibiotics into his mouth, swallowing them dry, muttering a string of obscenities before he lifts himself off the ground and flops on the sofa.

Silence ticks by.

Oikawa steals a glance as he heads into the kitchen, but Iwaizumi doesn’t notice, gaze glued to a clock, counting the seconds.

What’s he thinking of? Oikawa can’t help but wonder, so he merely watches him in fascination. Then he sees Iwaizumi lean down, picking up a half-empty pack of Mevius cigarettes that’s hidden in the pockets of his dirty suit. He’s looking for a lighter now, and Oikawa turns his head over at the kitchen island where a weathered brass lighter sits. His anxiety doubles when Iwaizumi finds it. He picks it up to light a fire at the tip, sucking the air into his mouth and—

Oikawa slaps the cigarette from his hand.

He freezes in panic as soon as he realizes what he had done, looking down at the cigarette on the floor. Oikawa presses his lips tightly together, heart thumping nervously. It’s like his limbs have a mind of their own, moving on their own accord. He doesn’t stop there though, as he stomps on the barely lit cigarette with the hardened soles of his feet.

Iwaizumi glances down at his double-dead cigarette, then stares right back at Oikawa offendedly, mouth agape, eyes stretched wide.

Seconds pass. Oikawa maintains eye contact with the hardwood floor mainly because it doesn’t have scary eyes like Iwaizumi. He fumbles with the hem of his sweatshirt. Cautiously, he glances back up and catches Iwaizumi’s firm glare.

Iwaizumi squints his eyes, brows scrunched together.

“What the fuck was that for—”

Oikawa’s shoulders stiffen like a cat as soon as he speaks. He hopes Iwaizumi will be able to tell that he merely acted out of instinct. “Y-You shouldn’t smoke in here.” Oikawa stutters, words quick and quiet, as if he’s afraid Iwaizumi will bite his face off if he raises his voice any further.

Stepping back, Oikawa keeps his distance inherently, keeps his eyes away from Iwaizumi’s.

“I’ll smoke in the bathroom.”

Oikawa isn’t able to muster up a response as Iwaizumi treads away to lock himself in the shower.
He feels bad restricting Iwaizumi in his own home, especially when he’s injured like that, and perhaps he opted for a smoke to get his mind off the pain from his wounds. Looking down at his feet, Oikawa feels the guilt creeping in from the bottom of his feet.

The wooden floors have gone cold when Oikawa drops down, surrendering to his weak knees.

There’s a chill in his bones that never truly goes away - footfalls that still echo in his memory. The mild burning smell from the short-lived cigarette still permeates, and Oikawa feels his heart race as though he’s already suffocating from terrible amounts of it. Horrible memories shove themselves into his brain without invitation. It’s a simple scent - but it isn’t just that. It’s creeping hands and slurs, stubbles against the back of his neck, needles in his veins, cigarettes pushed onto his skin—

Oikawa squeezes his eyes shut, because he doesn’t want the imagery to continue. He wraps his arms around his knees, throwing his head back, feeling a headache incoming. Snap out of it.

Oikawa strains to take a deep breath. You’re fine. He inhales through his nose, pulling in as much air as he can. Slowly, he lets the air out like one giant sigh.

Snap out of it!

His vision refocuses towards the hands of a kitchen clock. It ticks loudly enough and so consistently that it’s almost therapeutic, allowing his intrusive thoughts to wander aimlessly out of his consciousness. Maybe that’s why Iwaizumi likes watching the time tick away.

Luckily, Oikawa brings himself back down to earth. It’s usually a make or break situation, so his mental resources can only either succeed or fail. Oikawa wonders when it’ll stop, because he’s going to completely lose his mind at some point.

Oikawa rubs his palms against his face, swallowing the lump in his throat. He lets himself ease in and leans back against the base of the kitchen island. The back of his head hits a ragged surface, and he turns his head slowly, eyes locking on a couple of hardbound books. He didn’t notice these before.

Out of curiosity, Oikawa twirls his body around to see what Iwaizumi have on these shelves.

He pulls out a large book, coated with a thick blanket of dust. Letting it sit on the floor with him, he reaches out his hand. Cobwebs cling to his fingers when he traces them against the cover of what seemed like breaded prawn fritters. He blinks at the big words printed on it with pure interest and reads it aloud. Cooking Made Simple. Oikawa blows the dust off, noticing that the pages had began to stick to each other due to poor storage. He flips through the pages cautiously, skimming through salt-grilled salmons and cabbage dumplings and slow-cooked pork belly—

“What are you doing?”

Oikawa jerks up in surprise, frantically putting the book back. He cranes his neck straight ahead and sees Iwaizumi’s scowl, looking out of place in his own comfortable home as he stands there holding the medicine box from earlier, a towel wrapped around his waist, tattoos menacingly writhing all over his upper body. Iwaizumi’s similarly vulturine shadow slides across the bright room when he approaches him.

Iwaizumi stops in front of him, then kneels down to his level.

“What-What is it?” Oikawa asks weakly, stumbling backward. His stomach settles uncomfortably as he feels scrutinizing green eyes directly on him.

Iwaizumi leans in wordlessly, his hand drifting towards his face. Oikawa’s cheeks heat up with a
mild red when his breath mingled with his, barely noticing the peppermint displacing the tobacco smell. Oikawa closes his eyes, afraid, holding his breath like his life depends on it—

“I can remove the sutures now.”

Oikawa snaps his eyes open. “Huh?”

“Your stitches,” Iwaizumi says simply. He extends the space between them by angling back, his features easing into a soft mask. Oikawa flinches when a thumb grazes over his eyebrow, carefully peeling off the tiny gauze. “I can remove them now.”

“Oh,” he chimes in dumbly, feeling his mouth dry. His shoulders hunch slightly when Iwaizumi reaches out for a sharp pair of scissors and tweezers. “Will it hurt?”

“Pain’s minimal,” Iwaizumi answers flatly. His fingers twirl around the steel instruments. “Ready?”

Oikawa gulps, then nods wordlessly. The man in front him bends forward, chin up, trying to get a better view. He starts cutting the sutures, tugging the knots carefully so he can snip it off. It stings a bit. The pain is mild, but Oikawa can’t help but mewl whenever he feels the twinge under his skin. He tries to get his mind off it, his eyes cruising in every direction until it stops at Iwaizumi’s exposed upper body, a gauze neatly covering his stomach area.

He has a lot of scars, Oikawa notes, but he assumes most of them are old by the way the keloids have formed, somehow ruining the seamless flow of ink all over his body. Intricate patterns and pigments are etched over his skin in a symmetrical motive, the edges rounded like petals of a peony flower, a design meant to intentionally leave the lower of his torso free from ink.

It’s not quite extreme, unlike the bodysuits of tattoos Oikawa has seen. Iwaizumi wears the ink like a bushido warrior, like light armor, designed to be concealed under clothing, as if to humbly mask his chivalry. Chrysanthemums and whirlpools dip down from his shoulders down to his breasts, contorted into shoulder armor, giving the effect of spaulders that can protect him in warfare. An odd mix of swirling clouds, bamboo, and other foliage shrouds his forearms like gauntlets, stopping right at the base of his palm.

Unlike the conspicuous tiger on his back, the trimmings of ink on his chest and arms are more cryptic, small elements one can only discern if they’re close enough - clouds and peonies and bamboo underscoring the central motif, bare skin only peeking through spaces as thin as pine needles.

Oikawa’s gaze strays to a weird creature etched across his bicep - a beast which seems like it’s made out of spare pieces of different animals. He thinks it might be an elephant, except it has two trunks. The creature’s body is stout and hairy, almost like a bear, and has a tail akin to an ox. It has claws too, similar to the tiger’s paws on his back.

Iwaizumi notices his curious brown eyes immediately.

“It’s a baku,” he says as he pulls a thin thread with a pair of tweezers, wondering if Oikawa had forgotten about those silly bedtime stories along with rest of his memories. Iwaizumi glances down again, catching Oikawa raise his eyebrows, lips pursing, obviously still confused. He adds, “Dream devourer.”

“Is that a good thing?”

Iwaizumi blinks at the question.
“It only eats nightmares.”

Verdant eyes trail over Oikawa’s pensive expression, the residing peace in his features only withdrawing when Iwaizumi tugs on one of the stitches a bit too hard. Oikawa whimpers at the slight discomfort. His pain tolerance is ridiculously low without the drugs, Iwaizumi learns.

“You don’t like the smell of cigarettes, do you?” Iwaizumi brings up the subject suddenly, using the tweezers to gently pull the last stitch out.

Oikawa is quiet for the first four seconds before nodding, breathing out the air he’s been holding. Iwaizumi thinks about apologizing for asking, and he’s about to until Oikawa speaks.

“It doesn’t really give me the most pleasant memories.”

Iwaizumi gulps down the lump of guilt that’s preventing him from saying anything. He only hums in acknowledgment, feeling utterly stupid for not realizing sooner. Unknowingly, Iwaizumi stops breathing through his mouth that might still have remnants of a cigarette, keeping them pursed and focused. He breathes through his nose instead.

“You should’ve told me.”

“You wouldn’t stop even if I told you.”

Iwaizumi retracts his hands, eyeing Oikawa from underneath his furrowed eyebrows.

“Are you sure about that?”

Oikawa stares back, incredulous, seemingly lost on how to respond. Instead, his lips curve into a small smile, a thankful spark visiting his features. The young man stiffens when Iwaizumi dabs a cotton soaked with antiseptic over the dried up wound, careful not to let any of the liquid roll past his eyebrow.

It healed up well, Iwaizumi thinks with comfort. No crusts of blood. No ugly scarring. His skin is beginning to writhe back to its original depth and texture, spreading over the wound as fast as moonflowers climbing between the gaps of garden trellises. Iwaizumi gazes absently towards his exposed neck and his fidgety hands. To his relief, his other bruises are starting to fade like the last flowers of spring, the purples and yellows and pinks sinking as the hue of his fair skin returns.

“You said you stitched yourself up before,” Oikawa says, filling the silence before it gets awkward. “What happened then?”

“Years ago,” Iwaizumi replies without hesitation this time. He cleans up, putting the stuff he used back into the medicine box. “Rottweiler mauled my arm.”

Iwaizumi watches how Oikawa’s gaze curiously travel to his arms. It’s hard to make out a scar with all the tattoos subtly hiding it. But it’s there. Iwaizumi extends his left forearm and shows it to Oikawa. With the right light, one could see odd shapes of overgrown scar tissue, braiding together with the ink.

With the wooden clack of the medicine box closing, Oikawa relaxes, tilting his head to the side as he folds his knees up to his chest.

“Guard dog?”

“Yeah,” Iwaizumi says, mirroring Oikawa and shifting into a more comfortable seating position.
“It’s harder to kill those things.”

Oikawa’s smile seems almost sarcastic, and Iwaizumi can only hold his gaze for a second before looking away.

“Let me guess, you prefer killing people?”

Iwaizumi can’t tell if he meant that as a joke.

It’s easier to kill people. Iwaizumi doesn’t deny that. Unlike animals, people can think. People have thoughts, free will, able to successfully abstain from evil, able to hold their primal instincts back. And yet, they overindulge in vices, brains wired for selfish addictions, willing to break the rules of human decency as long as enough money is involved. Oikawa should know firsthand, having been exposed to these types of assholes. Iwaizumi admits he may not stray too far from the flock, having a fucked up moral compass himself, so he’s just as susceptible to ethical disengagement as any other criminal.

But given the right circumstances, even a saint is able to kill a man.

“You know that, yet you’re still here,” Iwaizumi says, tense lines popping in between his brows. It’s quiet for a few seconds, until he hears thunder timidly rolling in the distance, the chill growing colder. He studies Oikawa before asking, wanting an honest answer, “Doesn’t it bother you?”

Oikawa shakes his head, eyes flickering up. He looks Iwaizumi straight in the eye.

“You are what you are,” Oikawa says, an honest smile gracing his lips. “I won’t change you for anything.”

☆ ☆ ☆

There are no lights in Iwaizumi’s home office - only the electronic blue wash of his computer monitor tracing the borders of his face. Iwaizumi never did replace the picture lights that came with the place, and he’s too tired to replace the bulb in his mechanical lamp when he found out it died yesterday. The glazed acoustic door provides enough light at times, since the other person in the house likes to keep each corner bright and white, turning on all the lights Iwaizumi never knew existed, as if he’s afraid he’ll get lost in the dark. Oikawa particularly likes the ceiling lamps above the kitchen island, three adjacent fixtures hanging overhead, saying they possessed a comfortable glow.

His work area, or his “safe zone” as Oikawa likes to call it, seems like an adequately-sized office at first glance, as it’s cordoned off in glass rather than walls. It’s the only place Oikawa hasn’t touched despite its transparency. Iwaizumi never verbally specified that it’s off-limits, but Oikawa is able to figure it out by himself on his second night. In spite of this, the tight area slightly resembles a garbage heap; crates of empty Heineken bottles lay by the foot of his desk, balanced by dirty glasses and empty beer cans on the surface. Several stacks of old newspapers have accumulated below the table- each of them kept for a reason.

It’s ten minutes before eight when Iwaizumi glances at the time on the top right clock on the screen, then back at the news article he had just finished reading. He closes the tab on his browser, while the other thirteen tabs adjust to fit within the slim horizontal space.
That job with Taizo Janiev had incited him to scour information about missing diamonds - about Oikawa, even more so, whose search has been suspended all of a sudden, having no leads to work with for the past two months. Whether or not the syndicate paid the police off, someone out there is determined to find Oikawa first, for reasons Iwaizumi is still trying to figure out. He opens up another news website, his eyes automatically focusing on a recent news article.

—of the Tokyo Customs arrested Toushirou Nathubhai and charged him for attempting to smuggle diamonds from Gujarat by swallowing them. Officials revealed that Nathubhai was a diamond broker funded by the smuggling cartel based in Tokyo, and confirmed that the diamond trade accounts were being used to finance yakuza groups. Nathubhai was intercepted after he alighted from an Emirates flight—

He stops, eyes slowing to a halt, his fingers curling around his mouth in thought. It’s one out of ten articles about smugglers - be it diamonds, gold bars, cocaine, or even migrants, it’s a trade that greases the wheels of the powerful to turn. Oftentimes, the people being used in these schemes are from the average household; people who need money, low-wage workers moonlighting as smugglers on the weekends to earn extra cash.

Iwaizumi’s brows pull down into a scowl, thoughts sinking into a deep abyss.

But would a university student be willing to take part in that sort of trade? Iwaizumi had read online write-ups about Oikawa one too many times, going so far as to visit his inactive social media pages that are filled with walls of prayers and encouraging messages from friends and people Oikawa himself wouldn’t be able to remember - people who think Oikawa is dead. There aren’t any messages from family members. Strange. No signs of financial trouble. No signs of conflict. No signs of the yakuza. He’s well-loved by the public nonetheless. But even among the seemingly innocent sea of photos Oikawa has online, Iwaizumi knows he’s an important chess piece somehow.

Oikawa has inveterate scars dancing all over his body, Iwaizumi remembers. It’s hard to miss - and quite hard to forget. He has a long diagonal stitch across his lower abdomen, forearms, some small ones on his back, and another across his knee. Most of them don’t seem to be surgical, but it’s possible that someone could’ve sewn the diamonds inside him. Abdominal cavity, perhaps. That’s not so far-fetched - especially after reading about a woman who had cocaine-filled condoms sewn inside her stomach.

It’s best to keep him close for a while.

Unsated, Iwaizumi turns the iMac off. His fingers drum absently on his desk, knee bouncing. He’s a contrast to the stillness of the cloudless night, a spiderweb of thoughts enthusing him with restless energy. He doubts something about these backdoor diamonds everyone is covertly searching for will appear on the internet. Secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places after all.

Iwaizumi steps out and puts on his mint letterman jacket.

“Where are you going?” Oikawa murmurs when Iwaizumi walks into the living room. He sits up from the chaise longue that’s adjacent to the full-length windows, reflecting his figure divinely when he cranes his neck up from his book. “You just came back.”

“I’m going out for a drink,” he says, sliding into his pair of Puma Suedes.
“Iwa-chan, wait—!”

Before Iwaizumi can latch on the doorknob, he feels a hand around his arm. Surprised by the contact, he spins as quickly as he would in a duel. His first instinct is to elbow whoever’s touching him, but thankfully, he’s able to deter the impulse. A counterattack in the form of big eyes and brown hair hits him off-guard.

“If you’re going out…” Oikawa starts, but stops just as he flashes his hesitant eyes at him. He still has this remarkably strong grip on Iwaizumi’s bicep. He looks down and purses his lips. “C-Can you buy these for me?”

His other hand reaches for a piece of paper from his pocket. Iwaizumi steals a glance at his expression before taking it. The paper’s all crumpled, and it appears to have been written on days ago. Oikawa must’ve been contemplating when to give it to him for a long time now.

Flour, mirin, potato starch, sesame oil—it’s a grocery list.

“I saw some recipe books in the kitchen.” Oikawa lets go, his hand now rubbing the back of his neck, looking at everything except for Iwaizumi. “It’s just—I can cook, or at least try to, if you want, but it’s okay if I’m not allowed to! I mean, I understand if you don’t—”

“Okay.”

Oikawa stares, mouth falling open at the unexpected answer.

“W-Wait, what?”

“I’ll buy them.” Iwaizumi says simply, pocketing the paper.

“No way! Really?” His eyes are too goddamn large and bright even during the night. A smile quickly finds its way across his face as Oikawa breathes out a joyful sigh.

He then flings himself forward, throwing his arms around Iwaizumi’s neck.

Iwaizumi freezes on the spot, shocked, but mostly unsure of what to do with the gesture. Despite the weight over his shoulders, the first thing he notices is his breath against his neck when he said thanks. It’s tempting to succumb to the touch - the arms over his shoulders, the warmth against his chest, the smell of rosemary-mint shampoo in his hair. Iwaizumi doesn’t fluster, doesn’t reciprocate, but he can’t believe that he almost did.

After a few seconds, Oikawa rushes to draw back.

“S-Sorry,” Oikawa says with a breathless laugh, moving like music. He then beams a rueful smile at him as Iwaizumi shifts into a more guarded expression. “Got a bit carried away.”

Iwaizumi remains motionless, finding it hard to rip his eyes off him.

Oikawa looks happy.

The smile that had spread over his features charmingly affirms his high cheekbones, emphasizing the dimples that rarely ever show up. It flows through him so obviously, warming his cheeks into a light pink. Iwaizumi thinks he should leave before he says something stupid and he decidedly heads to the door, ready to walk out—

“Oh, and make sure to buy some prawns! I want to try making tempura!”
Oikawa sounds too excited at the prospect of accidentally blowing his kitchen up, and Iwaizumi is no longer sure if letting him cook is a good idea.

☆ ☆ ☆

Tucked away behind a seemingly ordinary fire exit, a cocktail bar roars in full blast.

As one would expect from the name alone, The Rosé Club is a clandestine after-hour haven, sort of like a secret club, greatly contrasting the neon lights of the metropolitan nightclubs that fuel the hedonistic souls in the area. Vinyl tiles of black and white covered the ground, intentionally arranged to resemble a chessboard. Quilted leather couches run on both ends of the space, long booths lit up by intimate lighting - dim, incandescent, sophisticated, a velvety orange glow branching across the old-fashioned wood panels and imported fittings. It’s reminiscent of the Roaring Twenties, which is sadly a fitting nickname for an era filled with political unrest and riots.

An air of conflicting grunge trails the luxe speakeasy when Iwaizumi walks over to the u-shaped bar. The bartender behind notices him immediately, turning away from the shaker cabinets and mirror backsplash to greet him.

“Iwaizumi-san!” he hears him call, a familiar voice weaving together with a Billie Holiday song. “You don’t look so good. Hard day at work?”

Iwaizumi recognizes the young man, his face framed with dull hues of brown. Yahaba Shigeru has hair that matches with the hardwood surface of the wet bar, all fractions of his features round and buoyant.

“You could say that,” Iwaizumi says flatly. “Your boss inside?”

Yahaba nods, wiping a champagne flute dry with a rag.

“Hanamaki-san is in the back.”

It’s evident that this is Hanamaki’s least favorite office. Iwaizumi can tell by the way the papers stack carelessly on his desk, little odds and ends, storage boxes and unimportant trinkets littered all over the room. Hanamaki had deliberately forgotten to transform the small office into an eclectic space a long time ago, letting it fester into a disorganized eyesore.

Within the odd angles and ornate wooden brackets, Hanamaki greets him with a wide grin.

“There he is, the Hero of Seijou, looking awful as usual.”

Iwaizumi narrows his eyes with distaste, finding the moniker objectionable. “I’m not a hero.”


The jazz music muffles into an unrecognizable tune as soon as the door closes, the squeaks of an old armchair made out of Italian leather breaking the quiet air. Questions run through Iwaizumi’s mind, accompanied with an essential terror.

“What do you know about the diamonds?”
Hanamaki raises his eyebrows, an undertone of surprise crawling under his voice. “Ooh, you’re interested in it, too? I never would’ve thought.” He then shifts in his seat. “I don’t know much. But even if I did, it’s highly classified information.”

“Bullshit. There isn’t anything classified with you, goddamn whistleblower.”

“Well, that’s just rude,” Hanamaki says casually with a scoff, pretending to take offense. He begins to shuffle through the chaotic piles of paper on his table. “Let me tell you a thing or two about the Diamond Fund Loot.” His hand fishes out a newspaper page, evidently days-old. Iwaizumi watches as Hanamaki places his elbows at the edge of his desk, hands under his chin as if he’s waiting for a reaction. “I’m sure you’re well-acquainted with this guy—”

Deputy Director-General of the Customs and Tariff Bureau, Taizo Janiev, was found dead last night in his hotel room in the Summit Circle Hotel. It was suspected as suicide but further investigation has led the police to—

“He’s a rat,” Hanamaki confirms, antipathy settling between his frown lines. “But the kind that runs blindly in the sewers.” He sighs loudly, then continues. “He’s under Kyoudai-krug’s payroll. He told us about the diamonds, and it just so happened that he told all the other guys, too. Got a shit ton of money for it. Clever guy, trying to get out of the country with a bounty on his head.”

Iwaizumi looks up at the last sardonic comment, recalling the plane tickets he’d found in Taizo’s briefcase.

“Not so clever.”

Hanamaki hums in agreement. “Even Shiratorizawa-gumi wanted him dead, so that says something. My boss wanted him dead, too, but I think Irihata-san’s more into the poor guy’s oil bonds and collaterals. Worth millions.” He stops, pouring a glass of Perrier for Iwaizumi. “Thanks to Taizo, our guys were able to steal the diamonds from the largest Russian mafia on the planet.”

“Stole it?” Iwaizumi asks with disbelief, reaching for the glass. “I thought it was stolen from Aobajousai?”

Without a word, Hanamaki opens a drawer and takes out a manila envelope. Iwaizumi is surprised he found it so quickly even with the messy nest of paperwork.

“Skim through it.”

Iwaizumi does what he asks and slips the contents out of the yellow jacket. His vision strays to the body of the letter, expression unchanging. He purses his lips into a frown, leafing through the paragraphs until he finds the word he’s looking for.

Subject: Diamond Fund Loot

(1) In the first report of this incident, diamonds from the RFS Slava shipwreck were smuggled into the country by Mokoshka Bratva [to be sold to Kyoudai-krug] through a freighter.

(2) During transit to Fukuoka, members of an unknown group stole the crate containing the diamonds.
Iwaizumi stops reading, his breath speeding up. His eyes swim through the other pages to see if there are any hints regarding Oikawa’s participation. There isn’t any. How exactly did he end up in Yaponskaya-kai’s hands? How is he related to all of this? Why would the Nightcall think he’s with Taizo Janiev—

“I hope you’re well aware that we have our own little group of nosey Ruskies running about,” Hanamaki resumes, his eyes glancing up at Iwaizumi’s growing frustration.

“Kyoudai-krug and Yaponskaya-kai.”

“Yeah, those weird little yakuza hybrids that are trying way too hard to operate like Nekoma-kai,” he affirms, followed by a mocking laugh. “You probably wiped half of their population already. They started as these stupid gray groups, you know, non-yakuza gangsters who aren’t on police radar. It’s mostly because they operate on small numbers, loose connections. They’re not a big deal, but they’re making up for it with huge drug deals and smuggling migrants. It doesn’t help that both of them stemmed from one group, Mokoshka Bratva, and separated when they started operating here.”

Iwaizumi looks up from the papers. This is making his head hurt and he still doesn’t have any leads. He drinks until his glass is empty. “How did they lose the diamonds?”

“We don’t know,” Hanamaki answers honestly, shrugging his shoulders. He clicks his tongue in disappointment. “I heard the diamonds have been stolen over and over again. Everyone’s on the race to find them, but no one knows where the hell they are.”

“Not even the Nightcall.”

“Nope,” he says, pouring another glass for Iwaizumi. It’s not sparkling water this time. “Not even those guys. It’s been hit or miss ever since.”

Iwaizumi remembers the note he’d found on the dead operative, hating how clear they’ve written Oikawa’s name. He hates the feeling. He hates being out of the loop.

“Jobs are based on rumors now?”

“Afraid so. Nightcall’s been unstable lately.” He notes the confusion in Hanamaki’s features, watching how his eyes squint in thought before smiling at him. “At least you’re busy, yeah? Better than doing nothing at home.”

☆ ☆ ☆

It’s around ten-fifteen when Iwaizumi arrives home, pulling up in the parking garage.
His sedan is a reflective black, designed to be an obscure outline within the dark, the lights that shine over it masquerading as stars against a night sky. It matches the other high-end automobiles in the row. Iwaizumi brings its whirring to a stop, cutting off the engine. Pocketing his keys, Iwaizumi is about to hop off when his hand chafes over a piece of paper.

“Ah, fuck,” he mutters when he takes out Oikawa’s list, eyes grudgingly scan the items on the list.

Iwaizumi could easily go upstairs and tell Oikawa he had forgotten, and that he’ll buy them some other day. He could just do that, end the day, and get some rest. But instead, he pushes the key back into the ignition until the engine revs back into life. Glancing up at his rear-view mirror, Iwaizumi catches the hazel in his own reflection.

An uncertain sigh follows.

“What am I doing?”

He eases out of the narrow parking space, slowly rolling his Lexus out of the underground lot and back into the asphalt jungle. The stars are hiding behind the haze of black, overpowered by the city lights that acted as a transitory moonshine asking for permanence. Iwaizumi peers over on both sides of the streets, searching for open stores. All of the big-name supermarkets are already closed, with the exception of one tiny food mart in the corner of an empty residential street.

The headlights die down as he parks in front of a modest two-story building, the only the source of light being a storefront neon sign that says ‘Seoul Mart’ in Korean letters. The shopkeeper is more than happy to see a customer so late in the night, forcing his plump frame towards the entrance to greet Iwaizumi with a big smile.

It’s a pleasant wonderment that a grocery store as small as an average Ministop has everything he needed. Six minutes later, he’s able to procure all the items listed by Oikawa - except for one.

“Sorry, mister. Seafood’s already out of stock tonight,” the shopkeeper tells him when he sees Iwaizumi gloss over the empty seafood display. His hands clasp in apology, bowing down. “Next shipment’s tomorrow noon. I can reserve the items for you if you want.”

“No need,” he responds, eyes casting down dismally. “Thanks.”

Beep, beep, beep—the sound of the cash register’s scanner leads Iwaizumi into a mundane hypnosis. He watches the food items being scanned in a trance; mirin, four-hundred yen; seaweed sheets, three hundred yen; eggplants, two hundred. Within that brief moment, a ringing blasts from the pouches of his sea-green jacket. It pierces the comfortable silence of the Korean food mart. Iwaizumi closes his eyes, every muscle in his body tensing in alert.

He lets it ring two more times before picking up.

“Hey, this is Junichi. We’re having problems with the plumbing here in the Freyja Apartments. Can you take a quick look?”

Before returning to his sedan, Iwaizumi rushes to pay, carrying thin plastic bags to his car. He throws his purchases in the passenger seat, his mood shifting drastically. Iwaizumi turns the navigation system installed on his dashboard. The location the call had mentioned is far in the northeast, could take twenty minutes or more if he’s coming from the Palm Plaza Hotel.

“What’s with their awful timing lately?” Iwaizumi murmurs between clenched teeth as he drives, his brain that’s been thinking about Oikawa’s grocery list deviating into another catalog. He has some weapons in his car, just in case the Nightcall feels a little stingy tonight. There’s a spool of
monofilament fishing line in his glovebox, an ice pick, and that double-edged butterfly knife he got from his previous job. It’s good he had these inconspicuous weapons on hand, because when he arrives in the hotel’s locker room, he’d only been given a note and a coyote mask.

Your target is Ito Takahisa. Room 477. Moderate police presence in the vicinity. Discretion is of essence. Eliminate all witnesses. Failure is not an option.

The navigation system had miscalculated, because after ten minutes of driving, Iwaizumi is able to see the gleaming glass and metal panels of the Freyja Apartments. Just as the note had mentioned, the neighborhood is heavily guarded, upscale buildings and shopping centers distributed across several kilometers of the district. Guns aren’t suggested, as one can’t simply shoot a bullet among the mass of wealthy city dwellers and well-equipped police officers.

Iwaizumi doesn’t come up with a specific plan, simply letting the scene flow each time. He’s not much of a strategist. He had been harboring this come-what-may attitude since the very beginning, since he doesn’t really have much to lose. It’s okay if he dies. It’s okay if he ends up being shot at, stabbed, or bludgeoned to death. Iwaizumi isn’t afraid of dying.

But now, by some fucked up reason, he feels totally different.

Hiding his car in a subterranean parking lot, he wraps a bandage on each hand before grabbing the fishing line and butterfly knife. He glances quickly at the digital clock on his dashboard. Ten-fifty. Iwaizumi shoves the items on both jacket pockets and gets out of the vehicle.

It’s easy enough to enter the mid-rise apartment as the luxurious foyer remained unmanned even after Iwaizumi had entered the emergency staircase, taking advantage of the security camera’s blind spot. His target isn’t that high up, so he forgets the elevator altogether. He needed the exercise. Reaching the fourth floor, Iwaizumi calmly walks over to the aforementioned room. No cameras. No guards. Just a locked door.

He knocks, hoping Ito Takahisa will answer it.

No one comes at first. Iwaizumi knocks on the door with a rising persistence until he hears a thud from behind the wood. Several voices. He then reaches into his pockets and withdraws the fishing line, stretching it with both hands.

“Who’s there?”

Shit. He forgot to come up with something.

“This is, uh, Godzilla Plumbing Services.”

The clanging of locks being undone comes next. Did the fucking idiot really fell for that? He’s lucky tonight.

“What? I didn’t call for a—”

The man’s wide-eyed gasp is all the reaction Iwaizumi needed.

With incredible agility, he hits the idiot who had opened the door hard on the face. He hoops the fishing line around his neck as soon as he twirls a 180-degrees after the hook’s impact. His
calloused fists pull on the fishing line and strangle the man to the point of speechlessness. It’s a clever way for a noiseless kill. The nerves in the neck are effective in immobilizing the enemy, sending glitched messages to the nervous system, fucking up their motor skills, cutting off all speech and thought.

Iwaizumi keeps the strain as the man chokes helplessly; a suppressed guttural shriek bursting out of his mouth. He had no time to examine the man’s features. It twists in anguish, his legs giving out, but Iwaizumi keeps him up while he strangles him. The monofilament finally digs into his skin, blood spurting out in through the slits, limbs thrashing in a futile attempt to escape. The man’s body trembles wildly, like an epileptic going through a fit.

He lets the large man fall on his stomach. Fuck’s too heavy. With a knee on his back, Iwaizumi pulls the garrote once again, higher and harder until the death throes stop, until his neck is completely crushed, until his life is completely choked out of him.

The front door entrance becomes flooded with a bright red.

“Hey, Takuya, you bastard! Who’s at the door!”

Footsteps. Iwaizumi unties the bloody strangling strip and looks up.

Ito Takahisa threads his way into the hallway entrance, whose face twists into fear as soon as he sees the gruesome scene. Tight lips tremble, eyes wide and hollow, unable to let out a single word out of outright terror. Iwaizumi only arches his brow as dread overwhelms the fear-stricken man. His target shrieks hysterically and runs, and Iwaizumi pretends to let him escape.

He stands up, completely calm, focused.

Iwaizumi walks away from the first corpse and ventures further inside, noticing the smell of marijuana and the burning smell of freebase cocaine. Crazy night of mahjong. Smuggled coke from Macau. Expensive seafood. Bottles of imported champagne. The large mounted television is loud and messes up Iwaizumi’s concentration, flashing an ongoing baseball game.

It looks like the Rakuten Eagles are winning.

However, the living space is devoid of any humans, scurrying off to hide their asses as if that would just magically make Iwaizumi disappear. The mahjong table in the center of the room is abandoned, three walls of tiles left undrawn. There are three people playing. Iwaizumi crosses out the guy he killed.

Two more.

He hears a thud from the kitchen. Iwaizumi yanks a large crab claw from the feast before heading to the other room.

“Get away! Don’t come near me!”

Ito Takahisa is slightly short, middle-sized and liver-lipped. He might be half a foot shorter, thick and wide and strangely unproportional. His closely shaved head tops his hefty body, his shaking hands holding up a knife, sharp and serrated, the kind people use in cutting sourdough bread. He pointed it threateningly at Iwaizumi. Behind him is an electric cooktop, a large wok filled with boiling oil sitting on the surface. He must’ve caught Ito in the middle of his dinner preparations. It gets quieter when the baseball game outside temporarily halts with a commercial.

Iwaizumi stares at the knife. He sees the man raise it one inch forward. He sees his fingers shake,
adjusting his grip because his sweaty trembles kept moving the handle around. He notes the bright ceiling lights glint across the serrated steel.

He’s going to charge once Iwaizumi steps closer.

The terrified man in front of him looks anything but a fighter, but Iwaizumi reminds himself to be careful. Nothing weakens him faster than blood loss. Iwaizumi also takes note of his previous injuries. The stab wound on his back hasn’t healed well enough, making his left movements rigid. He tells himself not to use it too much. It’s almost funny, with him holding a crab claw in his right hand, his left ready to whip up the butterfly knife if he needs it.

“Look, look, listen, b-buddy,” Ito starts in between pants, and Iwaizumi listens to him, slightly amused. Here comes the bargaining talk. “I have friends—see, I have friends, good friends. I’m a Yaponskaya affiliate! I can—I can hit you up, give you money, cars—!”

Iwaizumi rolls his eyes.

“No thanks,” he replies, humoring him. He takes one step forward. “I don’t need—”

Ito drops the act and attacks before he can finish his sentence. He swings clumsily, blade on hand. Iwaizumi arches back, the knife hissing past his nose. He retaliates and flings his weight forward as soon as the swing dies. Shoulders square. He stops the violent maneuver and swatted the knife arm away. Fists tight around a crab claw, he jams the sharp end above the man’s collarbone.

He howls, not entirely from pain, but from shock.

No, the pain comes later.

The serrated knife falls on the floor. Ito stares at the claw stuck in his chest in complete horror, quivering hands raised on one angle, uncertain if he should pull it out. Iwaizumi would’ve aimed for the kidney. There aren’t any bones there. No chance of the weapon getting stuck. He cries, sobbing hysterically, sounding more like music in Iwaizumi’s ears. Please don’t kill me. Spare me. His pleas for mercy are soon drowned by the television, the crowd from the baseball game cheering, the sizzling oil by the stove singing with it.

But it’s interrupted by an incessant ringing. Iwaizumi turns to the source and spots an iPhone - possibly belonging to Ito. He takes it and presses the red circle to decline the call. Ito chokes, pressing his hands against where a crab claw is pierced through. Iwaizumi takes a minute to regulate his breathing, his heartbeat. Be calm. Take it easy. Curiously, he investigates the contents of the phone. It seems normal. Messages from investors. Stock exchange files. Various travel plans to the Southeast. Gallery filled with—

Iwaizumi freezes, lashes fluttering disbelievingly at the images on the tiny screen. His eyes knowingly cruise over back to Ito Takahisa’s pitiful figure, and he’s wheezing, trembling in violent spasms, holding on to dear life as he loses large amounts of blood. He wants to die already but it’s taking so long, the crustacean leg stuck in his throat not enough to kill him instantly. Iwaizumi looks back at the screen and recognizes him in one of the photos, along with two other men. He closes his eyes, unable to browse the images anymore. He couldn't bear it. His wrapped fingers shake in growing spite, dropping the phone and stepping on it like a cigarette.

“P-Please— ughk … H-Help… huugh … help—!”

In the dying man's terrified pupils of dry concrete, he can see humankind’s sins, woven inevitably in the whites. Iwaizumi's blood curdles at the sight of him. It makes him sick. His words, begging
for mercy, strain, crack, and Iwaizumi is attacked by the voices of temptation. It tells him to deliver a slow punishment. Capitulating to his musings, he stomps over to him and drives Ito's head down on the sizzling oil without an ounce of hesitation. Ito screams in agony, muffled as Iwaizumi sears his face until the room smells like a pig being fried. It is quickly replaced by a horrendous smell, not pleasant by any stretch, that even Iwaizumi cringes at the scent. Flesh burning. Skin melting. He pulls his frizzling face up from the wok then knocks his melting skull against the kitchen counters in response to his screams, three, four times. He unshackles his anger out with every strike. Ito loses consciousness, blood dripping fall over his face, skin peeling off from his flesh.

But he doesn’t stop there.

Iwaizumi bangs the man’s head on the marble several more times with the strength of both hands, until his eyes gouge out of the sockets, until he’s unable to see the images of the little girls he had violated.

Before Iwaizumi can deal the fatal blow, another man comes marching in, axe in hand. He’s the other guy in the videos. Iwaizumi had no time to wonder where he got the huge ass axe from, the laughable battle cry immediately catching his attention. He spins reflexively, angrily, and grabs the wok that has a morbid mix of seafood and Ito's skin.

With one quick swing, Iwaizumi straight out splashes the boiling oil towards the man.

It hits the third man directly on the face, and he screams - howling as the oil pushes up burn blisters on his skin, melting his flesh, bubbling fat spreading across the burned carnage that is his face. Pale green boils rise from underneath his skin, popping out into bits of pink flesh. His face sizzles and burns, the man’s shrieks blending in with the background noise as he fights the pain crazily like a man beset with bees.

Iwaizumi shuts him up with a hard blow of the wok to the head.

Picking up the knife from the floor, he decides to kill the burned man with it. He carves the serrated knife up his mouth, jagging it up to his nose before tugging it downward, hacking the jaw bones off.

To finish the job, Iwaizumi gets the dead man’s axe and walks over to his original target. His heart races. The prospect of killing this man in his own castle sends a thrill down his spine. Iwaizumi raises the axe above his head and swings it down with great strength, the hardwood acting as a chopping board.

A mutilated head rolls across the kitchen floor, oil and blood trailing as it detaches from the neck, neither flesh nor fleshless.

His jacket is yet again spattered with flecks of someone else’s blood, and he slips it off, tying it around his waist. Iwaizumi looks at his wrist, the gold watch telling him it’s already a few minutes past eleven. He finished quick. Iwaizumi breathes out a tired sigh and walks over to the sink, carelessly stepping on the pools of red, staining his already crimson sneakers. The water is cold when he rinses off the blood that had speckled on his face under the tap. It comes running down in red when he slides his bandaged hands under the faucet. Finding a packet of cigarettes by the kitchen counters, Iwaizumi loots a stick and clenches it between his teeth, his throat itching in anticipation as he lights it.

Because he hasn’t fucking smoked in days.

He sucks in the smoke deep into his lungs, draping him in a blanket of satisfaction. Ashes sprinkle
across the floors when he taps it off, mixing in with the thick puddles of blood. His eyes adjust against the gray mist, traveling down to eye the burnt shrimp littered on the ground. He blinks off the lingering blood from his vision before it disappears completely at a sudden realization.

Iwaizumi dashes towards the fridge on the other side of the room, hand clasping the handle tight when he pulls it open.

The fridge lights give prominence to the bags under his eyes.

Its insides aren’t as empty as Iwaizumi’s fridge back home, because at the bottom shelf he sees a large pack of frozen prawns.

“Jackpot.”

Despite losing his desire for seafood the moment he beheaded his target, Iwaizumi still takes the plastic container. He’s normally able to stomach such things, but there’s just something about a pedophile’s head swimming in a soup of blood and paella that flat-out kills his appetite. Leaving the corpses to rot, he heads out of the door.

It looks like Oikawa will be able to cook tempura tonight.

Chapter End Notes

ok i am loving all the feedback on this thank you!!! i'd like to know what u think!! would really appreciate it!
anyway sorry this took so long i briefly lost the appetite to write for it many subtle allusions to burnt norton by t.s eliot if u know about it (btw the club i mentioned is based on a speakeasy near my condo it’s really fucking cool, but like theres 100 speakeasies in my city idk)
im sleepy so ill proofread tomorrow lemme kno about typos and shiz

playlists: 01 / 02 / 03

i shitpost 99% and post 1% art but u can holla at yo boy here: twitter & tumblr
In the dusky lavender fog, the city below smudges into ghostly silhouettes.

With a yawn, Oikawa steers himself away from the windows as soon as the blur of the morning haze fades. His footsteps are not as quiet, not as demure, and he pays no heed to the loud creaks of the door when he steps out of the bedroom. Oikawa draws in a breath. He takes in that fresh mist that rolls over his head before his heart beats at the sight of Iwaizumi sitting still on a bar stool, eyes fixed on a laptop perched on top of black marble.

It’s been a week since Iwaizumi’s last job, and Oikawa wonders what could the root of his idleness be. He isn’t going out in the morning either, completely neglecting his day job simply because he can. While the dark circles beneath his eyes have slightly receded, it’s still obvious Iwaizumi hasn’t been getting enough sleep – and that he hasn’t been trying.

Oikawa finds the courage to initiate a morning greeting, to which Iwaizumi responded with a nod and a neutral, “hey.”

The June sunrise soon baptizes the space with a warmer mantle as Oikawa loiters in the kitchen longer than necessary, listening to the soft clicks of the laptop keyboard. He slips in a glance here and there, small talk of that lasts for seconds, scrutinizing the minuscule changes in Iwaizumi’s impassive expression until the sleepless man hops off his seat.

Wordlessly, Iwaizumi walks into the bathroom.

Oikawa knows his routine. He’ll brush his teeth, then dampens his hair. Then, he’ll wash his face with cold water to freshen up, because Oikawa keeps telling him he looks like a walking corpse every morning, and that he needs to sleep more.

The noises from the bathroom sink blend effortlessly into the silence as Oikawa gingerly takes a peek at the Iwaizumi’s laptop, all the while wondering why he isn’t allowed to use any of the electronics in the house. He’s not complaining, but it certainly helps ease his occasional gusts of boredom.

With all of the curtains drawn back, Oikawa can barely see the purposely dimmed laptop screen Iwaizumi had left wide open.

Suspected yakuza groups deny ordering executive’s murder in downtown Tokyo: High-profile entrepreneur, Ito Takahisa, was found dead in his apartment. Police confirmed that Ito was involved with organized crime and was previously accused of tax evasion and stock manipulation—
Oikawa gasps when a heavy hand pushes the laptop screen down, the loud smack causing him to jump on his feet. His eyes slowly gather up at Iwaizumi, one dubious brow raised and a scowl gracing his freshly washed face.

He expects some sort of lecture, but it doesn’t come.

“Aren’t you going to make breakfast?”

Oikawa blinks his wide eyes at him. He can’t decide whether to smile or frown at the question, unsure if it’s sarcasm seeping from his voice.

It feels as though Iwaizumi is allergic to home-cooked meals. He didn’t eat the tempura when he cooked it the first time, didn’t eat it the second time, or even the third. Oikawa thought Iwaizumi was looking forward to it, especially since he brought home a large pack of prawns – more than what Oikawa had expected. Then, on the night before, he made seafood stew, and Iwaizumi said he “wasn’t in the mood for stew” as an excuse, then opted to buy food downstairs to further add insult to the injury.

And so, Oikawa assumes that his cooking must have been terrible, or that Iwaizumi hates lending the kitchen to him, or maybe the guy just doesn’t like anything that comes out of his own kitchen, considering his obsession with convenience store bentos.

“There’s leftover rice from last night,” Iwaizumi adds when he didn’t get a response, sounding less than pleased. He goes back to his original position and reopens the laptop. “You can fry it if you want.”

Iwaizumi seems supportive enough, sure, but it’s only seven in the morning, and Oikawa really isn’t in the mood to put a lot of effort in making breakfast and have it ignored. It’s too early to feel so inadequate. But despite his very little passion, Oikawa rolls up his sleeves just a little past his wrists and trods around the galley and flat-panel cabinets to forage ingredients. Fried rice shouldn’t take too long to make. It’s easy, so it’s fine.

It’s fine if Iwaizumi doesn’t eat it.

Oikawa bites the insides of his cheeks when he cracks an egg into a bowl. He hits it too hard, breaking the yolk before it even comes out of it shell. He breathes out a huge sigh. Who’s he kidding? He can’t bear to see the disinterest lying beneath Iwaizumi’s perpetually stern mask anymore. Sure, he’s been buying all these groceries with no questions asked, but he’s yet to eat any of his cooking.

Is it strange that Oikawa simply yearns to be a worthwhile presence? He wants to show he’s not a burden, not just a freeloader exploiting Iwaizumi’s kindness – if he can call it that. How can Oikawa prove to be someone useful if Iwaizumi won’t let him?

With those thoughts plaguing him, Oikawa glares down on the broken egg yolk, brows scrunched together. He prepares breakfast in silence and glances down on the cookbook he had found under the counters. In the middle of the recipe’s backstory, Oikawa catches sight of a simple phrase. The best way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. He scoffs bitterly. What if he doesn’t eat your cooking in the first place? What now?

He refocuses and finds the next few steps. After deciding to mix in the soy sauce, sugar, and tablespoons of dashi into the mixture, Oikawa turns to grab the pepper from the spice rack—

His hand stops.
Wait, Iwaizumi doesn’t have a spice rack.

But he’s not imagining it. Beside the bowl of dying fruits are small pre-labeled containers queued neatly next to each other; oregano, thyme, paprika—shit, he doesn’t even know what most of these are. Oikawa remembers asking for assorted chili powder the day before, not an entire basket of herbs he doesn’t even know how to pronounce. Iwaizumi must have bought them yesterday. Because the last time he checked, the only spices they had in the house was salt and a tiny jar of sugar that had hardened into rocks due to neglect.

Oikawa’s subsequent smile is audibly obvious, and Iwaizumi notices in an instant.

Iwaizumi looks at him suspiciously. “What?”

“Nothing,” Oikawa tells him with a shrug, his mouth trying to rub off a grin while the other man settles for a frown. Eventually, Oikawa picks up the newly-bought white pepper from the rack.

Iwaizumi shoots another scowl at him, except now Oikawa can’t see it, turning his back on him to focus on his preparations.

His green eyes shift into a more hazel color against the pale violet light as they follow the other’s slender hands bustling along the countertops.

He likes to watch Oikawa cook. He doesn’t deny it. It’s calming, to a certain extent. Oikawa may have to constantly look at the recipe book, constantly double-checks if it’s a teaspoon of that or a tablespoon of this, afraid of making the slightest mistake, but he still maintains this serene gait that’s just soothing to watch.

With the way his hand moves, the way his body sings, cooking doesn’t seem like a chore to him.

It’s as if he enjoys it.

Because he knows what to do – knows exactly how to hold a kitchen knife, how high the fire should be, how to properly cut the carrots into thin strips. The book doesn’t tell him those things. Perhaps, within the cache of repressed memories, Oikawa already knew, and that the furrow between his brows is a display of confidence rather than stress.

Iwaizumi winces at his own thoughts. He moves from his post, stopping right next to Oikawa to grab a half-empty whiskey bottle from the cabinets so it would be more acceptable to find Oikawa’s quirks charming.

Before he can take one sip, Oikawa tugs the bottle down.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

He doesn’t answer the question, uncertain, because he’s used to doing whatever he wants. Oikawa’s sharp tone clouds his thought process. He’d seen that uptight face before, but it’s the first time it’s cast directly at Iwaizumi.

“It’s my kitchen,” Iwaizumi blurts out.

Oikawa tightens his jaw, seemingly displeased at Iwaizumi’s condescending response. Shit, maybe he should have worded that out better—

“Yeah, it is,” Oikawa affirms, sarcasm slowly filtering into his accent. “You have excellent observation skills, Iwa-chan.” He crosses his arms across his chest as Iwaizumi’s mouth curves
down. “I told you not to drink so early, didn’t I? Do you want to get a hangover in the middle of the day or what?”

Iwaizumi doesn’t realize his face turning sour by the second until Oikawa points it out, frowning further when the young man unapologetically snatches the bottle from his hand and stores it away. He reaches for his patience and sighs heavily, closing his eyes as Oikawa returns to the other side of the undermount sink.

He lets it go.

Perhaps he can parade his psychological dependence on alcohol somewhere else.

Turning his head to the side, he sees Oikawa glazing over the recipe book one last time before flicking the stove on, a smile lighting up his features. It’s nice to know Oikawa is getting a kick out of this.

Cooking isn’t something Iwaizumi liked doing, and he dreads the thought of having to cook everyday. It’s stressful. He’s often short on energy and long on hunger, so it’s much easier to buy food than to actually spend time making them. Kitchen maintenance and keeping his fridge full is the last of his priorities.

Until now.

Iwaizumi hears the oil sizzle into a loud chorus, sees a bit of smoke rising up towards the high ceiling before getting sucked in by the range hood. The onion’s hostility with the sesame oil and garlic causes a slight sting in his eyes, while Oikawa seems amazingly unaffected. Iwaizumi rubs his tearing eyes. This is why he hates using his fucking kitchen—

“O-Ow! Fuck—!”

Iwaizumi turns in familiar urgency as soon as he hears Oikawa yelp in pain. He flicks the stove off, the splattering oil dying down with the sudden loss of heat.

“Let me see that,” Iwaizumi demands, secretly relieved Oikawa didn’t drop anything this time. He sees Oikawa nursing the area below his wrist, but the young man refuses to let Iwaizumi see.

Turning his head away, Oikawa pushes his sleeves down to cover his oil burns. He forces a polite smile. “No, it’s—it’s okay. It’s just a little burn...”

Iwaizumi follows with a sigh, already accustomed to Oikawa’s uncooperative stance. Why is he always like this? Despite Oikawa’s protests, Iwaizumi roughly yanks the hand he’s been hiding and forces his sleeves up to his elbow.

Oikawa’s right.

The burns from the spattering oil are barely dots, mild, although extremely noticeable above his skin. It’s the kind that’s painless after mere seconds. Iwaizumi lets his gaze wander, snatching a breath when he sees the rest of Oikawa’s exposed skin.

Among old track marks and dulled out bruises are abrasions scraping up all over his forearm, like fields of roses set on fire by fiends. They only disappear under the fabric of his sleeves, implying the scratches might be all over his body. They look fresh. The rough texture and redness would made him think Oikawa got dragged by a car or had fallen off a hill with how uneven the layers of his skin are.
Iwaizumi’s grip slackens in apology, smothering the urge to raise his voice. He looks at Oikawa straight in the eye.

“Where are these from?” he demands in a lower voice, but still failing to disguise his unripe anger. Oikawa looks down to hide, his fringe falling over his eyes. He doesn’t answer. His arm limps in surrender. “I asked you a question—”

“I just scrubbed too hard in the bath,” Oikawa cuts off, voice unusually loud. He tears his arm away from the other’s grip. Looking away, Oikawa pushes his sleeves back down and mumbles, “It’s no big deal.”

Iwaizumi had meant to ask if he was alright, but his words came out all wrong again. His first instinct always dwells on anger, but luckily this time, his heart is able to withdraw them partially. He notices the other’s shrinking body language. Oikawa keeps himself tight – shoulders tense, arms crossed, narrow and frigid. He had learned long ago that Oikawa hates unwarranted contact, and that Oikawa actually prefers initiating it himself.

And so, Iwaizumi takes a half-step backward to let Oikawa breathe easy.

“Oikawa.”

When he looks up at the sound of his name, the kitchen flickers with a golden lilac wash, giving his eyes a soft, sunbaked rim.

“Don’t do this again,” he says, abandoning every aggressive tone in his language. “Okay?”

Oikawa turns his head to the side, his lips tilting into a petulant pout. He makes a childish yet dubious sound of agreement.

“Okay.”

Iwaizumi lets out a quiet, exasperated sigh as his gaze travels down to Oikawa’s hands riddled with oil burns. “Go and put some water on that.”

He purses his lips and nods more enthusiastically this time.

It’s quiet right after, and Iwaizumi bites off an angry grunt before walking away. For the second time this morning, Iwaizumi darts into the bathroom, hoping Oikawa’s mood would mitigate with his brief absence.

Meeting his reflection’s eyes in the mirror, Iwaizumi shoots a glare at himself. His stubble is starting to grow, and his red eyes truly look like they’re going to shrink back into its sockets. He then looks around his own bathroom curiously until he finds the section where Oikawa’s preferred essentials are – lavender and chamomile body wash, fluffy hand towels, an electric toothbrush, and his favorite rosemary shampoo in one corner. These are all pretty harmless.

He then looks up at the real culprit. Hanging just above is a shelf of bath sponges made out of rough materials – mostly mesh and loofah. Iwaizumi had bought a couple of new ones, specifically for Oikawa’s use. That might not have been a good idea. He takes all of it with one quick scoop and throws it in the trash.

Iwaizumi sighs. He drags a hand over his face and leans on the edge of the counter.

Although his past, or lack thereof, gives Oikawa this air of helplessness, Iwaizumi would have to be blind to overlook Oikawa’s bold speech and posture. It’s fair to say he’s not the kind to waste
his life away in self-neglect despite his bad luck, so why would he hurt himself? Is it because he’s at the mercy of his own fucked up memories and he doesn’t know how to deal with them? Does he do it out of pure frustration? Does he do it just to make himself feel better because it’s the only hurtful thing he has control over?

Iwaizumi draws in a deep breath, the weight of his own gaze opening the floodgates in his brain. Physical pain is pretty effective in blinding emotional trauma. After all, a great deal of his current ideologies has its roots in similar experiences.

By the time he’s done throwing out the liable bath accessories, Oikawa had already finished cooking breakfast.

"This one's for you," Oikawa says monotonously, pushing a bowl of his concoction towards Iwaizumi's side of the island. He doesn’t look as excited as the other times he had cooked for him – his expectations clearly at their lowest.

Iwaizumi, more heavily intent on the sullen expression shot in his direction, feels the need to look away. In front of him is a simple meal. Fried rice. Crudely made, but appetizing, sure. It’s the sort of economical disarray that’s still a more valuable substitute for his cheap store-bought meals.

Oikawa might have mistaken his scrutiny for dismissal, and it’s obvious in the young man’s face that an ugly seed has planted itself inside his stomach. He looks crushed for an instant until Iwaizumi reaches for his chopsticks.

He notes Oikawa's look of disbelief before he stuffs a pinch of the flavored rice into his mouth. The pickled gingers and the thick aroma of sesame oil grab his nose right away, until the earthy shiitake mushrooms rush in, mixing a wistful serenade of flavors inside his mouth. It has a distinct local taste, to the point where it seems just about delightfully nostalgic.

Iwaizumi takes another bite, painfully aware of Oikawa who is waiting for his reaction. His taste buds have been deprived of this kind of simple home-cooked delicacies for so long that he tends to avoid it, worried that he might step on a potential minefield that would melt his brain into a vulnerable puddle.

And it did.

Almost.

“How is it?” Oikawa chimes in, his voice dripping with anticipation. His eyes widen even more. “Do you like it?”

Iwaizumi looks up from his meal and sees Oikawa’s hopeful smile. He dwells on it for a second, thinks hard on what to say. Maybe he shouldn’t say anything. He’s never been good with compliments anyway.

“Uh, yeah,” he starts, still, then sucks in a nervous breath through his nose. “I like it.”

His face lights up with a smile, the warmest peach touching his cheeks. It’s a beautiful reaction, and Iwaizumi couldn’t tear his eyes away, truly relishing the scene as Oikawa’s excitement softens into contentment – a far better look on him than any of what Iwaizumi had seen in the past weeks.

Oikawa takes it as a cue to sit on an adjacent bar stool and pulls in his own bowl. Iwaizumi stays there, watching the way Oikawa happily wolfs down on his meal. Just a month ago Iwaizumi didn’t have anyone to cook for him, or anyone to stop him from taking in uppers and downers at the same time. He used to throw up from bad heroin and wallowed in guilt and self-hatred, because
he had no one to replace a shot with a cup of hot chocolate.

Silence falls between them while they eat, the warm air around them thickening as the seconds crawl by, losing themselves in their own musings.

With his cheeks still full, Oikawa discreetly glances at Iwaizumi, tilting his head a tad bit to the side. He swallows just as the other stuffs himself until his cheeks puff. Oikawa chuckles quietly. It’s amusing to watch him enjoy something as simple as fried rice, but somehow it saddens him at how unusual it is. Iwaizumi catches him staring, but Oikawa doesn’t look away like he always does.

Instead, he gives him a rosy little smile before finishing his own meal.

☆ ☆ ☆

Playing dead was a known survival strategy.

His brain had completely shut down when it realized escape was beyond the realms of possibility. By then, Oikawa had lost track of his surroundings, lost track of what was happening. It grew into an obscure nightmare after the first hour, and the pain – the pain simply became white noise.

The floor was painfully cold.

They left him there, naked, shriveled and curled up like a dying insect. Those people held no restraint, and the continuous torment sapped the remaining traces of his dignity. He could barely breathe. Time simply kept replaying on a loop, and he was trapped in this ruthless burning as though it would never end. Between wretched cries and begging them to stop, they moved him around like a ragdoll, nails dug into his skin, pushed cigarettes onto his palms, tapped its ashes into his eyes. Some of them did not have the guts to take him without an ounce of mercy, but instead indulged in the voyeuristic pleasures of seeing another man suffer. After Sudkwan, the second viciously took his time, and the third—

His thoughts collapsed at the sudden sound.

Footsteps. He heard footsteps.

Oikawa trembled in panic. Were they coming back?

The door opened, an ominous wave of red flooding the room. Footsteps stopped right in front of his face, the person’s shoes gleaming beneath the inhospitable lighting. Oikawa’s head rebounded against the floor when the same foot firmly stepped on his ear.

There were disappointed clicks from a tongue.

“Now, now, you know I don’t like it when things get messy, Oikawa-san,” Kozlov said in a disgustingly sweet voice, as if he were soothing a frightened animal. His eyes meandered all over the small room, then down on the floor of ashes and vomit and blood. Empty bottles. Cigarette stubs. Ripped clothes. It was a garbage dump and Oikawa was purposely left at the very core of it. “What’cha waiting for? Clean this shit up.”

Oikawa couldn’t speak, nor stand, even if he wanted to. Sudkwan had torn his clothes and twisted
it around his wrists, then his head, fitting tightly between his teeth to muffle his cries of protest. Kozlov untied them, but it wasn’t out of sympathy. Still, Oikawa relished the momentary relief and gasped out in labored breaths.

“Get your lazy ass off the floor! I need this fucking room clean!”

He winced at the loud voice as it echoed painfully through his ears. Oikawa’s beaten face was wet with tears when he looked up, eyes irritated to the point where he can barely recognize the person towering over his coiled figure. Oikawa tried to stand, tried to move even just a little bit—

“I… I can’t—”

I can’t move. Oikawa gasped in sobs. I can’t see. His lips trembled to form words, but his voice wouldn’t come out, each breath felt like barbed wires scratching from the insides of his throat. It hurts. Raw tears burst like water, his swollen eyes as red as the blood flowing between his legs—

“You look better like this, Oikawa-san, really. I should’ve had you fuck those sods on day one. Why, oh, why did I wait this long?” Kozlov grinned down on him in mock. He leaned closer, and when Oikawa tried to turn his head in disgust, Kozlov gripped his jaw with his hand.

Oikawa desperately wished he was gagged again.

“Say, I’ll make you a deal. You can go back to mopping the floors, but if I don’t see this place spotless I’ll throw your ass to the next batch of faggots that comes in. Do I make myself clear?” Kozlov balled a fist in his hair, bringing his face near his. Oikawa felt his rancid breath against his skin when he spoke. “Give me a hard fucking time and I’ll fuck you up ’til yer head spins, yeah?”

Oikawa would’ve believed him – would’ve believed he could avoid getting into this terrible situation again. But he knew it was a lie. Kozlov never compromised. He pretended to believe him anyway. His lashes brimmed heavy with fresh tears as he struggled to rise to his feet – even just on his knees would do. He restrained a strangled groan as his face twisted in pain, every movement punctuated with violence that had left his muscles aching for relief.

The little man opened his mouth again, but his next insult was cut short at the sound of footsteps. Oikawa had managed to stand on his weak knees, his right one throbbing in immense pain. His trembling hands reached for the rags Kozlov threw at him. There was a voice, a very familiar one, and it came bellowing throughout the room. He couldn’t see who it belonged to, as his eyes had blurred to the point of near blindness. He didn’t care to know. It didn’t matter.

Oikawa just listened. That was all he could do then.

“Yanagihara, you fucking quack! You’re late!” Oikawa heard Kozlov greet the other man, but he kept his head low, bruised hands mindlessly wiping the floors in hypnotizing circles. “What happened to that Vietnamese lady yesterday?”

The man who had just arrived heaved out a tired sigh before throwing himself on the leather couch behind Oikawa.

“Same old, same old. We went to dinner, drank a couple glasses of wine, drove to the pier a little after midnight. Highly disappointing. The cunts we got from Rankei Residences were better. Can you believe that shit? Goddamn bitch was a walking disease – drinking, smoking, meth, all that crap. That date was more expensive than her fucking spleens. Shouldn’t have bought so much wine —”
He stopped just as he laid eyes on Oikawa.

“Oh? What do we have here?” he chimed knowingly, his index finger shaking at his direction, an attempt to think of a name. His eyes narrowed at him, and he didn’t even flinch at the sight of his tortured body and weeping flesh. He was probably used to seeing things like this if his list of friends included Kazuo Kozlov. “I remember this kid. Hah, I remember! You kept him, huh? He’s not like the other boys working here?”

“Nah, but he’s gonna be a well-fucked cunt if that ladyboy fucker Sudkwan stays in town for a few more days,” Kozlov gloated, a perverse laugh following his vile tone. “That’s fine, though, ain’t it? Hundred percent of his take-home kicks back to me anyway.” He bent his knees into a squat to get to Oikawa’s level. “Rules of the game. Right, Oikawa-san? You loved getting fucked, don’t ya?”

Oikawa didn’t respond, mustering what was left of his energy into a stabbing glare.

“Answer me, you stupid little fuck.”

He flinched when Kozlov reached for his face with a rough hand, eliciting apathetic laughter from his friend across the cramped room. Kozlov grew angrier the quieter he became. Lashing at him with hate and fury, Oikawa’s head was forced up.

Sudden panic seized him by the throat when a tip of a pocket knife dug into the side of his neck. His breath hitched.

“Answer me!”

Hot blood seeped out—

Oikawa sends himself back to reality, his own cries jolting him awake.

He wheezes in strained gasps, the tightness in his chest causing him to quiver under his sheets. His lungs constrict painfully. He’s drowning – and he gasps for air as though he had just resurfaced from the bottom of the ocean.

Cold sweat rolls from his forehead as his hands instinctively clutches around his neck. Oikawa flings the blanket off him and frantically grasps parts of his body – the parts that used to hurt. He claws on his neck, his arms, his chest—

There’s nothing.

Opening his eyes, fully and clearly this time, he realizes he’s not in the middle of a storm being engulfed by the tumultuous sea.

Ticking clocks. Potted plants on the bedside table. Windows with a vibrant city view, but without the noise.

This is Iwaizumi’s bedroom.

But his dream needles at him, still, and it brings him back – into that red room where he had lied naked on his own shit, to that wretched feeling of humiliation and invading pain. The remnants of his nightmare cling to his skin like leeches.

They slither under his flesh, ripping and eating him from the inside.
He can still feel the cold floor. Hands. Rough hands, everywhere. Pushing him down. Pulling his hair. Every laugh, every grin, every slur that makes him feel less of a person plays inside his brain like a torturous song, running again and again.

His heart drums wildly, and his body thinks something is wrong – that something should be hurting. And his stupid brain persists at this belief. It doesn’t have any idea what to do, and it’s terrible. It’s terrible how his mind works. Oikawa thought he had completely erased that memory from his brain, but there it is, waltzing into his dreams like it only happened yesterday.

Why can’t he remember the good things? Unless there aren’t any, because Oikawa isn’t sure he’d want all of his memories back if that’s the case.

Failing to steady his heartbeat, Oikawa jumps off the bed and rushes to the kitchen in panic. It’s pitch black, but he’s been living there long enough to know where to run without bumping into furniture. He hurries to grab a large bottle of water from the fridge and drinks in huge swigs. Each gulp hurts, but it soothes his dry throat graciously, releasing the invisible pressure blocking his lungs like a stonewall.

The motion-sensor lights inside the fridge cast a cool blue glow on his face, lustered with tears he didn’t know he’s been shedding. He keeps it open for a minute, and breathes the chill in, finding the light and the frosty air relaxing as it breezes past his face.

Oikawa times his breathing rigorously – inhales through the nose and slow exhales through the mouth. He remembers how Iwaizumi taught him that the first time he broke down. Breathe in. Breathe out. He does this a couple of times, sipping in water in between. After a seemingly long minute, all the energy keeping him on his feet falters, and he finally lets himself drop down on the floor as he hides between the islands and counters. He doesn’t want Iwaizumi to see him as this pathetic huddled heap of anxiety again—

“Oikawa? You’re still awake?”

He flinches at the gruff voice. Slowly, he looks up at the young man hovering nearby.

Iwaizumi sees him – a dumb, startled ghost of misery curled up next to an open fridge and an empty one-liter bottle. Oikawa wipes his eyes in a hurry, hoping Iwaizumi won’t notice his puffed up eyes.

“I-I got thirsty,” he says as he scrambles to close the fridge door, barely able to hide a sniffle. He subconsciously stays in his place on the ground. “Sorry, did I wake you?”

Oikawa’s guilt of waking him up dissipates when Iwaizumi shakes his head.

“No.”

One out of three hanging pendant lights turns on. It’s an amber luminosity that amply thickens the stubborn but comely corners of Iwaizumi’s face, which bears no traces of sleep. Iwaizumi stoops down with bent knees until he can see the gleam of tears in the corners of Oikawa’s eyes.

“You’ve been crying,” Iwaizumi points out, his voice as hushed as the night.

Oikawa blinks back, eyes wide. His lips pursed with a shudder. Iwaizumi has too many problems of his own to deal with, and Oikawa doesn’t want to be one of them. For days, he’s been wanting to help ease his burdens, not add to them, but he can’t help but think he’s failing miserably at this simple goal.
He smothers a troubled sigh and plays it off with a throaty laugh.

“Just had a bad dream,” Oikawa says with a coerced smile, still able to feel the chaotic rattle in his heart. He absently puts a hand on his chest, thinking it would help his erratic breathing somehow. “It’s hard to go back to sleep now.”

There’s a soft squeak of the wooden floors when Iwaizumi abruptly stands up, causing Oikawa to flinch slightly. His gaze of umber and curiosity follows Iwaizumi’s figure as he ambles by the kitchen galley. Clanks of porcelain. Milk being poured. Idle footsteps. Within the feeble light, Oikawa watches his brute prose simmer into an earthly flair until the loud beeping noise from the microwave interrupts his thoughts.

“Here,” Iwaizumi offers, holding out a cup of warm milk. Oikawa blinks dumbly as his dark lashes flutter up, dry lips parting in confusion. Before he can say anything, Iwaizumi elaborates, “It’ll help you sleep.”

Oikawa promptly takes the mug from him with both hands, in the hopes that the other would at least sit next to him. Sure enough, Iwaizumi takes a place in front of Oikawa, legs crossed and green eyes poignant.

Normally, mundane things like warm milk are beneath Iwaizumi’s attention, so witnessing it firsthand is quite an experience.

“Does it work on you?” Oikawa asks.

“Hm,” he sings low. “Nothing really works on me.”

Oikawa makes an interested hum as his palms soak up the warmth of the porcelain mug. He takes a careful sip. It’s not too hot, as Iwaizumi might have intended, but it hits the spot. Oikawa sighs at the fond taste and pleasant feeling of steam against his skin, smoothing the weary lines and tired smiles on his face.

Iwaizumi must have noticed, resting his chin on his palm as he stares. He has this satisfied expression that’s only noticeable if one’s close enough. The draft moves aimlessly in the silence that falls after, Oikawa gently tipping the cup to sip from the rim, making as little noise as possible. His eyes shyly glance up at Iwaizumi, wondering when he gave up on trying to get a good night’s rest.

“Do you have nightmares too?” Oikawa asks.

His voice, weak but sharp-edged, fills the dead air.

“I do,” he admits without delay. It’s a little surprising. Iwaizumi has never been the one to open up so easily. “It never stopped, so I just grew tired at the prospect of sleep.”

Iwaizumi sounded equally broken, another victim of a cruel life. Oikawa stays silent. He can’t help but feel a spark of sadness, his head dipping down in regret. Maybe he shouldn’t have asked—

“You still dream about what happened?”

Tension weaves through his muscles, the question forcing another locked door to open within the alcoves of his brain. He keeps thinking of his nightmare, a hint of heartache painting itself all over Oikawa’s features.

“I… try not to think about it, I mean, I want to be able to, but—”
Oikawa pauses, the tail end of his sentence catching his tongue. His nightmare still lingers between his fingers, inside this hollow pit in his stomach – a deep sea of paralysis and dread squeezing into his hindbrain until an impotent anger flares his cheeks—

He doesn’t realize he had started crying until Iwaizumi moves a hand to wipe his tears.

Oikawa stares at him, eyes big, his entire body freezing on the spot, truly unprepared at the raw concern he never really expects from a brute like Iwaizumi. He feels his coarse thumb brush the corner of his eye, then over his cheekbones – as if he’s trying to hold Oikawa together at his seams.

Inhaling sharply, Oikawa’s heart quivers in his chest. It’s different this time. The soft touch threatens more tears to bite into his eyes, lashes spiking up with moisture once again. It’s kind of funny how his body seems to believe that crying is the only way to keep Iwaizumi’s rare instance of affection to continue.

“You look ugly when you cry,” Iwaizumi says, his voice uneven, looking like he has a million things to say but decided to besiege them all into an insult.

Oikawa’s eyes narrow, lips pressing into a pout. The mild surprise from his face falters. But the tears did stop, just as Iwaizumi pulls his hand away.

“Thanks for the compliment,” he says, sarcasm evident. The long fingers around the mug clench tight, bones prominent as he looks at the thick liquid inside. Despite Iwaizumi’s bad manners, Oikawa huffs a frail, thin laugh. “You know that’s not what you should say to someone who’s crying, Iwa-chan.”

“I just think that—”

Iwaizumi cuts himself off to think. He then eases back, his shoulders slumping and his face lining with a certain kind of sincerity. Finally, he clenches his jaw and draws in a heavy breath.

“I just think that you look better when you smile.”

Oikawa’s eyes snap open, wide and unblinking. The words oddly feel like an embrace. He nearly chokes on his disbelief, but scoffs a doubtful noise instead. This must be a hallucination, or at least some part of a lucid dream.

If it isn’t, then Iwaizumi’s lack of sleep must be really getting to him.

But he means it.

The clock perching atop the island stops at exactly two o’clock as Iwaizumi huffs out a silent sigh, wishing he hadn’t said what he said out loud. He’s clumsy with words. It was meant to be comforting, or it might have been just a desperate jab to lighten up Oikawa’s mood. The way Oikawa stares at him so suspiciously proves he probably shouldn’t make another attempt.

Iwaizumi knows better.

He doesn’t let Oikawa’s doe eyes fool him. He knows the guy is far from delicate, harboring a ferocity from days and days of mistreatment, and that he’s frustrated – at his missing memories, at his dreams that still haunt him even during the day.

There are moments, lasting for mere seconds, when the russet gleam in Oikawa’s eyes would just widen with fury – the sort of crimson glint one would see from a person who wants to see the world burn. Even then, there’s still an undeniable presence of despair, anger, and fears that run rife,
raw and capricious.

When his green eyes ride up, the weight of Oikawa’s unabashed gaze immediately dawns over him. He feels Oikawa drink in the sight of him, his shuddering breath escaping from a frail but grateful smile when he opens his mouth to speak—

“Thanks, Iwa-chan.”

His thoughts are too fast, that his heart isn’t able to keep up, knocking against his ribs. It’s almost surreal how Oikawa can trigger these things with just a few words and a simple curve of his lips. His eyes skirt upward. Even in the dim lights, he can pick out the warmth rising to his cheeks after finishing a cup of warm milk.

Iwaizumi reaches out again, his hand inching over to Oikawa’s face.

His fingers gently sail towards the side of his head, stopping midway for a second as if he’s asking for permission. Oikawa doesn’t say a word, doesn’t move, doesn’t even flinch—he just breathes. And so, Iwaizumi takes it as an invitation to brush Oikawa’s hair back from his forehead, his soft locks tickling his palms and the spaces between his fingers. His hair gleams in a dozen shades of cinnamon, greatly complementing his glazed irises and long lashes that flutter in response.

Iwaizumi had expected a fraction of latent apprehension to flourish, but there’s none of it. Oikawa allows himself to melt beneath his hands. His slow inhales and exhales swell his chest. He’s unmistakably relaxed. Soon enough, the long brown tufts of nutmeg soften Iwaizumi’s heavy thoughts as his conscious mind makes a decision.

He’s confident to say these words now—to let Oikawa know that he can confine himself to the safe horizons of his home—

“Nothing’s going to hurt you as long as I’m here.”

His promise comes in a soft whisper as he weaves his hands in brown wisps. Iwaizumi takes in Oikawa’s profile, takes in the stained canvas of creamy skin. He notices the young man’s weight shift down until the faint shadows of his haunting dreams lazily fade from his eyes.

Calloused fingers tingle with the urge to linger, believing that maybe a simple touch can make Oikawa’s worries vanish. He only wishes it could be that easy.

The seconds melt by, and Iwaizumi decidedly pulls his hand away, bringing the world screeching to a halt.

☆ ☆ ☆

Summer coils around his limbs like molten metal. In the blinding light of the sultry afternoon, the city is in perfect clarity. Skyscrapers reflecting ubiquitous white rays. Inhabitants mechanical and efficient. Sidewalks clean, but utterly soulless. Trees lining up the streets stand mute as the heat bounces off the pavement, giving an illusion of mirages when Iwaizumi’s stern footsteps stride over it.

Iwaizumi’s black suit is an unintentional act of defiance. He feels sweat under his sun-warmed clothes as he walks up the gray cemented stairs towards his office building. Unwilling to succumb
to the humid talons of the day, he rushes inside to get that blustery winter chill from the building’s air conditioning.

The Keyaki Plaza is a greenhouse disguised as an urban apparition. The curtain walls of solar reflective glass and granite floors adorn the main lobby into a gardener’s retreat, hiding the Tokyo Stock Exchange and the nerve center of Aobajousai-kai behind a facade of a quaint garden.

On the far corner is a high rise elevator which opens into Aobajousai’s private floor. It's a seemingly ordinary office, the only thing distinguishing it from others is its security – heavily armed men, attack dogs, remote-controlled doors and the like.

His office isn’t particularly special. Iwaizumi never found the ambition to personalize it with trinkets and personal items like Hanamaki does, finding the panoramic city view from the full-length windows to be enough of a decoration. When he sits down, the clock hands on his gilded watch points at exactly twelve-fifteen, and there’s already a newspaper left on his desk.

—the 30-year-old Zainichi Korean from Kobe has pleaded not guilty in court Tuesday to the charge of murdering the National Public Safety Commission chairman, Takemura Masayoshi. Court documents reveal the suspect, Park Yutaka, admits to having met Takemura in the late hours of—

“There you are, and here I thought our hero wouldn’t drop by again today.”

The voice he hears is steady and calm – the drawl at the end hinting that the owner might have been waiting for a while. Iwaizumi makes a disgusted noise, wanting to argue against the nickname.

“Matsukawa,” he greets instead, eyes drifting up to meet the singularly tall figure advancing towards him.

From his unexpressive and bureaucratic countenance, it’s safe to assume Matsukawa Issei is liable with Aobajousai’s trade and commerce. He’s a head higher than most people, with perpetually disinterested eyes and firm outlines, suited up in hues as dark as his short-cropped hair.

He shuffles and sinks into the armchair right at the corner of the room, next to potted palms and a rack of magazines for walk-in guests – not that Iwaizumi has any, but it’s there to impose that typical office archetype.

Iwaizumi is tempted to ask why he’s here, but lets Matsukawa settle in first. His visitor's dark eyes sweep all over the small space, surprised at the overall brightness of the room.

“Huh. You have the curtains drawn back for once,” he notes, thick brows raising in mild surprise. “Anyway, checked your bank account recently? The money you should be getting from the Nightcall has been transferred. Terribly sorry about that job last month. Irihata-san is more than willing to make amends.”

Right, that job in the nightclub. Iwaizumi casts his own questions aside for now. It doesn’t feel right to direct his confusion at Matsukawa, so he keeps quiet and eases himself on his seat.

“Oh, and were you the one who took out Ito Takahisa?” Matsukawa asks right after, but the certainty in his tone implies that he’s not exactly looking for an answer. “Because I want to say thanks. He was a pain in the ass. You know who he is, don’t you?”
Iwaizumi rubs his temples. He doesn’t really want to recall, but he’ll be lying if he said no.

“Okinawa Equity and Investments,” he says. “Runs investment portfolios for offshore drug money.”

Matsukawa draws a sharp sound of surprise, impressed, but his monotone voice says otherwise. “I didn’t expect you to know, honestly, but well done.” He jokingly claps his hands, earning him a frown from the other man. “He had been sabotaging our businesses for months, trying to overrule us in the market.” His face is quick to change, wrinkling in distaste before continuing. “I should mention that the police found child porn in his house.”

Iwaizumi winces, eager to get rid of the horrific images running through his mind uninvited. “Media skipped that part though.”

“Typical.”

He runs a hand through his hair. It’s a rare occurrence for Iwaizumi to research on his targets, fearing he might encounter something that’ll force him into a realm of self-condemnation. Mourning families. Orphaned kids. Crying mothers. It’s the type of thing that still tugs on his conscience even after several years in the trade.

But ever since Oikawa came, he finds it an obligation – as means to quench his thirst, hoping to discover some kind of clue on how a normal college kid could get into this bloody industry.

Pulling his chair closer to his desk, he opens his laptop to pull up an old news article. It doesn’t take too long to find it. Grudging curiosity bites at him. Iwaizumi spins the laptop around, his face stern as his vision moves determinedly at Matsukawa.

“Do you know anything about this guy?”

Matsukawa lazily hops off his seat to squint his eyes at the screen. He doesn’t need to read anything, his eyes lighting up in recognition as Oikawa’s image pops up.

“Ah, the missing student. He was all over the news after the Rankei Residences shooting. Hasn’t been found yet, though. Presumed dead by authorities.”

“Is he?” Iwaizumi asks just for the sake of it. Matsukawa is a close friend, and he trusts him – but trust only goes so far. It’s unreasonable to take risks at this time, especially when it comes to Oikawa’s safety that he so confidently promised he’d keep.

He seeps a breath through his teeth to think. “I don’t know, but it’s rumored that the guy might be a member of the yakuza. He went missing after Yaponskaya-kai fired on his apartment.” Folding his arms, he shrugs, posture slacking. “I highly doubt it, though. The kid’s super clean. Trust me, I’ve checked. No criminal records. Small town kid moved to the city for college. Varsity player. Guess he just got caught up in a gang war, as unfortunate as it sounds.”

Iwaizumi lets out the breath he’s been holding. He latches onto the information, absorbing everything Matsukawa has to offer. There’s nothing pertaining to the diamonds, or Oikawa being connected to it. He’d ask more about it, knowing Matsukawa can pull in every informant who so miraculously able to acquire fascinating intel, but he decides against it.

“Got another question,” Iwaizumi declares, desperate to change the subject before Matsukawa raises some suspicions on why he’s so interested in Oikawa.

“I came here to see how you’re doing, and I get interrogated in return.”
Iwaizumi blatantly ignores his remark. “Toushirou Nathubhai. You know him?”

“Broker from Kyoudai-krug,” Matsukawa answers still. “Got arrested for smuggling diamonds. Idiot swallowed them, so the airport security had to get it out of him, and let me tell you, it is not a good sight.”

“Is it possible to keep diamonds inside the body like that?”

Matsukawa slips in an interested hum, lifting his chin up to think. “Yeah, but not on long periods of time. They’ll work their way out naturally, and if they don’t, it’s gonna cause serious damage. Take Toushirou Nathubhai for example. Poor guy took the term ‘blood diamonds’ too literally.”

Iwaizumi blinks at him, unfazed.

“Inflamed hemorrhoids, rectal bleeding, blood diamonds—” Matsukawa explains, hoping that the short pause is enough time for Iwaizumi to understand the joke. “Get it?”

“Stop,” he says simply, closing his eyes and snorting in disgust. It’s not a very pleasant image to imagine. Lifting his gaze, he squints at Matsukawa who grins amusedly at his direction. “What if it’s sewn inside the abdominal cavity?”

“Then they’ll just shit the diamonds out—” Matsukawa shuffles his broad shoulders before sitting back down on the armchair. He crosses his legs and leisurely grabs an old magazine from the rack, his gaze dipping down on the models between the pages as he speaks. “Come on, you should know that. It’s a foreign object, and naturally the body will just try to eject it in any way it possibly can. It’s impossible to keep it inside a human body.”

Matsukawa arches an expressive eyebrow, snatching his attention back to Iwaizumi.

“You’re pretty interested in the diamonds,” he adds, his features pulling up with curiosity. It’s the same face he makes when he contacts his informants. “I’m guessing you might have a lead?”

Iwaizumi keeps his expression blank – a flat, impassive mask that shows none of the theories racing through his brain. He reclines in his chair and sighs. “No. It’s just that weird job last month —”

“Diamond Fund Loot,” Matsukawa cuts off with apparent interest. “I heard from Hanamaki. You know we’ll both tell you if we had more details, and I expect you’ll do the same. But sadly, I have none.”

Iwaizumi averts his eyes from the mire of his guilt. Unlike Matsukawa, he doesn’t have a lot of connections, or a web of informants, and his only lead can’t remember anything.

Craving to occupy his mind with something else, Iwaizumi reaches for an old bottle of whiskey he’s been hiding under his desk for months now. He gulps it down straight from the bottle, the sharp but mellow taste spicing his throat like cinnamon. It’s an almost fresh feeling.

“How are you guys faring?” Iwaizumi asks after sighing out the fumes, glancing at the other before swirling the nearly empty liquor bottle. He notes Matsukawa’s unusual restlessness. “Pretty shit, from what I’ve heard.”

With an exhausted sigh, Matsukawa runs a hand through his hair. “Well, we have no choice but to rely on the Nightcall. Takemura’s anti-gang ordinances and taxation laws are royally fucking things up,” he stops, eye sharpening. “Financially speaking.”
Iwaizumi takes a quick look at the morning paper left on his table, the headline printed in large bold letters. “Should be easier now that Chairman Takemura is dead,” he tells him. “He hated the yakuza.”

“Old man was too idealistic,” Matsukawa says rather wistfully, mouth twisted in an uncertain line. “But it’s too early to tell. We don’t know who the new guy will be. He might be worse than Takemura for all we know.”

“Isn’t it weird? What happened to him?”

“How so?”

“The killer got caught.” Iwaizumi purses his lips, uneasiness creeping into his bones. “Operatives don’t get caught by the authorities. If they did, the Nightcall would strip off their immunity, and they’ll get executed by another hitman before they hit court.”

The air hangs, motionless. Matsukawa raises his eyebrows as though he’s able to tell where Iwaizumi’s assumptions had gone.

“You think this Park Yutaka is an imposter?”

Iwaizumi shrugs. “He could be.”

“But the chairman had it coming,” he replies with faint empathy. “He made enemies with every single syndicate in the country, didn’t he?” His long fingers fish out a pack of cigarettes from the inner pockets of his suit. “I just hope they’ll replace the head of the National Police Agency while they’re at it. That guy’s such a fucking asshole—hey, mind if I smoke?”

Iwaizumi frowns, his brows pleating. It’d be bad if the smell sticks to his clothes, because then Oikawa might notice. He doesn’t feel like getting berated when he gets home in the evening.

“I mind,” he replies, sounding far too serious.

Matsukawa laughs at the unexpected response. He keeps the cigarette between his lips, but doesn’t light it. “That’s not how you treat someone who gave you an advanced birthday present worth four million yen.”

Iwaizumi scoffs.

“That’s hardly a gift,” he says, rolling his eyes. “I had to work for it. Your friend even gave me the wrong target.”

“That friend helps with a lot of things,” Matsukawa vouches with a grin. “The reason you’re still alive is with your immunity as an operative. Then again, I doubt anyone could take you on, even if you’re not one.”

He takes another swig of whiskey. “You guys benefit from the Nightcall more than I do.”

“It’s a smart business move,” he agrees. “No possibilities of prosecution and indemnities if our hired guns aren’t part of the organization.”

“And I’m not part of your pyramid so I don’t count, huh?”

Matsukawa offers a small smile before he continues in a low voice.

“Iwaizumi Hajime is just an average guy in the Tokyo Stock Exchange after all.”
Oikawa learns that all of the plants inside Iwaizumi’s apartment is not, in fact, fake.

Peace lilies and orchids that have been keeping him company at the bedside tables are alive and real – white flowers seeking to balance the room of dark walnut and black furniture. It has a mild sweet scent of dewy grass, light petals fanning widely in layers of ivory, delicately camouflaging within the white walls. Pale, tightly packed rosettes of various succulents are aimlessly littered around the house – aloe vera, jades, stonecrops – their pots nailed to the walls like framed artwork, serving more as modern decor than companions.

In the east, next to the chaise longue and bookshelves where he usually reads, are thriving bamboo palms, quietly taking over the area with its narrow leaves curving like butterfly wings. Later, Oikawa learns that the potted snake plant that lives by the entryway grows fairly well in dim light, and that Iwaizumi might’ve intentionally placed it there where there’s barely any sun. The hanging spider plants give off a splash of green against the monochromatic household, and they grew so beautifully, as if their homes aren’t white ceramic pots anchored with strings and nails.

Then, there’s a large plant adjacent to the workout bar where Iwaizumi does push-ups from time to time. After skimming through several plant nurseries, Oikawa discovers that it’s called a dumb cane – due to the fact that its poisonous leaves can fuck up a person’s mental capability to speak, making them sound dumb; hence the name. He makes sure to steer clear from it.

It’s lovely, Oikawa thinks. The plants almost give off this exquisite feeling, as though every breath he lets out is a gift for them. Evergreens, cornstalks, subtropical ferns – Oikawa thought they were all plastic all this time, and he only realized they’re not when Iwaizumi casually told him to water some of them this morning.

One would expect Iwaizumi’s indoor plant life to teeter between life and death, just like the man himself, but they’re all brilliantly green and vivid and alive. He had always believed that plants would end up looking like the people they live with, but that’s not the case with Iwaizumi—

He’s simply good at taking care of them, surprising as it may seem.

With a yawn, Oikawa finally stores the watering can under the sink and makes his way to the front door where a laundry bag of clean clothes sits. Iwaizumi had picked it up from the laundromat earlier. He folds them neatly in the living room, one by one, and only then he realizes he may have accidentally associated the smell of hydrogen peroxide with Iwaizumi.

Some of Iwaizumi’s clothes, even after numerous times in the washer, would always smell like chemicals. Oikawa holds out a letterman jacket with sleeves in pale seafoam green, the rest in accents of midnight black. He brings it up to his nose and closes his eyes, letting the thick fabric caress his cheeks.

He likes this one in particular.

It smells like Iwaizumi.

Curiously, Oikawa gives another one of his shirts a whiff. This one’s different. It’s blue, and despite its softer material, the scent of fabric softener sends a painful stream through the pathways of his brain, robbed of every trace of Iwaizumi’s scent.
Oikawa likes the jacket better.

He collects the folded clothes and puts it in the dressers.

Cleaning and cooking became his primary job. Iwaizumi never asked him to, or even verbally agreed to it. Iwaizumi doesn’t let him do the dishes, the laundry – or anything, really. But it keeps him active, keeps his mind occupied while his body moves to sustain itself. An hour later, Oikawa finishes the last task in his list of household chores and sinks into the couch.

He’s lit up by the warmth of the sun, mislaying its yellow fires over the city and through the windows. By and by, the skies are dyed in pomegranate pink and tangerine, a slight smear of obsidian slowly writhing itself up as the night threatens to deepen.

Oikawa almost makes it back to the bed before he stops, his vision catching the transparent home office on the left side of the bedroom. It’s the only room he’s not allowed to touch. Still, he inches towards the glass doors, his reverence stifled by his curiosity. Although Iwaizumi has never directly warned him never to go in, Oikawa can tell it’s the man’s private retreat, a place more personal than any of the areas in the pad.

It’s not a surprise that the room is a total disaster.

The bittersweet residue from the sunset skims through the dim room, painting the disarray with purples and pinks. Dusty curtains. Piles of old newspaper. Light fixtures that never turn on. Files, folders, stacked carelessly into mountains. Crumpled papers that had missed the trash bin lay on the ground. Crates of beer and empty cans. Wires intertwined like a pit of snakes—

Oikawa can barely see the beige carpet with all the garbage Iwaizumi had left on the floor. He can only blink in disbelief, lips parted in shock as he walks in. His brain wires back to life. Suddenly, his drowsiness is replaced by the ardent need to tidy it all up.

He doesn’t even know where to begin.

His instincts scream at him to get out, to leave the tragic mess alone. But he’s lured in by the notably old box beside the office chair, how it’s being kept close to where Iwaizumi usually sits, as though it’s a source of warmth. Oikawa kneels down. The torn newspaper articles and printed paragraphs poach the air with an old bookstore smell – chalky, but not quite unpleasant. Careful hands scuffle through the files, his brown eyes widening when he sees Iwaizumi’s name written on old hospital bills. It’s not the same person he calls Iwa-chan though.

Medical Center Tokyo
Patient Name: Iwaizumi Luisa
Control Number: 00894586544

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01/11/2013</td>
<td>Sterile Supplies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01/11/2013</td>
<td>Chemo IV Infusion 1HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01/11/2013</td>
<td>Chemo IV Infusion 1HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01/11/2013</td>
<td>Fosaprepitant Injection J1453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01/11/2013</td>
<td>Palonosetron HCL J2469</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It stops there. Oikawa has a feeling that it should be longer. The piece of paper feels awfully heavy in his hands somehow, even though it’s as light as a feather. Could it be his sister, his mother — his wife? He shakes his head, the line of his shoulders tensing. Oikawa tries to shuffle through the contents of the box to find the missing pages, to find more details, but the longer he pries, the more questions stumble inside his head.

September 13, 2013 — The body of an 18-year-old student was found: Kawamoto Aiichi, 18, was last seen along Totsukamachi in Shinjuku, Tokyo. The autopsy confirmed strangling and blunt force trauma as the cause of death. Police have identified the body as the daughter of retail tycoon, Kawamoto Ikebe, and was suspected —

Unease crawls down Oikawa’s spine, his lips pressing tight as fear clamored within him. Iwaizumi wouldn’t kill a young girl, would he? She must’ve been involved with something awful if he did. Oikawa bites his lip. It’s not good to jump to conclusions. He’s not like that. Iwa-chan would never —

He swallows a nervous gulp before turning over to the page stapled behind the clipping.

September 16, 2013 — Kawamoto Ikebe, 53, was killed by an intruder who entered his home in Shinjuku at 1:45 a.m. Kawamoto was allegedly involved in a political feud with several yakuza groups, resulting in the murder of his—

Strange. The bottom part is ripped off, and it wasn’t done very gently.

Oikawa puts the stapled articles back into the box.

The realization makes his blood run cold as Oikawa ruefully stares at the contents of the box. It feels like he had just picked a lock he never had the keys to, secrets he never had claims over. But why would he keep these? How could a man unimpaired by remorse hoard tokens of past tragedies? Oikawa expects to see something as sentimental as photographs torn at the seams, or as valuable as family heirlooms, but he can’t find any of those things.

He takes a deep breath, unwillingly taking in the tiny particles of dust in the air. The sun wanes as seconds melt by, sad strokes of plum cascading over his hands, his fingers itching with the urge to pick up another piece – another clipping from an old newspaper. This particular one is smaller than the others, smooth edges which mean it was cut more precisely. The contracted press designedly printed the sentences in minuscule size, almost to suggest its unimportance.

Arakawa, Tokyo — A local policeman was shot dead Saturday night when he was ambushed by a group of unidentified armed suspects along Ogubashi Street. The fatality was identified as Officer Iwaizumi Hiroto—

“What are you doing?”
Oikawa jerks up as he hears the voice echo, followed by the glass door slamming into the wall with a loud thud. He cranes his neck around, heart hammering. Iwaizumi hovers behind him, a terrifying shadow obscuring the already dark room.

“Iwa-chan! Sorry, I was just—!”

He stumbles clumsily in an attempt to stand up, toppling over a tall stack of folders with an accidentally misplaced elbow. The loud clatter of files and binders hitting the floor creates a deafening noise, that it made Oikawa squeeze his eyes shut. There’s a long pause as the air between them grows quiet. Oikawa has been holding his breath, his mind already in a state of panic, prepared for some kind of visceral outrage. He’s been caught red-handed snooping around in his office, and he knows for certain that Iwaizumi isn’t going to let this slide anymore—

“Be more careful, you dumbass.”

Oikawa snaps his eyes open.

Rather than pulsing anger, he’s met with a suited Iwaizumi kneeling to clear out the fallen debris of files and papers, his eyes of rosemary and thyme placid – free from any traces of fury. His rugged hands stop midway when his vision catches the storage box Oikawa has been shuffling through – the old carton where Iwaizumi’s carefully suspended grief are all condensed into. He’s quick to look away, but Oikawa is able to catch how the other’s features flicker into an oddity within that one second of vulnerability.

Iwaizumi seems he has his emotions collected at first glance, but the firm grip under his palms and the inherent tension over his shoulders prove otherwise. Frustration flares in his chest. Oikawa can’t help but feel he had just reopened a wound somehow.

“Sorry, let me do it,” Oikawa offers, bending his knees in haste. He gathers the jumbles of paper he had added to the mess that originally graced the room, head low from habit.

Iwaizumi lifts his chin, his face masked with false indifference. “I’ll do it.”

“No, it’s my fault.” Oikawa shakes his head. “I’ll clean it up—”

“What were you doing in here in the first place?” Iwaizumi cuts off, his questioning voice pitched low.

It feels like the firing squad’s in front of him, but he stays lined up. Oikawa leaps in with an immediate excuse. “I-I thought it’d be a good idea to clean it up. I mean, look at this place.” He pauses and looks back, catching a pair of hazel eyes. “Besides, Iwa-chan never said that I wasn’t allowed in here.”

“I told you not to touch my things,” Iwaizumi answers quickly, his words clipped but authoritative.

He watches the grim cloud washing over Iwaizumi’s face, but Oikawa doesn’t flinch. In stubborn defiance, he bites the insides of his cheeks and ignores the other’s warning, snatching a fallen binder under Iwaizumi’s hands before he can pick it up.

Iwaizumi inhales deeply through his nose.

“Just go away, Oikawa.”

His words lack the intimidating tone Oikawa is used to.
It sounded more like a plea.

But Oikawa chooses to respond with nothing but silence, and proceeds to stack the files neatly on the mounted shelves behind the desk. He can feel Iwaizumi studying him until he hears him sigh loudly in resignation, along with the noises of paper sheets scraping against each other when the man rises to his feet.

“You’re so fucking stubborn,” Iwaizumi chides through clenched teeth, scratching the side of his head in sheer agitation.

Six-twenty-five.

The clock perching atop the cluttered desk marks down the beginning of twilight, and Iwaizumi spares the sun’s descent a quick glance before shifting his attention back at the persistent figure who scrambles to tidy up the hopeless area of his locked up grievances.

Even in the midst of clutter, Iwaizumi knows where each specific object is placed. Last week’s finances, undone, threatening to fall on the edge of his desk. Used cups. Used bottles. Pages from tabloids and newspapers ripped off. Empty Heineken cans dispersed all over like soldiers in a battlefield – and it’s a disaster, truly, but it’s his disaster.

Iwaizumi knows about the years-old hospital bills that he never managed to pay, the newspaper clippings he had ripped out of pure rage. They’re all shoved inside random drawers and cardboard boxes – and oddly enough, Oikawa is still able to find them.

He glances at the other man for a short time, doe-eyed and skittish like a rabbit. Slowly, his range of view follows the sunstripes of asters and marigolds that lay over Oikawa’s figure. He blinks when he catches a red tint against his skin, a weird pattern coiling above his feet like shackles.

“Hey,” Iwaizumi calls out, his words directed at Oikawa’s feet. “What happened to your ankles?”

Oikawa hums inquisitively. He stops to take a peek to wherever Iwaizumi’s eyes focused on.

“Oh, it’s... the joggers I wore all day.” Oikawa stops a second too long, enough for Iwaizumi to notice how he hesitated to continue. “It was—It was a little short, so it’s tight around my ankles.”

Iwaizumi chokes back a frown, and closes his eyes instead. His chest heaves with a guilty sigh. He walks towards the busybody and takes a firm hold around Oikawa’s arm.

“Leave the mess,” he says, one hand taking a bundle of folders from Oikawa’s arms. He throws it carelessly on one corner, further emphasizing that he doesn’t mind the room full of clutter. “Get some rest, Oikawa.”

Oikawa’s lips twitch into a bitter, petulant pout.

“I’m not tired.”

He casts him a firm look, eyebrows drawn together in a galled line.

“Well, I am,” Iwaizumi rasps angrily. “So get out.”

Finally, Oikawa stands down, his disheartened expression coming into painful focus before he storms out with lumbering footsteps, slamming the sliding glass doors behind him. Iwaizumi pads behind his desk and realizes he had his breath stuck in his throat. The air escapes him in an unsettling current, digesting his thoughts as he leans back against his desk.
The slim television monitor across him lights up when Iwaizumi manages to find the remote control under the rubble. He makes sure the volume is low, although he’s certain that the acoustic glass can adequately keep the noise in. He settles for a news channel. It helps numb his thoughts for a minute until words in red flash on the bottom of the screen, behind it a man being escorted as reporters shove their microphones and cameras at him.

Park Yutaka, who was appointed a public defender, faces a lifetime imprisonment if found guilty for the murder of the former Safety Commission chairman. His pretrial is set for—

Iwaizumi switches to another channel.

The news has been the same for days, and he refuses to dwell on it.

His phone hasn’t been ringing, which isn’t at all unusual. Iwaizumi admits he needs the much-needed rest, because the wounds on his back and stomach aren’t healing that well, and they still deal a generous amount of pain if he moves too vigorously.

Iwaizumi feels the need to clean up a bit and stumbles through the small space until two trash bags are filled. He doesn’t know what made him do it, but at least he can see most of his dusty, carpeted floor.

Unlike the carpets in his home office, the hardwood floor outside doesn’t muffle his footsteps when he walks into the living room. He spares a glance at a wall clock before taking in the sight of Oikawa’s back as he wipes the full-length windows with a soaped up rag, the approaching night stealing his colors away until the scene looks straight out of a black-and-white film.

“You never listen, do you?”

Oikawa doesn’t turn to look at him, but Iwaizumi can see his reflection pulling up a sour face.

“It’s barely seven, Iwa-chan,” he points out, his voice droning like a child who's complaining about an early bedtime. He directs his focus at a stubborn stain that won’t rub off. “My body itches when I’m not doing anything.”

Iwaizumi doesn’t know Oikawa before he found him, although it's clear that he's someone who needs to constantly move. He used to be active in sports, based from all the news reports Iwaizumi rummaged through, and it shows even now – with how he bustles around the pad, scrambles along the galley, humming, scampering, juggling with menial tasks. Oikawa seems exponentially content the busier he gets, and by this time Iwaizumi decides he should probably stop scolding him for doing simple house chores.

He watches him quietly, his gaze taking in his movements as the air settles into a comfortable silence. The peace is only disturbed by the squeaks of glass and soap. Oikawa goes to the sink to clean the rag, squeezing the dirt off it, then proceeds to another glass panel.

“When was the last time you cleaned your windows?” Oikawa asks, harmonizing with domestic noises of the house.

Iwaizumi’s thoughts slide to a halt.

“I never cleaned them.”
He hums a vague sound. “That explains a lot.”

Oikawa attempts to reach a blotch of grime on the uppermost part of the glass window. Even with his height, he stands on his tiptoes and stretches his entire upper body, revealing a strip of skin just above his waistband as the insufficient fabric rides up to follow the sweep of his arms.

Iwaizumi realizes that his shirts might be too short, with Oikawa having longer limbs. It’s partially Oikawa’s fault. He tends to wear Iwaizumi’s older sportswear, the ones usually on the bottom drawers, the farthest in the back, as if he didn’t want to borrow the ones that seem brand new.

He’s wearing clothes Iwaizumi hasn’t seen in years – a dusky pistachio sweatshirt and light gray joggers he remembers buying several years back. The blanched colors draw out the cool undertones from his skin and kindle his irises into a warmer varnish. With one quick glare at Oikawa’s exposed skin and red marks around his ankles, the novelty of it all fades like a dying plant.

Immediately, his musings turn to Oikawa and his situation, how he’s stuck to the meager shelter of his spiritless home. Comparably, flowers have done nothing wrong, yet people pluck them from their homes, forcing them to live on foreign soil.

Iwaizumi is guilty of that.

“I’m going downtown,” he declares suddenly, taking off his suit jacket to change into a more appropriate outfit.

His voice quickly shifts into a more thoughtful edge.

“Do you wanna come?”

Oikawa falls to a complete stop. He blinks at Iwaizumi with stunning eyes, all wide and incredulous, lips parting in confusion as though he’d heard the question wrong. He doesn’t say anything as his face locks.

Iwaizumi notices, then reminds himself to get Oikawa his own clothes – something that’ll fit him better. “I’ll let you buy anything you want.”

Brows crease further in suspicion.

Oikawa looks skeptical – scared, even.

“But, why?” he asks, plain and frank.

His voice is low and so doubtful that it almost hurts. Maybe he isn’t used to this kind of stuff. Still, shouldn’t he be a little bit happier?

“But, why?”

Oikawa makes a faint noise of panic.

“I-I want to! But, really, I mean, I don’t think I can—”

“Oh, which is it?”

The washed out hues of his melancholy soon evolves into a pastel pigment of excitement – his face warm like cherries and wine. It’s a huge improvement, which leaves Iwaizumi to wonder how he can keep it like that.
“I'll go get changed!”

Chapter End Notes

sup mah bois u think i wont update before the year ends well ur wrong anyways would love to know what yall think!!

playlists: 01 / 02 / 03

i shitpost 99% and post 1% art but u can holla at yo boy here: twitter & tumblr
White noise floats around the small space as Oikawa sits motionless on the passenger seat. The tinted windows didn't offer much visibility in the night, his sight only capturing the uncompromising energy of vivid downtown lights. It does not take long before the vehicle decelerates, curving into a parking space just outside of a Grand Hyatt.

A short silence replaces the revving engines.

“Take it in,” he hears Iwaizumi say. It sounds more like a brief warning than advice. After one glance, Iwaizumi steps out and opens Oikawa’s car door, laying him bare against the city’s harsh music. “You’ll become numb to it.”

Night has already ravished the skies above, but not below, where a nocturnal carnival radiates.

He gets dizzy as soon as he steps foot on the asphalt. It’s the electrified lights of shopping malls and digital billboards that seep painfully through the edges of his retinas, skyscrapers circling around him like hyenas mocking a kill. Don’t look at anyone. Don’t smile. Ultraviolets illuminate the mass of people, moving in a predictable river, and they pass by him in an endless stream, deaf and heedless from the rapture.

Oikawa keeps his head low, hiding his strained eyes under a borrowed baseball cap to dull the disorienting neon-lit signs flickering between affluence and misery. He can only see his feet now. Diffident steps hit the asphalt, wet from the summer rain, reflecting the amber glow and red lights like paint mixing in with water. He hears the jarring clatter. It’s out of tune and painful. Strange sounds ring unfamiliarly in his ears - blaring conversations, car horns, belching vehicles, high-pitched laughter, fierce footsteps gushing like rapids. It’s a metropolis of commercial hysteria that highlights his anxieties, an intricate jungle showing little to no empathy towards his nervous sighs and trembling hands.

Staring only at his feet, he drifts along the thick crowd, trailing close behind Iwaizumi. Blindingly, carefully. His vision shifts up to watch streaks of blinding magenta cascade over Iwaizumi’s back, as Oikawa falls into a trance that drives butterflies to asters. Somehow, the excited voices around him turn silent, his focus drawn to the figure of a man that he can’t help but gravitate towards.

Iwaizumi splits open the sea of people in an abstracted pace, peculiarly conscious of Oikawa’s ardent gaze, constantly craning his head back to make sure he's there. He unknowingly structures himself as a cult leader with each stride, possessing this natural magnetism that can lure in a willing prey and turn him into a loyal devotee.

Oikawa hears him through the noise.
“Stay close,” he tells him.

The sudden surge in his heartbeat blurs his vision before it refocuses back on his surroundings. It's hard to breathe suddenly. Oikawa sees the jubilant crowd thicken along a wide crossing just as the unholy scent of anxiety rushes in through his nostrils. His hand moves on its own in urgency, reaching for something to hold on to. He’s afraid to get lost in the sea, afraid to lose sight of the polar star that keeps him from straying off the path.

Oikawa eases out a breath, clutching the textured hem of a jacket tight in his hand.

Iwaizumi stops in his tracks, and Oikawa realizes only then that he had been squeezing his eyes shut as he walked. Confusion races in his chest. He's merely an adherent who blindly follows, stopping only when his cult leader stops. Oikawa opens his eyes—

Iwaizumi’s hand comes sharply into focus.

Oikawa blinks dumbly at the offer - an empty hand. He looks up at the other’s face for answers, but he’s met with an impatient mask and rolling eyes. Iwaizumi couldn’t seem to wait for a proper reaction, and dutifully wraps strong fingers around Oikawa’s hand and continues to walk.

The shock and unlikeliness of it all barely registered in his brain. But his hand is warm, and it’s all he can think of. Never mind that it’s rough and bruised and inelegant. Oikawa feels his face burn, a hint of pink resting on his cheekbones as he tries to get his head around the fact that he’s holding Iwaizumi’s hand. Even so, Oikawa lags a few steps behind on purpose. Iwaizumi keeps a tight grip, but it’s Oikawa who ultimately squeezes their hands together more tightly. Somehow, he can breathe better, see better. Maybe it’s the kindness that reeled with Iwaizumi’s hand. He’s tired of feeling afraid, tired of the pain still beating in his chest. He cherishes the warmth of his palms. It makes him feel safe - so, so safe.

“Isn’t this weird?” he asks timidly, brows creasing downward.

“Everyone’s too busy with their own shit to notice,” Iwaizumi answers. Veils of pink cast a highlight across his face when he gives Oikawa a sidelong slice of a glare. He maintains his pace and eases through the crowd so Oikawa shouldn’t have to. “I can kill anyone right now and no one will care.”

Oikawa frowns in worry. It’s been more than a month but he still can’t tell if Iwaizumi is joking or not. “Come on, that’s not true—”

“Want me to try?”

“No—!” Oikawa yells almost in an instant, shaking his head. He sucks in a nervous breath and scampers to keep up with Iwaizumi’s pace until he’s directly next to him. He keeps his grip on Iwaizumi left hand, thinking he might be able to keep him from doing something crazy. “That’s not funny.”

He waits for Iwaizumi to meet his gaze again, to leer at the mysterious clouds hovering above his eyes. Instead, he’s steered away from the current and into an empty boutique. His vision gradually adjusts with the sudden brightness. Oikawa looks around and sees a wide space of gilded glass cases, lit up by a crystal chandelier that makes the both of them strangely out of place. There are hardly any people inside the shop, and Oikawa finally releases a long sigh of relief and welcomes the opportunity to shed off some of his anxieties.

“Oikawa,” Iwaizumi calls out, voice lenient. He lets his hand go.
In the pool of golden lights and French music, Oikawa catches the worry hiding behind the obscurity of his hazel eyes, making his heart cramp with delicate surprise. Iwaizumi didn’t say anything else, his eyes speaking for him. He must’ve noticed that Oikawa needed a minute away from the crowd.

Oikawa dips his head down in shame, veiling his face with the bill of his hat. He hates this feeling. When is he going to stop looking like a charity case in front of Iwaizumi? Isn’t Iwaizumi getting tired of feeling bad for him?

“Sorry,” he murmurs, smiling, hiding his insecurities behind it. He gives Iwaizumi a wry huff of fake, nervous laughter. “I haven’t been outside like this in a long time. It’s a little overwhelming.”

Hesitantly, Iwaizumi purses his lips, remorse painting over his stern features, looking as if he had made a terrible mistake. He closes his eyes and sighs. “I shouldn’t have brought you out here—”

“Look, I was getting tired of staying home all day,” Oikawa cuts off, meeting Iwaizumi in the eye before casting them back down to his feet. “Even though I complained a lot, I felt safe, really safe, but—”

Oikawa hesitates, searching for the right words. He swallows and forces his shoulders to relax before looking at Iwaizumi.

“But I realize that I feel safer when I’m with you.”

The change in Iwaizumi’s eyes is taut and certain, curling around him with a delightful warmth. Oikawa notices how Iwaizumi softens into a more placid stance, and he smiles at this before turning on his heel to walk further inside the store.

“Hey,” he hears Iwaizumi say, followed by footsteps. “Where are you going?”

“Taking a look around,” Oikawa replies with a small smile, bending over to a glass case to admire a row of diamond necklaces. He shifts his weight on his left knee when a subtle pain surges from his right. “You said you’ll buy anything, didn’t you?”

Iwaizumi lets out a sigh - and almost smiles - before walking over to see what he’s looking at. Oikawa pretends to not have seen it and immediately looks away, knowing he’ll frown once he points it out. But it all fades within a second. From his angle, Oikawa catches the grimace cross his face, and it’s hard to tell whether it’s the price or the diamonds itself that irked him. He doesn’t look at all pleased.

This time, Iwaizumi follows him as he circles around. Oikawa walks across the boutique, eyes wide and sparkling at overpriced leather bags and watches. He doesn’t plan on buying anything, or have Iwaizumi buy things for him, but it’s not everyday he’s able to do a little window shopping.

Oikawa stops next to a tall rack of expensive eyewear.

“You look handsome in these glasses, Iwa-chan,” he says, pulling one out to put them on Iwaizumi against his will. “It makes you look smarter.”

Iwaizumi gracelessly takes it off and frowns. “What exactly are you trying to say?”

“Well,” Oikawa starts, etching back a wide grin. He attempts to lighten up the mood. “Iwa-chan does have that all-brawn-no-brain vibe going on.”

He narrows his eyes at Oikawa’s teasing remark before staring at the half-rim gilded eyeglasses
Oikawa picked out. Oikawa notices that he’s less tense, and that this angry little face he’s making is kind of charming. It makes him a bit happy. He’s caught off guard when Iwaizumi slides the glasses on him.

“Do you want it?” he asks within that slight moment of inattention.

Oikawa blinks four, five times before his eyes widen behind the clear lens. “What? N-No way! This is, like, four thousand yen!” he exclaims, flustered. He pulls it off in a hurry. “I was just kidding—”

“It looks good on you,” Iwaizumi says simply, his expression still and unchanging. Oikawa looks away, the sudden compliment sending a wash of heat to his head. “If you want anything, just tell me.”

Iwaizumi takes the eyeglasses from his hands. “Ah, wait—”

And before Oikawa can stop him, Iwaizumi already has a matte black card placed on top of the counter, hell-bent on not letting Oikawa leave the boutique empty-handed.

☆ ☆ ☆

Roppongi is an epicenter of international flavor, a favorite among both expatriates and the local crowd. But it’s also littered with several multinational firms and investment banks, making it a favorite among crime syndicates to subjugate and control.

Roppongi Hills, in particular, is under the exclusive jurisdiction of Aobajousai-kai.

Iwaizumi is fully aware that they’re on friendly territory, which curtails a huge portion of his worries, although Iwaizumi had already ensured the lay of the land before taking Oikawa anywhere, especially to a large shopping complex with a plethora of retail stores and businesses which may or may not be under a certain syndicate’s supervision. It’s a little less populated than the chaos outside, providing Oikawa some relief. He seems calmer now.

The ceiling domes high with reflective glass, sheltering the aisles and stores quartered in sharp, careful angles that makes it easy to avoid people, making it less likely for people to recognize him. Nevertheless, the non-prescription eyeglasses they just bought did help with Oikawa’s disguise, and he wasn’t lying either - the glasses really did flatter his comely face.

Iwaizumi takes him to the first shop. It’s spacious, brimmed with racks of tracksuits and shirts, the shelves housing sportswear and other casual articles, the remaining half then holds a large selection of athletic footgear. Oikawa trails not too far behind him as Iwaizumi strolls between racks of clothing, pulling out a sleeve to check the fabric, as he’s more concerned on how they felt against the skin rather than their style or color. Iwaizumi grabs several casual apparels with the hangers still tucked in before turning into a hidden corner for the fitting rooms.

“Try these on,” he orders, then pushes the pile he had eagerly procured towards Oikawa.

Oikawa stares at the bright cubicle made of wood, then at his own apprehensive reflection on the full-length mirror. His shoulders tighten.

He turns to face Iwaizumi in panic.
“You’re leaving me there alone?”

“I’ll be right outside,” he assures him.

Oikawa doesn’t speak. The young man looks petrified, a certain kind of fear sinking through his wide eyes. What exactly is he afraid of? Why does he look like he’ll pass out once he steps into this room?

“This—This is fine. I don’t need to try them on.” Oikawa’s voice brings in a flicker of confusion, taking two steps back, his eyes still on the small room. “I’m sure they’ll fit—”

“What’s wrong?” Iwaizumi asks, resting a hand on his shoulder. Oikawa sure likes to talk, but he’s surprisingly not well-equipped to communicate about his issues. “Tell me.”

Oikawa keeps his ground, his arms coil tighter around the heap of clothes. He repeats, quieter, “I don’t need to try them on.”

He can hear the brief upheaval in his voice, buckling beneath a bad memory, as though it’s digging into the insides of Oikawa’s brain. It might have to do with something in the past - being left alone, small rooms, mirrors, it could be anything, really. With that, Iwaizumi reaches his hand out, a palm touching the side of Oikawa’s head, light and careful with concern.

“I’ll go inside with you,” he offers with a sigh. “Come on.”

It’s a single-person fitting room, so it’s no wonder two grown men will further emphasize the tight space. But oddly enough, despite the limited room, the host of fear Oikawa was carrying vanished entirely, appreciating the company. He tries on the clothes Iwaizumi had chosen with no qualms, as the other sits on the corner stool. The first one is a fleece windrunner, two-toned and in the right size. Some shirts are too small, some too big, and some had sleeves that are too short for Oikawa’s long limbs. Even so, Oikawa seems to like anything that can hide his skin, and wide round necklines that aren’t too suffocating. Iwaizumi mentally jots that down.

“Is this okay?” Oikawa asks, spreading his arms like an eagle. He shows Iwaizumi a cotton elbow-sleeve shirt in a pale turquoise color. “It’s not too bright, is it?”

“That color,” Iwaizumi starts, finding it a bit hard to search for words at that moment. It goes well against Oikawa’s overall palette, as though he’s wearing a part of the sea, and his skin the shore. He looks good in anything, really. “That color suits you.”

Oikawa presses his lips together to fight off a content smile, fingers twisting in the hem of his shirt. “Really?” he asks again, then turns to look at the mirror. Iwaizumi thinks it fits perfectly. “I like this color, too.”

The bill is paid right after, and the cashier hands them two paper bags of clothing.

“I’ll carry this,” Iwaizumi insists, taking the bags before Oikawa can. “Just carry the bags from the next store.”

“Next store?” Oikawa echoes in disbelief, eyeing the shopping bags that are already keeping Iwaizumi’s hands full. “I don’t remember agreeing to go to another store.”

“I rarely buy anything,” he says with a frown, letting Oikawa’s words float in the air. “I might as well spend some on you.”

Iwaizumi goes on to take Oikawa to a different shop, which is a little more high-end than the
previous one. Wood panels. Classical music bursting from the speakers. Oikawa protests even further when suited shop assistants greet them, bright smiles all over their faces.

Carefully pulling from the racks, Iwaizumi holds a navy blue longline trench coat against Oikawa. Double-breasted. Belted cuffs. It’s a rich blend of wool and cashmere - a transeasonal requisite. It feels butter-soft, and it’s appealing in Oikawa’s silhouette.

“This seems a bit excessive,” Oikawa objects, reluctantly chafing his hands over the thick fabric. “It’s summer. Do I really need this?”

“Summer doesn’t last that long,” he retorts and hands the coat over. “Try it on.”

With a sigh, Oikawa takes it and wears it over his light sweatshirt.

“I don’t get a say in this, do I?”

“No, not really.” Iwaizumi examines the coat on him. Gently, he lets his hands brush against Oikawa’s waist to adjust the belt. “Is it too small?”

“Kind of,” Oikawa says timidly, uncertain. “I already like how it fits, though.”

Iwaizumi holds the coat for him after he takes it off, taking note of Oikawa’s preferred size once more. He wouldn’t wear elegant clothing like this personally, but figures it’ll look good on someone tall and slender like Oikawa. He then grabs a second long-length coat, a soft cashmere with a velvet collar, before getting a lightweight jacket in pure cotton and deep-notched lapel. He lays them over the counter for payment.

The third store is simpler, exhibiting a more modern elegance fit for a younger crowd. Mostly homewear. Comfortable, light. Iwaizumi takes some casual ones - ribbed sweaters, cotton shirts, joggers, basically anything that’s meant for lounging around the house.

“I guess you’re tired of me having to borrow your clothes all the time, huh?” Oikawa says ruefully, trailing after him with shopping bags on both hands. He looks around while Iwaizumi takes a few articles of loungewear in Oikawa’s size.

Iwaizumi frowns. “That’s not the reason why I’m buying these stuff.” He gives Oikawa a subtle once-over before pulling another article of clothing off the racks. “Try this.” Oikawa takes the shirt hesitantly, staring at it with a cheerless gaze. “What? You don’t like it?”

Oikawa snaps his head up, eyes big. “No, I mean, yeah. It’s soft, and it feels nice—”

“Good,” he says simply. “All the more reason you should have it.”

“Iwa-chan,” he hears him call. “I think this should be enough.” Iwaizumi glances away from him, trying hard not to acknowledge the frustration written all over Oikawa’s face. What is he talking about? It’s barely enough.

“Hey, listen—!”

Iwaizumi is stopped with a firm hand around his wrist. The unusually loud voice turns him around, brows cinched into straight lines as he meets with Oikawa’s disconcerted expression.

“I—I don’t like this,” Oikawa voices his thoughts out, and without hesitation this time. He keeps his grip on him as Iwaizumi waits in mild surprise. “I already owe you for a lot of things, and… there’s really not much I can give you in return. I don’t think I deserve this kind of treatment.”
“People buy things they don’t deserve all the time,” Iwaizumi contends, realizing a second after that it’s not the response that can push down Oikawa’s worries. “Besides, I’m not asking for anything in return—”

“But I always feel like I have to!” Oikawa snaps back, his annoyance clear in his voice. He angrily pushes the shirt still in its hangers back at Iwaizumi. “It feels like—It feels like shit, okay? I want to pay you back by any means possible but you’re honestly making it really hard for me!”

Iwaizumi’s eyes widen in surprise, unblinking. He squashes down the aggression building up to his chest, his fingers itching at his tremulous instincts to talk back, to yell at him.

The unsolicited guilt that follows doesn’t help at all.

“Sorry,” he mumbles the first thing that comes into his mind, face blank. This seems to have made Oikawa more upset.

“Don’t—” Oikawa stops, his shoulders slumping. “Please don’t apologize, especially when I should be thanking you.” His downcast eyes travel to the racks of clothing before he lets out a loud sigh. “Help me try this on,” he says, taking the shirt from Iwaizumi’s hands apologetically. “But promise me this is the last one.”

Iwaizumi stares at him.

“Fine,” he sympathizes, scowling when Oikawa glances his way with a tilt of his head and a faint smile before heading off to the fitting room. Iwaizumi follows suit. It doesn’t take long before Oikawa finishes. He pulls out his card, earning him another set of shopping bags to carry.

Outside the shop, Oikawa closes his eyes and breathes in through his nose, letting the air out as a sigh. Iwaizumi switches his attention to look at the other man, who’s wearing the light gray long-sleeved running top they just bought. He looks away just as heat involuntarily rushes through his cheeks.

They walk out of the high-end retail area until they reach an outstretched hall with an affluent mix of restaurants and coffee shops, cosmetics stores and luxury boutiques still lingering in between. This could be the best time to think of dinner, he thinks. Oikawa must be hungry—

“I don’t know what you’re getting out of this, honestly,” Oikawa says as they walk. He looks down to inspect his new top. “If you wanted to dress someone up in fancy clothes, you should’ve picked a better model - like, a woman, for instance.”

Iwaizumi begs to differ, but he keeps quiet. He feels the air heat up suddenly, the warmth of Oikawa’s hand curled into the crook of his elbow fogging his head.

It’s a quarter before nine, and a slight exhaustion drags at Oikawa’s knees.

The golden flicker of Iwaizumi’s watch catches Oikawa’s attention. Absently, he watches the small sword-shaped hands move behind the polished glass, adorned with more gold than stainless steel. Oikawa can tell it’s not something Iwaizumi is inclined to buy for himself, looking more and more like a lover’s gift.

“Iwa-chan,” Oikawa blurs out, unsure where the conversation is heading. “Don’t you have, like, a girlfriend or something?” He steals a nervous glance to check his reaction, only to find a hardened scowl click into place. “You look like the married type.”

“The last thing I am is married,” Iwaizumi replies quickly and angrily. “Do I look like I have time
for that sort of thing?"

“You have time for me, don’t you?” he counters, the laughter in his face fading into a more mischievous smirk. “I’ll even prove it.”

“Where are you going?”

Oikawa detaches himself from Iwaizumi and saunters over to a luxury boutique, the kind that would know customers by their name. Shopping bags flinging from both hands, he walks in between the shelves and racks of intricate clothing. He transfers all of the paper bags to one hand, just so he can pick something out.

“This would look great on you.”

He drapes a bomber jacket over Iwaizumi’s torso. Black faux leather. Zipped pockets in polished silver. It has an open-knit stand collar that blends well with Iwaizumi’s athleisure style, and it lusters in pure obsidian, the willow green stripes on the bottom trim accentuating the vinyl material.

Oikawa shuts one eye and purses his lips, tilting his head at Iwaizumi as if he’s capturing him with a camera. He hums happily. “Iwa-chan would look super cool beating up bad guys in this,” he mutters, mostly to himself. “You should get rid of that old letterman jacket. It stinks no matter how many times you wash it.”

Iwaizumi eyes him wearily. “We’re supposed to buy clothes for you.”

“Yeah, and I want this.” Oikawa examines the jacket closer, searching for the price on the tag but couldn’t find any. He hopes it’s not too expensive. “But you have to wear it.”

Iwaizumi studies the smooth, supple leather with a raised brow, suspicious.

“I’m not buying that for me.”

“Then buy it for me.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“I want you to wear it—”

“Good evening,” a third voice chimes in and Oikawa jerks in surprise. The salesman, donned in a crisp, single-breasted, metropolitan suit, approaches them with a smile. “Can I help you with anything, sir?”

“Uh, sure,” Oikawa cuts in awkwardly before Iwaizumi can dismiss him. He adjusts his eyeglasses and avoids eye contact, but shows him the jacket anyway. “T-This one in his size, please.”

The shop assistant nods and politely takes the jacket from his hands, able to skillfully find Iwaizumi’s size just with just one look. Iwaizumi calls Oikawa’s name with a low warning tone, but the other man childishly pushes him towards the counter to pay, completely unafraid of his threats.

“That’ll be fifteen-thousand yen.”

Oikawa’s eyes went big. “Shit,” he mutters, guilt etching all over his face. “I didn’t know it’s that expensive.”
But Iwaizumi takes his card out anyway.

☆ ☆ ☆

Sometime later, Oikawa suggests taking a ride up to see the top of the tower. He's starting to get tired from walking all over the place, craving to sit somewhere quiet and just rest. One long elevator ride later, they reach an observation deck surrounded by glass - an extremely high vantage point, a perfect height to idly watch the boulevards flicker.

Oikawa licks his lips, shivering at the sudden barrage of cold air.

“Are you cold?” Iwaizumi asks, fishing through the various shopping bags to get a jacket that they just bought. “It’s just a little past twenty-two degrees.”

Oikawa pouts. “I can’t help it, okay?” He takes the jacket and slips it on in a hurry. “I get cold easily.”

Sitting on a bench facing the view, Oikawa drops the bag and lets his legs rest. He breathes out an exhausted sigh and scours through a FamilyMart paper bag, searching for a snack. Iwaizumi settles on the empty seat beside him.

“You really like that, huh?”

Oikawa stares down at the packet of milk bread and takes a bite. They bought it earlier when they passed a convenience store, after Oikawa craved for something to chew on. With his mouth half-full, he replies. “Yeah, I mean, it’s fluffy and soft and creamy—” he pauses for a while and swallows. “It's sorcery.”

“You should’ve told me you like that stuff,” Iwaizumi says, resting an elbow on his knee and a palm under his chin as he watches him gobble up the large bun in a short amount of time.

“I'm not really in a position to ask for things I like. I'm already staying at your place for free, eating all your food…” Oikawa trails off, averting his gaze.

“You don’t mind,” he says kindly, folding his arms. “Just tell me if you want anything.”

“You’re willing to buy milk bread everyday?”

Green eyes narrow, poring over him. “Everyday?” Iwaizumi repeats in disbelief, but mostly surprise. “Can you really eat those things everyday?”

“I bet I can,” he says, a whisper of a smile charming his lips.

After a short moment of silence, Oikawa lays his eyes on the city view once more, staring at the scene with exuberance and catching the city’s pulse, unapologetically bright even within a partial panoramic glimpse. He can’t see beyond the horizon of lights and illuminated monoliths of steel and concrete - can’t possibly see the city in its entirety, but he's satisfied at where he's standing.

It’s a living, breathing metropolis - and it’s a wonder how of all the lives in all the streets, in all the cities, Iwaizumi just happened to miraculously walk into his.

Oikawa then herds his gaze away from the lights to catch the hazel eyes beside him.
“Can I ask you something?”

“No.”

“Do you really like hurting other people?”

Iwaizumi stares at the view for a long while, carefully aware of how Oikawa has this habit of staring straight into his eyes when asking a question. Expectedly, Oikawa keeps his eyes on him, intent to see every single change in his features, wondering if Iwaizumi’s comfortable enough to tell him things out loud.

“I saw all those news articles in your office,” Oikawa confesses, although Iwaizumi already knew about that. He caught him snooping around after all. His voice is quiet, unfocused, remembering the clippings of dead girls and dead mobsters. “Those murders… it was all you, wasn’t it?” He hesitates, shrouding his nervousness with a soft chuckle. “Do you hate people that much?”

Iwaizumi lets a few seconds of silence pass, and before Oikawa can apologize for asking, he takes a deep breath.

“I’m disappointed in them,” Iwaizumi clarifies, running his fingers through his hair before adding, “and I’m not very good with people.”

Oikawa casts a soft look in his direction. “You’re pretty good with me.”

“That happened without me expecting it.”

He raises his eyebrows, not forgetting how Iwaizumi completely ignored the first question. “Is it the thrill of it?” he asks, curious, making sure there aren’t any people within earshot. “Do you like how you can take the lives of others so easily?”

After what felt like an entire hour, Iwaizumi finally finds a brief minute to relax, his exhale drawing out in a shuddering breath.

“Some people don’t deserve to live.”

Oikawa wonders if he had imagined it, as he fully expected Iwaizumi to remain silent. He turns away and bores his eyes at the view again. “I suppose it’s a unique feeling,” he croaks, chin up in thought, dropping his hand to the edges of the bench. “I’ll be lying if I say I haven’t thought of it. I have a mental list of people I’ve always wanted to... get rid of, people who make it harder for other people to survive.”

He feels Iwaizumi’s gaze on him this time. “It is a unique feeling,” he admits. “I guess I lied.”

“Why do you do it if you don’t like it?” Oikawa demands.

Iwaizumi licks his lips, his voice thickening. “What if I tell you that I don’t like killing, and that I just don’t like bad people?” His head lowers, hazel eyes drilling a hole on the floor. “And that maybe, if I hurt them first, they won’t hurt anyone else?”

The last part came out like a question. Iwaizumi probably didn’t intend it to be. With the pregnant silence, Oikawa feels his chest clench, his heart racing painfully at an erratic speed. He presses his lips together, wishing there’s something he can do to pull the perpetual guilt out of Iwaizumi’s eyes. It’s frustrating. Iwaizumi has been able to provide him with purpose, after being robbed of everything, and it kills him that he can’t do the same for him.
Iwaizumi expects some kind of disagreement, or disgust, but Oikawa offers him a vague, unsavory sound of understanding instead.

“Were you—” Oikawa pauses, and Iwaizumi must’ve sensed his hesitation. He stares at him, stares directly at his dark green eyes, even if Iwaizumi doesn’t intend to look back. “Were you able to hurt the bad people who killed your dad?”

Oikawa watches as surprise flicker over Iwaizumi’s face, eyes unblinking and wide, like he had just vividly remember every single word in that newspaper clipping. It all becomes a wheel of incomprehensible emotions flashing over his features. He had never seen him like this before. Iwaizumi swallows back the intensity of the question, dragging a hand across his face, dreading to meet Oikawa’s gaze.

“Yeah,” Iwaizumi answers, his voice strangled. He lifts his head up. “It felt good.” He then spreads his hands, keeping his eyes fixed on his palms as if the memory of killing his father’s murderers gave him comfort. “I got in trouble with the authorities after that, but someone helped me clear my record, all of it, deleted every single file related to my crimes like nothing happened.” Silence drags on for a few seconds, the clamor of his thoughts clenching his jaw. “I’m indebted to them, and if I don’t do what they tell me to, my name might end up in the obituaries just like my dad.”

“Who are ‘they’?” Oikawa parts his lips, bending a little closer. “Yakuza?”

Iwaizumi shrugs, mouth wrenched in a grimace. “Something like that.”

Oikawa decides it's the perfect moment to shift the mood. “Is it real?” he asks vaguely.

“What’s real?”

“The pinky thing.” Oikawa smiles at without any traces of judgment, free from recrimination. “When you do something wrong, your pinky finger gets cut off?”

The mirthful laugh that consequently grates through the air was something Oikawa did not quite expect. He turns to face the man laughing in short huffs, easy and airy, almost instinctual. Oikawa finds himself with enchanted, wide eyes. It's taking every ounce of him not to point it out. He leans back in his seat, relishing the mere sound of it.

“If that’s the case, all of us wouldn’t have pinkies,” he says, unaware of his features still strained with traces of a smile. “On serious cases, they just shoot the guy. It’s much easier to keep their mouth shut that way.”

There’s a shadow of humor in his words, and this time Oikawa can tell.

“It’s my turn to ask questions.”

Oikawa stiffens. He gulps down the nervous lump in his throat.

“W-What is it?”

Iwaizumi glances at Oikawa, unnervingly quiet and perturbed all of a sudden. His nervousness isn’t so obvious, but it’s there, hitching his breathing to a full stop.

“Why do you stay?” he asks, exploring the other’s profile. “Why aren’t you leaving?”

“You told me I’m not allowed to,” Oikawa answers, as though he’s stating a fact rather than an amendment.
“I’m not keeping you locked up.” Iwaizumi fights to keep his expression blank. “You could just open the door and leave.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

The wobble in Oikawa’s voice puts a strain on his heart, and Iwaizumi feels his mouth twitch at the sides.

“That’s not what I said.”

Oikawa lets out a tender sigh, warmer than the summer air. His caramel eyes fall over Iwaizumi’s face. “Does it ever occur to you that maybe I don’t want to leave?” Iwaizumi keeps quiet, noticing the slump of his body when he breathes out a laugh through his nose. “I won’t even know where to go. I don’t know who I am, where I live, what I do. Honestly, I’m afraid to find out at this point.” His chin shudders, as if to bite back tears. “You’ve been nothing but good to me, and I’m—well, this,” he says, the last part implying an insult to himself. He huffs a self-deprecating laugh. “Sometimes, I can’t help but wonder why you haven’t thrown me out yet. But I can still stay, right? I can clean, or cook, and do whatever you want—!”

“Oikawa,” he cuts him off, pausing at the threshold. It feels wrong to keep Oikawa’s own identity from him. It’s for a good reason, but the guilt still remains. He lifts his head. Green eyes focus on the other. “I never said I wanted you to leave.”

Heat paints over the canvas of Oikawa’s fair skin, a smile gracing his lips.

“It’s my turn again.”

Iwaizumi winces. He doesn’t know how long he’ll last in this game. Patiently, he waits for Oikawa, shifting in his seat so he can peek at Iwaizumi’s expression.

“Have you ever cried before?”

The question seems innocent enough. Iwaizumi rests his hand on his knees, palms brushing the fabric of his pants. He catches a glimpse of Oikawa’s curious expression. Tenacious, but unsure.

“Too many times,” he answers truthfully.

Oikawa only responds with a thoughtful hum.

“That’s all?” Iwaizumi asks, baffled. He expected a little bit more.

Oikawa nods, satisfied, smiling in quiet pleasure.

“Yes, that’s all I needed to know.”

☆ ☆ ☆

Even in the summer, the coldness of the city circles around him like a serpent.

They go back outside when Oikawa suggested eating somewhere simple and inexpensive. The crowd has substantially thinned just as the night deepens. It brings relief to Oikawa once more, feeling less scared and less anxious. There’s still a sort of hedonistic greed in the air. It soaks into
the sidewalks, crawls in between the cracks on the pavement and inconspicuously squeezes through the mass of people.

The loud buzz of a phone ringing sets him on edge.

Oikawa glances over to the side to watch Iwaizumi, still carrying bundles of shopping bags as he plucks his smartphone from his pockets with much difficulty. “Sorry, let me take this,” he says politely, brows furrowing in annoyance when he reads the name on the screen. He slams the phone to his ear. “Hanamaki, I’m busy. What the hell do you want—”

He looks away out of courtesy, pretending not to hear the conversation. It’s nearing ten-thirty when Oikawa’s appetite starts to run rampant. He puts a hand on his stomach as it growsl in cue. Oikawa sneaks a sidelong glance at Iwaizumi, who is still on the phone, until his vision catches the modest signs of a restaurant - a subtle golden highlight shining along the humble exterior of an izakaya that looks straight out of a period drama. The thick brush strokes of Tsubakido is written over cherry wood, lit up by a lonely lantern glowing in a bright, ruby red.

“Wanna eat there?”

Oikawa jumps at the sudden voice. He didn’t notice Iwaizumi finishing his phone call and sneaking up on him. He sucks in a breath to say something, but puffs his cheeks instead.

“It’s a nice restaurant, and the food’s pretty good.” Iwaizumi claims, sounding as if he had already been there. Oikawa stares at him for a full second. Iwaizumi can probably tell that’s not enough of a reason. “It’s not expensive, if that’s what’s bothering you.”

Finally, Oikawa agrees. The izakaya welcomes them with a blast of hot air mixed in with a somehow dreary, depressing ambiance. Oikawa admits that the mysteriously dim lighting makes him a little nervous, but the old-fashioned low-level tables and clandestine vibe did add to its rustic charm. After settling in and given cold towels, Iwaizumi steers him to a private booth and orders two sets of meals.

The waitress arrives with small plates of appetizers. Oikawa waits for Iwaizumi before he digs in, drawing in a bowl of miso soup first. It’s unlike the instant ones they have at home. This has a sweeter flavor, which might have been caused by the wakame that’s mixed with soft tofu and scallions. Then there’s a plate of sliced soft shell crabs, deep-fried with cucumber and eggs, a sweet sauce drizzled all over it.

Oikawa waits patiently for the main dishes. It’s been more than twenty minutes, and he realizes it might take a long time to cook whatever Iwaizumi had ordered. The other man isn’t so patient, attempting to stand up from his cross-legged position.

“I’ll go out for a quick smoke,” Iwaizumi says.

“What?” Oikawa chokes out. He blinks several times before succumbing to the urge to grab the hem of Iwaizumi’s denim jacket. “Stay here. I don’t want to be alone.”

Iwaizumi shoots a glare at him, but sits back down without a word.

Oikawa stiffens in his seat, loathing the awkward air that he accidentally caused. He studies Iwaizumi for a full minute, looking restlessly hungry and irritable, probably craving for a nicotine fix.

“You should stop that.”
Iwaizumi raises a suspicious brow. “Stop what?”

“Smoking,” Oikawa states, crossing his arms over his chest. “It’s unhealthy, and you’re more prone to cancer. Really bad for the heart. Plus, it makes your breath stink.”

“Huh.” Iwaizumi mirrors him and leans back. “Where did you learn all that?”

“I may have lost my memory, but I’m not stupid,” Oikawa counters immediately. He glances up at Iwaizumi to see the rise of a disbelieving brow and adds, “or I may have read it from one of your fitness magazines.”

Soon after, the main course is brought to their table. Oikawa parts his lips with mild surprise. Breaded slow-roasted pork belly with thin slices of pickled onions, carrots, and seaweed. Iwaizumi carefully slides this plate to Oikawa, then gets his own. He peers over to see what he’d ordered. Sesame-crusted salmon with roasted pineapples and pickled radish, drizzled with a ginger-garlic sauce. Aside from the main dishes, there are small plates of torched scallops, fried prawns, grilled chicken thighs—

It’s practically a feast.

No wonder it took so long.

“You’re drinking?” Oikawa asks disappointingly when the waitress places a large bottle of liquor on the table.

“This isn’t just for me,” he corrects, slamming two shot glasses between his fingers. He pushes one towards Oikawa. “It’s for you, too.”

“Ah.” Oikawa makes a tight noise of realization. “We’re drinking.”

Iwaizumi raises his head to look at him, shoulders rolling in a shrug. He pops open the whiskey bottle and pours himself a glass. “It’s fine if you don’t want to.”

“I do,” Oikawa replies too quickly and Iwaizumi pours him one. It’s hard to hide his excitement, especially when a distinct aroma tickles his nose. Citrus. Woodiness, and a bit of an almond tone. He lifts the shot glass to his lips—

“Wait, I’ll order some juice.”

Oikawa frowns and puts the glass back down. “I thought we’re trying to get drunk?”

“You need something to drink after a shot of hard liquor,” Iwaizumi explains, his voice shifting into a more thoughtful edge. “Especially aged whiskey like this.”

“What?” Oikawa puffs his cheeks, slightly offended. “I can take it.”

He scoffs. “I doubt it.”

Oikawa pushes the pickled vegetables around his plate with his chopsticks, submerging them with the sauce. “I’m not as helpless as I look.”

“Don’t look helpless at all.”

He looks up at Iwaizumi, doe eyes wide. There are no traces of dishonesty in his face. Oikawa then stares back at his meal to assemble a bite. “Come on,” he says in disbelief, voice thinning. “I looked pretty pathetic when you found me.”
Iwaizumi glances up, raising an indicative eyebrow.

“What were you doing there anyway? With those kinds of people?”

The question catches him off guard, and there’s really no straightforward answer that he can give. Panic begins to huddle in his chest as Oikawa draws in a deep breath.

“I don’t—I don’t remember,” he tells him, voice unsteady. The drone of the restaurant’s ambiance suddenly echoes in his ears as he fishes through his brain for his earliest memory. “I woke up inside this… water drum. It’s filled with ice, and I’m in it. It was freezing. I couldn’t move at all.” He sucks in some air, folding his arms as though the air had turned cold. “My side—It was stitched up, but blood still came out, and I…” he trails off, sighing before putting a hand on his temple. “I don’t know what happened. I became some sort of lab rat after that. I lived like one. I have no idea why I was there. They didn’t tell me anything. Those assholes kept me locked up, and I—”

Iwaizumi cuts in wordlessly, a steady, apologetic hand circling around his wrist. The warm touch stops his brain from bringing a horrific scene into focus. Instead, he drinks in Iwaizumi’s expression, features contorting with regret.

“Guess I’m not that different from them.”

Sudden humidity hits his face, and Oikawa didn’t realize that his hands had balled into fists until Iwaizumi unfurls them, letting his fingers idle above his palms for a short moment. His heart hurts at the sight of guilt spreading across Iwaizumi’s face. He’s not a monster. He’s very far from it. Iwaizumi makes him forget everything else, even for a short while. He lets him move, lets him know that he exists—

Iwaizumi withdraws his hand, but Oikawa wishes he hadn’t.

“That’s not true,” he says solidly, shaking his head in disagreement. He whips his gaze up to cast a look of genuine affection at Iwaizumi. “You’re more human than anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Wouldn’t you like to have met a normal person instead?” Iwaizumi asks with a short chuckle.

Oikawa notices the edge of contempt in his voice. He straightens up, licking his lips. He rests his hands on the table, a thumb brushing the varnished wood of his chopsticks. “I don’t think a normal person would’ve found me, or gotten me out of that situation.”

“Any person with a conscience would,” Iwaizumi says, not lifting his eyes from the other man. “Oh, so you do have a conscience.”

Iwaizumi grunts in his throat, horning in a meaningful glare. “It’s—well, mine’s different.”

“But it’s there, isn’t it?” Oikawa tells him quietly, taking a prim bite out of his dinner. “That’s good enough for me.”

☆ ☆ ☆

Iwaizumi would’ve considered it a scam if that twelve-year-old bottle of Yamazaki didn’t do its job in poisoning him. His drunken stupor has already passed, although the subtle taste of malt still
lingers on his tongue. His hands ease around the steering wheel, the rest of his body loose and warm, devoid of tension that normally likes to hang around him.

He peels his vision away from the road for a second, turning his head to look at the man sleeping in the passenger seat.

Oikawa had only drunk a little, but had been reduced into a sack of exhaustion on his third drink. His low tolerance for alcohol causes an absurd amount of blush on his face, spreading far across the entirety of his body. Maybe he has a low tolerance for everything. His defenses are the type to fall down easily, even without the help of alcohol.

The drive home is quick. He lives in the same vicinity, so it didn’t take long for Iwaizumi to reach the parking garage below Moriyome Hills. Oikawa doesn’t budge even when he shuts the car off. His capped head has been resting on Iwaizumi’s shoulder for a while now, and he lets him stay like that, slowly leaning back in his seat to relax. It’s calming. He doesn’t have the heart to wake him up.

Iwaizumi fixes his eyes on the rear-view mirror, staring first at his reflection then at Oikawa whose features had softened, glasses dangling loosely from his ear, shallow breaths escaping from his parted lips. He looks peaceful. When exactly did Oikawa become this otherworldly comfort?

It all breaks when the silence is shattered by the buzz of his mobile phone. In an instant, his mood sinks between displeasure and irritation, a string of whispered curses slipping through his teeth as he liberates his phone from his pockets.

“Thank you for ordering from Madam Saigou’s Bakeshop! Your cake has been delivered to your hotel room!”

While the initial ringtone isn’t enough to budge Oikawa from his sleep, Iwaizumi realizes he has to wake him up sooner or later.

“Oikawa,” he calls out, his voice low and warm. “Wake up.”

Several repetitions of his name later, Oikawa comes around. He rubs a sluggish hand over his eyes, then blinks them a few times until they open completely. Noticing where they are, he straightens his back and releases a loud yawn.

“Go upstairs,” Iwaizumi orders, disliking the sleek weight of his phone in his hand. “I have a job tonight.”

Oikawa blinks back at him, then at the digital clock on the dashboard. Twelve-fifteen. He’s expressive enough for Iwaizumi to read the minuscule clues that display his disappointment as Oikawa drifts his gaze towards him. His lips part like he’s about to say something, but presses them together in a moment of hesitation.

His heart skips when Oikawa suddenly wraps his arms around his neck.

“Can we do this again?” Oikawa asks in a delicate whisper, his breath brooding over his skin. Iwaizumi feels the other take a deep breath, tipping his head of brown hair slightly so he can burrow himself deeper into the crook of his neck.

“Yeah,” he says along with a soothed sigh.

He remains a passive recipient of Oikawa’s embrace, leeching off the warmth from the other’s body. Under the spell of a fortuitous decision, Iwaizumi’s hands move up, finally, perhaps in an
attempt to reciprocate—

But Oikawa untangles himself from him before he’s able to do anything.

A wave of regret carves lines into his face. He hopes Oikawa doesn't notice the self-loathing painting over his features. Pursing his lips, he reads the silence and decides to compromise.

“Give me your hand.”

Oikawa snaps his head up drearily, the clutches of sleep and the remnants of Japanese whiskey still obvious in his eyes. “Why?”

Iwaizumi doesn’t answer. Instead, he unfastens his wristwatch until it dangles off his palms. The air between them thickens with a calm silence as he belts his golden watch around Oikawa’s wrist, the young man growing hopelessly still.

“Wear this at all times,” he says, brushing his fingertips over the length of his hand before letting go. He raises his head to meet Oikawa’s glazed eyes.

Still in a daze, Oikawa stares at the watch around his wrist. “O-Okay,” he stammers, not quite sure what to make out of the gift. He chews the bottom of his lips before offering Iwaizumi a sleepy smile - which, in Iwaizumi’s truly unbiased opinion, is more than enough to act as a token of his gratitude.

“Thank you.”

Within a minute, Oikawa is able to grab the shopping bags sitting in the backseat before stepping out of the car. Iwaizumi lifts his eyes to watch the young man walk towards the elevator, the paper bags in both hands keeping him from covering his mouth when he yawns. Oikawa waves at him from the distance before he disappears into the elevator.

Iwaizumi remains still for one whole minute until there’s nothing but silence.

Oikawa’s embrace did two things.

He stares at himself through the rearview mirror, incredulous, a rush of blood roaring through his veins. His heart races like it’s ripe and ready to burst out of his chest. That’s only the first thing. The second is the overbearing feeling of utter regret - because he was too fucking slow, too latent, because until now he still has this indigenous deterrence against anything that can be classified as affection.

Iwaizumi presses the back of his head against the car seat.

His absent gaze takes him to a lonely paper bag on the passenger seat. Did Oikawa forget to bring it with him? Iwaizumi peeks inside, surprised to see the only article of clothing Oikawa truly coveted. He yanks it out and carefully scrutinizes it before taking off his denim jacket, replacing it with one that’s made out of faux leather and mint cotton trims - the one Oikawa happily picked out for him.

He drives towards the exit and emerges into the road, ignoring the speed limit and cutting the journey in half.

☆ ☆ ☆
It’s a quarter after midnight when a Lexus veiled in black mica rolls to a stop in an open-air parking space. Iwaizumi plucks the key from the ignition and hops off. He looks around before wandering inside and heads down towards the Palm Plaza Hotel’s staff entrance.

Your target is an encrypted file. Send the target to respective intelligence servers. Do not kill. High police presence in the vicinity. Discretion is of essence. Failure is not an option.

Retrieval, he thinks wearily.

Providing the same mask as the last time, Iwaizumi duly ignores it and walks out.

His destination is located in the less dense part of town. Iwaizumi leaves his car in an inconspicuous alley, nestled between an old 7-Eleven and a dental clinic. He walks east towards the target building’s location.

The bakery is at the very bottom of a low-rise building, three stories tall. Empty streets. No other civilian in sight. The interior lights are off, but the Madame Saigou’s Bakeshop sign burns with neon gas, giving it a singularly crimson glow within the dusky blue neighborhood.

“Is he dead?”

“I fucking hope so.”

Iwaizumi halts, blending in with the shadows as soon as the faint voices of men travel within earshot - two or three, probably. His sight catches one of them, sporting an ill-fitted suit, wiping his bloody hands on the side of his pants. Iwaizumi observes him. That doesn’t look like a man who’s working overtime in a quaint bakeshop.

Two more emerges from the alley. Bloody t-shirts. The guy in the expensive suit displays his importance like a peacock. His suit pockets seem to be bulging - could be a phone, or keys, or weapons. The three men, alert and wakeful, idle for a short while before going back inside through the front door. Once they’re out of sight, Iwaizumi steps out from his cover and scans the building facade. He looks up at the windows on the second floor. Lights. Broken glass, which means broken locks - a viable option to remain undetected.

Iwaizumi quietly slithers to the narrow side alley where the three men came from. It’s dead-quiet. He turns left and reaches the back of the building.

His surroundings are dark, but he doesn’t need a torch to know that it’s fresh blood smeared on the ground.

His breath stops.

Another dead operative.

The corpse has a rubber mask on. It’s thick with a generous amount of blood that Iwaizumi can hardly recognize which animal it’s supposed to emulate. Nylon rope is tied tight around his neck, probably so the guy wouldn’t be able to take the mask off. Those men probably did it to make a mockery out of him before beating him to death. Fucking assholes. Iwaizumi cautiously approaches
the lifeless man and pries into his pockets.

They have the same note, but different in color.

He attempts to overlook the dead body and surveys the area. His gaze ascends, searching for ledges or balconies he can climb onto. The window isn’t high up, and he thinks the drain pipes anchored at the top and bottom ends could be thick enough to hold his weight. Iwaizumi considers himself nimble. He climbs by stepping on the protruding pipe fittings until he’s able to haul himself up the windowsill.

The room he sneaks into is eerily quiet. It’s a small bathroom, dim lights, mold seeping in between the tiles, a perpetual pungent smell of shit and urine defiling the airflow. Iwaizumi wrinkles his nose in disgust.

Dead bodies smell better than this.

He leers around and steps out in soundless stealth. It’s dark. The bakeshop below is possibly just a front, the second-floor hallways suggesting there’s something else going on. Iwaizumi guesses that this floor might be residential. Dilapidated rugs. Dirty walls. Huge footprints staining the wooden floors. It’s obvious people frequently loiter around this hall.

“Stay alert,” he hears someone say from downstairs. His footsteps seem to be getting louder. “There might be more of ‘em.”

As much as he hates the nauseating stench of the bathroom, Iwaizumi sneaks back in. Footsteps. Someone is walking up the stairs. In an attempt to lure him in, Iwaizumi hurriedly turns the faucet to its extremes, releasing a loud torrent of high-pressure water from the corner sink. He quickly hides behind the shower curtain.

“Those fucking idiots forgot to turn off the—”

Iwaizumi strikes for a knockout.

The guy never saw him lunge from behind. Never saw the arm that came across in one swift movement. Iwaizumi folds his arms around his neck in a blood choke, skillfully restricting blood flow from reaching his brain. He brings his elbows tight, the lateral pressure of his biceps enough to knock him out. The man falls down like a sack within half a minute. Iwaizumi seizes half of his weight and puts him down gently to avoid any sort of noise.

He rolls his eyes at the unconscious man.

It’s the guy in the ugly suit.

He rummages through his pockets and finds a set of keys, as well as a pistol squeezed between his belt and slacks. Iwaizumi takes both. He might need them later on. With the area quiet again, he shuts the bathroom door behind him and tries a couple of doors on both sides of the second-floor hallway. Only one is locked. He pushes several keys into the knob until the door creaks open.

Iwaizumi scuttles across the carpeted floor and turns the light on.

The first thing he notices is the strong odor - ammonia, ether, acetone; it’s hard to tell which one. The room has the structure of an office, or tries to be one, its image obstructed by suspicious objects littered all over. The scene reminds him of his younger days, when he had to accept illegal small-time occupations to earn cash. Windows covered with foil. Yellow stains on the carpet. Fire extinguishers. On the west corner, he finds propane tanks and chemical bottles and glassware,
charred and blackened with use.

This is definitely not what a bakeshop should look like.

He finds the computer table across the room, which is strangely the only thing that doesn’t belong within the mess. When he switches it on, he is welcomed by a familiar emblem - a white serpent eating its own tail against a maroon backdrop.

“Kyoudai-krug,” Iwaizumi whispers to himself, now fully aware that he’s in a hostile territory. The white circular motif that flashes on the screen haunts him. He clenches his jaw tight, recalling the similarly designed note with Oikawa’s name on it. He might be able to find information about him here.

Iwaizumi glares at the screen, his fingers clattering over the keyboard. The computer asks for a password as the previous user has logged out. Four letters - or digits. He draws in a breath and stares at the keys. Some prints on the numeric keypad are faint, perhaps from overuse. Four, five, six - they’re almost gone. That’s ten thousand different combinations, so Iwaizumi thinks he should start guessing now if he wants to leave early.

His dark green eyes comb around the table, hoping it might be written somewhere. Keyboard has an English alphabet. No Japanese. Password could be an English word. It could be anything. What are some words he can make out of those numbers? Kilo, lion, monk, milk. Incorrect Password. The violent beating of his fingers hitting the keyboard jams his thoughts. He’s starting to get pissed. Iwaizumi tries a few more words, more combinations of numbers; Link. Join. King—

King.

The screen fades into black before white pixels explode across the monitor. It asks for the password once more and he enters it. 5-4-6-4. Iwaizumi loads the computer, typing commands directly onto the system for full access. Soon after, he finds what he’s looking for.

After procuring the target, Iwaizumi spares another minute or so to copy all the files that he can currently access, hoping to find any type of information involving Oikawa. It’s almost like trying to find an honest man in the government - which is highly unlikely, but he tries anyway. Iwaizumi sends whatever he can to his phone. He can flip through the files later—

Bang!

Iwaizumi hears a commotion downstairs.

Instinctively, Iwaizumi raises the pistol he had looted from his first victim. Safety off, finger inside the trigger guard. He stands absolutely still and listens—

Bang!

He peeks his head through the doorframe slowly, gun ready. Hallway is clear, but that’s a gunshot in the ground floor. No doubt about it. Iwaizumi runs back to the bathroom, jumping over the body
that still lies motionless on the putrid tiles. Sirens. It’s coming from the outside. Front entrance. Is it the police? Either way, Iwaizumi thinks now is the best time to get out of there.

Iwaizumi escapes the same way he got in and hurdles out. Hanging by the windowsill, he adeptly leaps towards the drain pipes and slides down. His palm catches a protruding screw and cuts him, but his mind immediately tells him to worry about it later.

Once his feet hit the ground, Iwaizumi scrambles away from the building and brisk-walks into the opposite alley, hands in his unzipped pockets, emulating a civilian going out for a midnight stroll. He delves deep into a residential area to avoid suspicion before taking the long route back to his car on the other side of the neighborhood.

“That was close,” he breathes out, finding it easier to relax now that he’s far from the heat. It’d be bad if he’s caught by the police. He jumps into his car and hides.

Iwaizumi settles in and opens a glove box, throwing the pistol in and grabbing a roll of elastic bandages. He wraps the soft cloth around his hand, covering a long cut across his palm to keep it from bleeding. It stings a little. Mild pain. He sucks in a breath through his teeth. Once that’s done, he whips his phone out to do a little investigation of his own. He had gotten a substantial amount of intel, and it’s going to take a while to go through them all. His vision skims through the paragraphs until he chances upon something interesting.

In the morning of March 13, 1984, while sailing to Vladivostok, the Diamond Fund's RFS Slava collided with an unidentified ocean liner—

Ah, that’s probably where the loot came from. The Russian mafia must’ve gotten it first before Kyoudai-krug got their hands on it. He continues reading until he reaches the part where the diamonds are publicly classified as lost. It’s weird, because the next batch of files seem to have details regarding the diamonds - extremely specific details, as if they're not lost at all.

It appears to have been written by an auctioneer.

Lot No. 000-5464-01
Crescent Moon of Yelisaveta 101.29ct Blue
Expert's estimate: $80,000,000
Clarity: FL
Color: Fancy Vivid Blue-Green
Cut: Excellent, Cushion
Weight: 20.258 g

Lot No. 000-5464-02
Tvardovskaya Diamond 55.23ct Blue
Expert's estimate: $60,000,000
Clarity: VVS1
Color: Fancy Deep, Blue
Cut: Excellent, Triangular
Weight: 11.05 g
Lot No. 000-5464-03
Aleksandr Osvoboditel Diamond 69.60ct White
Expert's estimate: $90,000,000
Clarity: FL
Color: Colorless
Cut: Excellent, Oval
Weight: 11.92 g

Lot No. 000-5464-04
Saint Alexandra the Passion Bearer 35.36ct White
Expert's estimate—

“Holy fucking hell—” Iwaizumi manages to choke out in disbelief.

It’s the sheer shock and incredulity that hits him like a splash of ice-cold water. Those numbers are huge, and that’s just in US dollars. He could only imagine how many zeroes that’d be in Japanese yen.

Goddamn Russian crown jewels.

No wonder everyone is fighting over them.

He thumbs through the digital documents once more, but finds nothing else but that, as the rest appears to be efficiently encrypted and unreadable. The auctioneer’s list of jewels looks like it should be longer. Iwaizumi doubts these are the only ones missing. Why are files like this hidden in an unimportant meth lab? These seem like highly confidential information that any professional with a brain can decrypt.

Iwaizumi curses in amazement, his mind toppling over in pure shock. It’s unbelievable that he’s able to find this. He shifts in his seat, grips his phone tight, wondering if Aobajousai-kai already knows about the diamonds. The documents he sent probably has the same story or more.

He makes a mental note to ask Hanamaki about it tomorrow.

While tonight has been a stroke of luck, there’s still no mentions of Oikawa. He sighs in frustration, his head swimming in endless speculation, bringing his mind back to his initial theory. The diamonds being inside Oikawa’s abdominal cavity is already out of the question. They’re quite extensive in size, and it would’ve caused Oikawa a serious amount of discomfort - blood diamonds, as Matsukawa liked to call it. Somehow, Oikawa is mysteriously being left out in every single document. What could a kid possibly do in this kind of suspicious business?

Some time passes, and Iwaizumi realizes he’s been scrolling through thousands of pages on his phone for hours, desperate for clues. Frustration bleeds into his eyes. By reflex, he raises his wrist to check his watch, but remembers he had given his time to Oikawa. He leers at the dashboard clock instead. Four-thirty. The sun is going to rise soon, and he reminds himself to come home before Oikawa wakes up.

He clears his throat and starts the car, knuckles prominent as he clutches the steering wheel and drives off.
The pleasant fragrance of his flat floods his senses.

Iwaizumi steps inside, careful not to slam the door in its frame, swinging it shut with a gentle push. It feels a little bit different somehow. There used to be an undiscovered ecosystem of mold and bacteria in his kitchen, used to have piles of trash and forgotten take-out boxes rotting beneath his couch. The hardwood used to have constantly sticky puddles of spilled whiskey, sometimes beer, a thick veil of dirt and dust and ashes often mingling with them.

But it’s all gone now, and for the first time Iwaizumi felt at home.

The frigid air dwindles as the early dawn’s rose gold light flows through the tiny spaces between the curtains. It’s a mild, enticing glow, and he summons up the last reserves of his strength to open the door to his bedroom.

The mattress sinks ever so slightly when Iwaizumi sits on the edge of the bed. Oikawa doesn’t shy away, or rouses from his sleep. His features are etched with contentment, calm and still under the russet bed of hair that was hidden by a ball cap all evening, so it’s messier than usual. He’s comfortably wrapped in a cocoon of thick blankets, wearing Iwaizumi’s watch, wearing Iwaizumi’s old letterman jacket for additional warmth. Iwaizumi caves into his impulses. Gently, he reaches out, brushing his cinnamon wisps of hair back from his forehead and away from his eyes.

“I thought you hated that jacket,” Iwaizumi whispers, then chuffs out a quiet laugh as he runs his fingers through his curls in light strokes, afraid to break the spun glass.

Iwaizumi allows himself to drink in the sight of Oikawa sleeping peacefully. He’s no longer that malnourished, dehydrated kid with infected cuts and second-degree burns - proof that flowers really do grow back, even after they’ve been stepped on. For someone who’s been through a lot, he seems blissful, his thoughts happily lost in a dream, and thankfully not in a nightmare this time. It’s almost infectious. Iwaizumi then brushes his thumb over his cheekbones, chafing over skin smoother than velvet—

“Iwa-chan...?”

His heart jumps at the sound his voice.

Long, dark lashes flutter open as sleepy brown eyes struggle to stare back at him. The delicate rose gold light seeps through the dark room and resides over Oikawa’s half-lidded eyes of polished amber. Iwaizumi doesn’t withdraw his hand, and Oikawa must’ve appreciated it, lazily inching a palm over the back of Iwaizumi’s hand, as if to welcome the soft touch.

“You haven’t slept yet...?” he rasps, his words bleary and still under the influence of sleep.

Iwaizumi softly shakes his head. “No, not yet,” he replies somberly. It’s probably a good time to get some sleep, even if it’s just an hour or two. He’s about to stand up but is stopped by Oikawa, eyes closed, his palm sliding down to his wrist, keeping Iwaizumi in place.

“Stay here.”

He blinks, hazel eyes widening. Oikawa’s words could mean anything - stay by the edge of the bed, sit on the armchair nearby. But he’s been awake for so long that Iwaizumi simply chooses to lay down next to him, sliding an elbow behind his head like a pillow. He gulps down an unsuspecting lump in his throat, rolling to his side simply to watch Oikawa’s face burrowed in the pillow next to him. Watching him feels more like a reliance than a miracle, and he wishes he can
absorb some of that peacefulness in his features.

Oikawa takes him in with unquestioning acceptance and shuffles closer, a gesture Iwaizumi wouldn’t be able to do himself. He pulls at the sheets, draping a large portion of it over Iwaizumi’s body, just below his shoulders. He then skirts a graceful palm on Iwaizumi’s cheek, tracing his soft fingers across the weary lines etched in his face, then along his jaw. He combs his dark hair, pushing it back as though it’s long enough to be in the way. Iwaizumi feels vulnerable under his touch, but remarkably enough, he doesn’t mind it.

His face is so close to him that he can feel Oikawa’s sweet breath ghosting over his skin, mixing in with his own.

“You look tired,” Oikawa drones, voice quieter than a whisper, extending his other hand underneath the covers and grazes it over Iwaizumi’s bandaged palm. His dreary eyes flicker in worry as he cups his face. “Did you get hurt?”

Iwaizumi relaxes under the stroke of his hands, listening to Oikawa’s comforting murmurs. His voice is exquisitely near. “It doesn’t hurt anymore,” he mutters, his hum low and tuckered out. He breathes in deep through his nose, tries to make out Oikawa’s expression, but feels his eyes slip shut involuntarily whenever Oikawa brushes his hand against his skin, whenever his fingers comb through his hair.

He thinks it’s some sort of magic - like he’s under a spell.

Oikawa has a certain degree of natural charisma that pulls people into his orbit, though he still cultivates a wall of secrecy that’s a bit hard to break. He has this unknowing influence over him. It’s absolutely terrifying. He can easily bend him into any shape or form, rendering his heart to stop and go as he wills it with just one smile—

His will to stay awake disappears in a heartbeat, washed away by Oikawa’s enchanting touch. Finding a much-needed sanctuary in his warmth, Iwaizumi lets time melt by and finally drifts off into a deep slumber.

Chapter End Notes

ha ultraviolent more like ultrasoft amirite boys
on a scale from 1 to super soft how will u rate this chapter
playlists: nightcall / unit3041 / theroseclub / maybeitstimetowakeup

99% shitposts 1% art holla at ya boy here:
twitter & tumblr
Never Let Me Go

Chapter Notes

Heavily inspired by Hotline Miami.

Never Let Me Go by Lana Del Rey

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The tides of noon filter timidly through the curtains, bittersweet apricots welding together with the dark corners of the room. Rays of honey drip over the walls in a slow descent - sweet and tart. They weave across the planes until they reach a tempest of sheets. In this nest of comfort, Iwaizumi squeezes his closed lids tighter, an attempt to deter the sun’s valor falling over defenseless figures. He never liked how his bedroom windows face the east. The windows are all too keen and courteous, painting gold-flecked rectangles across his monochromatic home.

Underneath the tender tropics of his bed, some other source of warmth lays docile, mingling with layers and layers of blankets. Iwaizumi tightens his arms around its figure. His senses light up with indulgence, although his mind is too much at rest to fully grasp the context of this blind delight.

On his third attempt to block out the stubborn sunlight, a loud sound washes over the soft whirr in the air. His phone rattles against the wooden surface of his bedside table, bringing about more noise than intended. Iwaizumi groans, but doesn’t slip out of his slumber despite the urgency. Instead, he nestles back into the warm human-shaped covers. Maybe it will stop if he keeps ignoring it. But the ringing carries on, and despite its cold-hearted sounds, it’s something else that jolts Iwaizumi awake.

“Iwa-chan,” a heavy voice, irritated, drones from beneath the covers. “Your phone’s ringing...”

Iwaizumi snaps his eyes wide open, an electric current surging through his brain faster than the speed of light. He untangles himself out of reflex and shifts up onto his elbows. His consciousness awakens with someone nestled next to him, a head of brown tufts peeking out from the covers - obviously more asleep than awake.

It’s criminally unfair how Oikawa can look like this. His hair is a riot and nothing but. The roses blooming under his skin surface as soon as the sun hits it, implying the slightest trickle of foreign blood. Long dark lashes hover over his eyes - squeezed tight in annoyance, the wrinkles across the bridge of his nose only softening when the ringing phone surrenders.

Oikawa in slumber is a heavenly sight, and in that vulnerable moment of sleep-induced weakness, Iwaizumi can’t help but wish he’d never again wake up anywhere else.

But in the false hope that the air maintains its quiet hymn, his phone decides to blast another electronic song in full volume. He makes a disgruntled snort. Rolling to his stomach to reach out towards the bed end table like a sloth, Iwaizumi gathers the phone with his bandaged hand.

With an unsatisfied groan and sleep still in the back of his throat, he snaps at the caller.

“What do you want?”
“Where the hell are you?!” Hanamaki yells from the other line, loud enough for Iwaizumi to wince. “We have a meeting in thirty minutes!”

Eyes snapping open, he sits up and slides towards the edge of the bed. He immediately turns his vision towards the wall clock as it stares back at him in pure mockery.

Two o’clock.

Iwaizumi flares up in disbelief, the voice from the phone gradually dying out as his brain tries to come up with an excuse, and with the amount of sleep he just had, it didn’t take long for his thoughts to spring together a proper response.

“I... overslept.”

It’s a foreign word, a foreign concept, and the unfamiliarity of it all dries out his tongue and just the mere sound of his own voice saying it seems so fictitious. His sleeping habits are not what most would deem normal, so eight straight hours of it is already a fucking miracle in Iwaizumi’s book.

“Overslept? Are you kidding me? It’s two o’clock in the afternoon!”

Still suspended in shock, Iwaizumi’s mind buzzes with a sudden urgency. “I’ll be there as soon as I can,” he tells Hanamaki without an apology, biting the insides of his cheeks to keep his mouth from slackening.

He hangs up before he gets another earful and climbs out of bed. Oikawa stirs slightly at the brash movement, letting out a cranky whimper, disappointed at the loss of the other’s weight on the bed and the loss of the odd warmth he had been blatantly indulging on.

The lazy day shifts quickly into a chore as he hurries to clean himself up and change. Iwaizumi wanders to an open wardrobe and pulls out a creased shirt and unironed pants, putting them on with haste. His breath leaves him in an irritated rush, pulling in excess oxygen to quicken and mechanize his limbs. He wraps a clean bandage around his hand, just so the cut from last night wouldn’t dare split open. He opts for a cold splash of water to the face for breakfast and a bottle of beer for lunch. His hollow stomach probably didn’t like that too much, his thirst and hunger doubling as each second passes.

Marching back to the bedroom to grab a single-breasted suit, he’s greeted by Oikawa stretching his arms up with a loud groan, the letterman jacket doing wonders for his complexion, allowing him to be in the very center of his vision. The russet in his eyes glimmer when he blinks himself awake. He sleepily gazes back at Iwaizumi, tilting his head to the side as he watches Iwaizumi bustling across the flat like a restless rodent.

“You’re leaving already?” Oikawa asks in soft mumbles and glides on the edge of the mattress. His lips pressed tight in obvious concern. “You haven’t eaten yet, have you? I can probably whip up some—”

“I’ll just grab something to eat on the way,” Iwaizumi cuts in and gracelessly knots a loose black tie.

He turns to look at Oikawa and his big eyes and his tangled heap of brown curls. It’s taking a lot of his spirit to look away now, because the longer he stays locked in his gaze, the more he finds himself lost in a dense forest, until all he can think of is the soothing touch that was able to lull him to sleep.

Unhinging himself from the storm of his own thoughts, Iwaizumi grabs his phone and car keys off
the bedside table. He wanted to get out of the house as soon as possible - to align his thoughts back in order, to get rid of the affection-seeking dopamine running hopelessly in his brain—

“Iwa-chan! Wait!”

Oikawa catches Iwaizumi’s hand in his, managing a soft tug that’s forceful enough to stop Iwaizumi in his tracks. His left hand is admiringly warm, while the other dispenses another grocery list - the elegant handwriting suggesting that he had prepared it with much thought. He must’ve written it last night. Iwaizumi upholds a still demeanor even as his jaw relaxes, noticing hope darting over Oikawa’s features.

The pale hand clasping his tightens for a full second before it slides off. “It’s something I want to try making for breakfast,” he tells him, gently biting his lip, body language meek.

Iwaizumi can’t bring himself to refuse, taking the paper and tucking it into his small breast pocket. There’s a subtle flush rising to Oikawa’s cheeks when he stares back. His eyes shimmer in an unambiguous brown, a playful smile gracing his lips as his hand move to tweak a crease from his suit, and by this time Iwaizumi can feel his heart counting down the beats until its destruction.

“Oh, and I’m going to cook dinner tonight, so Iwa-chan better come home early.”

☆ ☆ ☆

Iwaizumi is quite certain when he says that he would rather watch a pachinko ball zigzag through an endless maze of metal pins than to sit in a room full of middle-aged businessmen.

The parlor hidden on the top floor of the Keyaki Plaza is dull and old-fashioned, as though it was built during the Golden Age. It’s a stark contrast to the rest of the offices in the building. A dominance of wood. Tatami floors. It has the perpetual air of tobacco and fragile egos, clouding the faces of profoundly wrinkled Japanese men. Hours later, the lesser bosses and their subordinates are dismissed. This includes Hanamaki, who seems the most relieved.

“You’ve never been late before,” Hanamaki says as soon as they’re out of earshot, pressing the down button to call the elevator. He lets out a loud yawn that he’s been holding back. Iwaizumi notes the suspicious tilt of his eyebrow before he casts a side glance. “You got a girl or something?”

Iwaizumi’s spine stiffens at the sudden question, sucking his mouth cheeks in. He didn’t answer simply because he didn’t feel like answering, and because Hanamaki is the type of guy who believes what he prefers to be true. The elevator sings a high note when it reaches them, and his vision darts to the door, his feet quick to step inside.

“You’ve never been late before,” Hanamaki chimes, and although Iwaizumi is looking ahead, he can still hear the cheeky grin being thrown at him. “I honestly thought you’d never move on.”

Iwaizumi’s spine stiffens at the sudden question, sucking his mouth cheeks in. He didn’t answer simply because he didn’t feel like answering, and because Hanamaki is the type of guy who believes what he prefers to be true. The elevator sings a high note when it reaches them, and his vision darts to the door, his feet quick to step inside.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Hanamaki chimes, and although Iwaizumi is looking ahead, he can still hear the cheeky grin being thrown at him. “I honestly thought you’d never move on.”

Iwaizumi remains quiet, his jaw clenching. His next breath gets caught in his chest as he presses the button for the ground floor.

“You’re not dropping by your office?” Hanamaki asks, tipping his head before pressing the button for the 20th floor. “Come on, what’s the hurry? Let’s go for a couple of drinks. Happy hour. I know you have a lot of aged whiskeys stashed in there, and you can tell me all about your new
girlfriend while we’re at it.”

Iwaizumi counters with a heavy sigh, thick with annoyance. “I don’t have one,” he insists truthfully, the grimace twisting his face amusing Hanamaki even more. The door opens where Hanamaki wants it to. He prematurely pushes Iwaizumi outside.

"Don't have what? The girlfriend or the booze?"

The clacks of their oxfords echo in a hallway of fitted tiles and glass cubicles as Iwaizumi walks ahead. Hanamaki’s footsteps approach at a quicker pace behind him, and Iwaizumi twirls just in time for the other man to snatch the piece of paper peeking out from his suit pocket.

“Hey—!”

“Oh? What’s this?” Hanamaki suggests with playful curiosity. He scampers ahead to avoid Iwaizumi’s imminent anger. “Would you look at that...” he sneers. “Iwaizumi Hajime, Aobajousai-kai’s top-performing butcher, is in need of strawberries, cottage cheese, pancake mix—”

“Hanamaki,” he growls with a slow buzz, restrained but threatening.

“I wonder whose pretty handwriting this is— ow !” Hanamaki yelps in pain. Iwaizumi roughly wrestles the grocery list from the other’s grip with a subtle intent to tear his wrist off. He shoves it to his back pockets this time. The chuckle and the leering smile that comes after only heightens his irritation. “You do have a girl.”

Iwaizumi rolls his eyes, his gaze flicking upward as he purses his lips in distaste. He figures it would be better if Hanamaki thinks he’s living with a woman, rather than a missing person who may have mysterious ties with the syndicate. He responds with a cold shoulder and slips into his office. Hanamaki follows closely from behind, slightly surprised when Iwaizumi pulls up the roll-up blinds to let some sun in.

“It’s totally okay if you don’t want to tell me about her, it’s not like we’ve been friends for a long time or anything—ah, shit, I forgot my Luckies in the car,” Hanamaki cuts off his own ribbon of sarcasm, frisking his pockets to check for protruding cigarette case. “Do you have a smoke?”

“I don’t smoke anymore.”

Hanamaki’s expression falls into lines of disbelief. His fingers find its way up to his head, rubbing his temples. “Who are you?”

“It’s unhealthy,” he adds, dropping his weight on his office chair, leaning back to take a deep breath. Within the bright confines of his workplace, he can clearly see the bags under Hanamaki’s eyes. He then pops open an old bottle of whiskey and equips Hanamaki a drink of his own.

“You know what’s unhealthy?” Hanamaki starts, sipping once from his glass before settling down on an armchair across him. “Killing people. Drinking during the day. Staying awake for three days straight.”

His eyes squint. “Killing people who deserve to die isn’t going to give me cancer.”

“Still unhealthy,” Hanamaki reiterates with a more exaggerated lilt, pointing an index finger on his temple. “I’m talking about mental, not physical, and don’t forget about occupational hazards. You’re more likely to get killed during a job than to die of a disease.” He breathes out a short mirthless laugh before continuing, “and here you are, worried about getting lung cancer.”
“It’s one thing to be hit by a bullet, another thing altogether is to be eaten up from the inside out,” he retorts with a shrug. Feeling a sudden lightness, Iwaizumi briefly closes his eyes and lets his head fall back a little, eyes fixed on the ceiling lights. Death isn’t quite on his top list of fears. It’s slowly working its way up, though. “I don’t want either of the two.”

“I’m a little jealous,” Hanamaki confides with a sigh. “I’ve been trying to quit. Smoking, I mean. Even got those nicotine patches to take the edge off. Made the withdrawal symptoms worse.” He glances up at Iwaizumi over the rim of his whiskey glass. “I remember you used to have two hours of sleep within a span of ten days. How’d you do it?”

Uncertain, his hazel eyes daze into the distance. “I don’t... know,” he says.

Iwaizumi scours through his thoughts and recounts the events in the last couple of weeks. Oikawa cooks most of the time now, so takeouts are basically off his diet. He’s been laying off the morning cigarette. His opioids constantly disappear into thin air. Whiskey bottles magically run out. Iwaizumi supposes that it might have something to do with at least one of them - or someone. After all, Oikawa did manage to single-handedly improve his quality of life within days of cohabitation.

“Well, whatever it is, I’m glad it’s working out for you,” Hanamaki says, slamming an empty glass on Iwaizumi’s desk to help himself for a refill. “Might want to share some tips with Matsukawa. He’s been paranoid, losing a lot of sleep, keeps thinking his holding companies might get delisted.”

“Investigators monitor trading accounts now,” Iwaizumi explains. “They sift out names that might have underground connections.”

“Huh, I thought the bureau would be more lenient now that Chairman Takemura is gone. I guess his anti-yakuza sentiments rubbed off on them.” He huffs, taking a drink from his second glass. “You’re not drinking?”

“No.” Iwaizumi frowns. The aroma of whiskey alone curdles the beer and acid inside his stomach. He thinks Oikawa wouldn’t appreciate the smell either, so he leaves the bottle alone. “Not today.”

“Wow, you really are a changed man,” he says, letting out a tight laugh. “I must say, your girlfriend is doing a damn good job.”

“I told you I’m not with anyone,” Iwaizumi reproaches, but it falls on deaf ears. With a sigh, he follows the other’s lanky hand extending towards the newspaper sitting on his desk. Hanamaki builds a slow smile when he unfolds the paper, his body posture perking up. He begins to read the front page news out loud.

Several officers assigned to a drug task force discovered a Kyoudai-krug meth lab on the second floor of a local bakery. Police Chief Harada Masabumi received a tip last Wednesday about a strong chemical aroma coming from a small bakeshop in Ueno—

“Have you heard?” Hanamaki asks, stopping to check whether he has Iwaizumi’s attention. “Thanks to you, we got new intel on the diamonds. I mean, it’s nothing too special, and we still don’t know where on earth they are, but everyone’s quite intrigued.”

Iwaizumi feigns innocence, attention bucking up. “What’d you find out?”
“Crown Jewels,” he answers, eyes narrowing with a good-natured excitement. “We don’t know how many there are out there, but each should estimate at around a hundred million, and I’m talking US dollars here. It’s fucking insane.”

“And they’re all missing,” Iwaizumi reminds him, which brings Hanamaki’s smile back into a fine line. He leans forward to lift himself off his chair. “Good luck with that.”

“You’re going home?” Hanamaki asks, his head following Iwaizumi’s moving figure. “I haven’t even given you my gift yet.”

Iwaizumi halts, pausing to examine the other man’s suspicious profile. “Gift?”

“Your birthday,” he tells him with a hint of excitement. “It’s today.” Hanamaki gets to his feet as well, walking over past Iwaizumi. He takes a quick stop in Iwaizumi’s unused pantry to fish out a small box. “I know you hate shit like this, but this is sadly my only specialty.”

Hanamaki hands him a box with the usual pastel pink packaging from his pâtisserie. The top lid grants a transparent window so Iwaizumi can see the cake inside - a mercilessly colorful abomination, profusely speckled with rainbow sprinkles and edible confetti on the outside. He squints at the contents with distaste, then glances back at Hanamaki dead in the eyes.

“This is horrible.”

“What? Too over the top?” Hanamaki flashes a smirk before slapping Iwaizumi’s back. “Your reaction is disappointing, by the way. I was looking forward to it too.”

With a blank stare, Iwaizumi glances at his old friend. “Can I go now?”

“Yeah, okay, you’re free to go, buy pancakes for your girlfriend or whatever.” Iwaizumi notes the sudden change in his voice, low and definite, his face shifting into a more grave expression. “Just remember,” he starts, unsmiling, placing a firm hand on Iwaizumi’s shoulder. “Don’t allow anything to be in your life that you can’t walk out on in ten seconds flat.”

☆ ☆ ☆

Oikawa can’t remember his dream last night.

He blinks a pair of copper eyes into focus. The setting sun outlines the surface of his skin in supple peach strokes, washing over the pages of an open book setting up home in his hands. He absently turns the page with gentle fingers, allowing his thoughts to focus on the small, printed words instead of trying to recall what might have been a nightmare. It’s an unusual feeling. Judging by his history of bad dreams, he’s certain last night’s might have been just a horrible memory. He’s thankful his brain blotted it out this time.

The first minutes of his mornings are never pleasant. There have been more times of him waking up in cold sweat, because he’d often dream about being eaten alive, about hands clawing at him like hookworms, like parasites.

Today, however, was remarkably different. His entire body heats up the second he remembers, his pulse racing, brain flooding with the lingering warmth that belonged to none other than Iwaizumi. Oikawa tucks his knees up to prevent the ghostly butterflies from soaring out of his stomach. His
heart sinks. He’s been deprived of affection for so long that it triggered a hot flush of self-contempt within him, embarrassed that he’d literally throw himself to the first person who’s nice to him.

Iwaizumi is just that - nice.

Who would want a fucked up kid like him anyway?

Oikawa shakes his head to shed off the disgraceful blush that snuck across his cheeks, his fondness almost immediately replaced with shame. He shuffles his feet, curls his toes, and brings his eyes back towards his book.

It took a while, but he learned to lounge around unapologetically. Most of the time he’ll just perch himself on the chaise longue facing the tall windows, holding a book that’s fascinating enough to keep his interest for hours. That part of the flat has an exquisite view of the city and the perfect amount of sunlight to read books in.

This particular one he’s into is sullen and bathed in an aura of sadness. It’s frustratingly lyrical. Characters padding around in wasted emotions. Things left unsaid. Heartsick images of misty mirrors. Snow-capped mountains. Tales of star-crossed passion. The leading man somewhat reminds him of Iwaizumi - lost and forlorn, continually compelled to the past and his commitments. Then, there’s his winter lover, homesick and desperate, drawn to a distant man, hoping to somehow reach his heart—

His eyes flare open with a tragic realization. Oikawa lifts his gaze from the doomed nature of the book’s love affair, the likeness of it causing an ache to traverse to his chest.

It’s too depressing.

He’s nearing the end, with only a few more pages to turn, and Oikawa can tell it will eventually bring him to a devastating conclusion. He’s not sure if he’s quite ready for it yet.

Oikawa abruptly shuts the book and presses it on his stomach. His absent gaze soon travels ahead, towards the cityscape washed in the hypnotizing colors of the sunset. The backdrop blurs when he raises his right hand in front of him, an orange glow outlining the valleys between his fingers. The gold watch that hangs loosely from his wrist glistens with sharp focus as he greedily latches on to every little detail on it. Scratched glass. Loose crown. Tarnished metal.

He draws in a breath through his nose as he stares at it in a more careful inspection.

“What’s this?” Oikawa hums to himself, noticing six numbers engraved on the top ring surrounding the dial. His eyebrows furrow into an inquisitive crease. He turns the bezel so the marigold light hits it better. “Zero, six…” he mutters absently, the brim making a ticking sound as he rotates it. “Ten, ninety…”

He wonders if the numbers mean anything to Iwaizumi, since he’s pretty sure that a common watch bezel should have fifteen-minute increments on them. It might be just a design choice. Random numbers. Even still, he doesn’t get why Iwaizumi would give this to him. With so many clocks inside his flat, he doesn’t really need a watch, nor an expensive accessory. His chest heaves with a sigh. If anything, its only purpose is to sit around his wrist, painfully reminding him of all the hours Iwaizumi isn’t home.

Cold hardwood nabs at the soles of his feet when he lifts himself off the longchair. Oikawa shuffles to the bathroom and rubs his eyes, strained from all that reading. He stretches before he steps out of his sweats and letterman jacket. Soon after, steam fills the room and fogs the mirror
when he takes a scalding hot shower. With warm water falling over his lashes, he opens his eyes, glancing to the shelves with a lineup of bottles - shampoo, conditioner, shower gel, body butter - all of which appeared to have been selected randomly by Iwaizumi when he was in the store. Oikawa doesn’t think a guy like him would actually read the labels. The absence of his favorite loofah sponges cuts his bath time by half, and he cruises through the clouds of mist and damp tiles as he emerges from the bath.

Hesitantly, his eyes meet his own on the mirror.

He isn’t at all handsome, Oikawa thinks. His face doesn’t look like it would fall under that category. He hates his face. He hates that it’s more likely to be compared to a woman’s. His preceding captors would throw insults at him because of it, hidden under the guise of compliments, deliberately mindfucking themselves into thinking he’s a woman so they can use him as such.

It’s his fault.

It’s this stupid face’s fault and Oikawa wants nothing but to rip it off.

The violent urge simmers down when he spots the reflection of the only plant in the bathroom - a small, potted succulent sitting next to the faucet and hand soap. It has thick, velvet-like leaves, gray-green, tips spotted with brown that gives it a charred look. It would probably be better off somewhere with plenty of sunlight.

Oikawa does just that. Pulling his thick terrycloth robe tighter around his chest, he picks up the lonely succulent pot and places it on the kitchen island, right next to a bigger centerpiece of bright green jades. It’s already dark outside, but Oikawa finds himself smiling at this little feat. He twirls to lean back against the island counter and dries his hair with the towel hanging around his neck.

He didn’t take off the wristwatch when he bathed, truly believing its claims of being waterproof. It’s heavy, but Oikawa finds the weight soothing for some reason - like a protection charm, like an omamori that people would carry around for luck. When he looks at it, the accusing hands are already pointing at seven-thirty, reminding him how he promised Iwaizumi dinner before he left.

Oikawa always ends up cooking one way or another - even when he doesn’t need to, even when he’s not at all hungry. It’s a time when he can slow down, take his time to enjoy the moment. Cutting, peeling, mixing - they’re mostly mindless, mundane tasks, which makes it almost therapeutic. Oikawa can go as far as to say that it’s another form of meditation. It feels good to do something purposeful instead of sleeping all day or moping around the house.

In one magazine, he read that hard work is a good distraction. It’s more of an article about moving on after a really bad breakup, but Oikawa feels like it still applies. He powers up the rice cooker first off. He then kneels down to bring out the cookbook he had found collecting dust beneath Iwaizumi’s counter.

Following recipes gives him a sense of assurance, peace of mind, since the very essence of it being its predictability, so the chances of a cataclysmic event happening are slim.

When he snaps the recipe book open, it automatically spreads into a certain page - the paper folded in half to substitute as a bookmark. Oikawa doesn’t remember doing that. The crease is sharp and old, flattened to the point where it can easily be torn off. Someone must’ve folded it a long time ago. Could it have been Iwa-chan? Oikawa unfurls the page with mild curiosity, and is greeted by a recipe for fried tofu.

This seems like a good dinner idea.
With a newfound objective, Oikawa gathers what he needs. It’s a simple meal with less than ten ingredients - all of which are readily available thanks to a certain someone. Iwaizumi truly likes proving his sincerity through actions, bringing home food and buying every ingredient he asks for.

Oikawa works with the tofu first, keeping his hands light and firm just as the book suggests, afraid that the tofu might break. He wraps it with a clean tea towel to extract moisture. Pulling out a knife from the rack, he cuts the block into large cubes before patting them dry with paper towels. He pulls out a small saucepan from the upper cabinets, then mixes in *dashi* and soy sauce in high heat, adding in a few tablespoons of *mirin* and *sake* just as the fire dwindles.

He flicks the panel for the second stove. Soon after, a complacent amount of heat floats through the air when the pot full of oil starts to bubble. He coats the tofu cubes in potato starch, blanketing his fingers in thick clumps of white powder. Oikawa glances at the pot again, and with animosity. Oil has been his worst enemy when it comes to cooking, but his bathrobe provides an advantage, covering a huge area of his skin with thick fabric that even oil can’t penetrate.

Slowly, he dips the breaded tofu in the oil using long chopsticks. He’s mildly amazed at his strong grip. He lets the tofu sit and wallow until it becomes this wonderful pale gold color. Oikawa pulls it out and places it on a paper towel before examining it, his bright eyes sparkling with excitement. It’s the perfect texture, perfect crisped edges - exactly like the picture in the recipe book. With the success of his first deep-fried tofu, Oikawa does the same thing to the other cubes, and when they’re all ready and fried, he divides them into two bowls before carefully pouring the sauce he just made on it.

Finally, he cuts up small portions of *daikon* and shreds a bit of ginger, as well as little pieces of dried seaweed and spring onions. Oikawa picks up a small packet of bonito flakes and rips it open. He sprinkles them all on top as a finishing touch.

Oikawa draws in a deep breath and smiles, triumphant. It’s magic. He feels the food heal him without having to taste it. The entire process is soothing in its own right, providing him time and space to breathe. But before Oikawa can continue basking in the glory of his hard work, he hears the electronic beep of the digital lock and the harsh sound of footsteps from outside.

When he walks in, Iwaizumi recognizes the scent of fried tofu wafting in the kitchen. “Welcome home!” Oikawa chirps almost in an instant. His head is peeking out of the bedroom door frame, and Iwaizumi assumes he’s still wearing a robe by the way he’s hiding. “You’re just in time!”

Iwaizumi frowns. “Didn’t I tell you not to cook in a bathrobe?”

Oikawa puffs his cheeks, keeping his distance. “S-Sorry! I’m changing already!” He extends an arm to grab the doorknob with a firm hand. “I want to eat dinner together, so wait for me, okay?” he pleads in a hurry before slamming the door.

The echoes of his familiar voice linger for a few more seconds before silence dawns on him. Iwaizumi wanders to the galley. There aren’t any ceiling lights on, the strip-lights fitted under the kitchen cabinets the only ones offering a warm beacon. His hair is damp and glistens when the soft light hits it, droplets from the light drizzle sliding down along dark brown strands.

Putting down a paper bag of groceries on the counters, Iwaizumi blows out a quiet sigh. He shoves
Hanamaki’s stupid birthday cake in the fridge before it reaches Oikawa’s line of sight. His shoulders ease down as he slides into one side of the kitchen isle - the side where they usually eat - and obediently waits.

Eventually, his gaze cruises down on the meal Oikawa had prepared; steamed rice, cucumbers in a soy-vinegar marinade, and a lovely bowl of *agedashi* tofu.

His eyes widen.

Iwaizumi didn’t say anything about which food he liked, always letting Oikawa cook whatever he felt like cooking, and he’s even more certain that he had kept his birth date from him. Does Oikawa know? He’s always been quite perceptive, and he’s pretty good at finding things he’s not supposed to. Iwaizumi spares another glance at his promised dinner in genuine appreciation.

Illuminated with a soft glow of the kitchen strip-lights, Oikawa finally springs out of the bedroom and rushes over to him. He’s wearing one of the plain shirts they bought yesterday and paired it with a pair of new joggers, the cinched cuffs able to cover Oikawa’s ankles comfortably this time.

“I hope you’re hungry,” Oikawa says, accidentally reading his mind because he hasn’t eaten anything for the entire day. He settles onto the barstool on his right. “I actually just finished cooking when you came in.” The young man pulls in his own bowl before he claps his hands and urges Iwaizumi to eat. “Come on, I promise it’s not poisoned.”

Iwaizumi frowns at the remark and hesitates for a bit. Carefully, he looks down at his bowl. It smells even better up close. The tofu has an amazing color - lightly deep-fried, silky, swimming in seasoned broth, garnished meticulously with thin slices of dried fish flakes and some other stuff he can't recognize. He hasn’t eaten anything the whole day, and he can feel his mouth starting to water that he had to press his lips together to keep it from falling open.

Carving a small cube with his chopsticks, he takes a bite—

To Iwaizumi, food is just a basic human need - like filling up the tank to get the engines running. But this is a far cry from just gas station petrol. It tastes like Sunday morning cartoons, tastes like Sendai in mid-July, tastes like the humid nights catching fireflies - tastes like the time when his family was still alive.

“W-What’s wrong?” Oikawa asks and breaks his reverie, brows wrinkling in worry. “Does it taste bad?”

He must’ve mentally blacked out for one whole minute, and Oikawa’s miserably worried expression confirms it.

Iwaizumi shakes his head once. “N-No, it’s just—” he stutters and busts out of his statuesque state, brows wrinkling, a shallow sigh escaping from his lips. It feels like a wave of memories resurfacing from the bottom of the ocean, and instead of guilt, heartache, it gives him peace for once. “The last time I had someone cook this for me was way back in high school,” he says, his voice low and quiet in profound reminiscence.

Iwaizumi shoves another bite into his mouth.

“Thanks,” he blurts out after the hard swallow. The words twitch the corners of his lips into a faint smile, his fitful gaze gravitating towards Oikawa. “You should cook it more often.”

Oikawa’s eyes widen and blink rapidly at the sudden confession, cheeks lighting up with a warm hue. The light that just entered Oikawa’s eyes mesmerizes him into a trance, taking comfort in its
presence, convincing him further that food really is just an extension of the person preparing it.

With a satisfied smile and an earnest nod, Oikawa responds, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Soon after, dinner was over. Oikawa gets up and prepares to wash the dishes. For the first time, he welcomes Iwaizumi for joining the Clean Plate Club and declutters the island in swift movements. Iwaizumi examines him from afar. Oikawa seems more than pleased when he discovers the new bag of groceries Iwaizumi had brought in, gleefully taking them out and storing them in the fridge. Iwaizumi wonders, that maybe in Oikawa’s exploration to cook, something revived his spirit. It must have provided him a sense of identity, brings him back to that pre-trauma version of himself that he can’t remember.

“What—!”

Iwaizumi springs into action when he hears Oikawa yelp from the kitchen, blood roaring in his ears. Concern slams through his body in a cold rush when he runs to him. “Oikawa, are you—!”

The young man who is seemingly in distress turns to him with the same amount of urgency. His eyes have grown big, yet his brows are furrowed in accusation. Iwaizumi realizes the awkward situation he’s currently in when he spots the pastel cake box nestled in his hands.

“You didn’t tell me!” Oikawa cries and bites down on his bottom lip, significantly hurt. Iwaizumi’s mouth falls open, perplexed. “I thought you knew—”

“What? How would I know that?” he asks with a pout. “You never tell me these things.” Oikawa then dry swallows and glances down at the box. “The date on your watch, this cake—”

“It’s yours,” Iwaizumi cuts in, hoping for a quick compromise. “You can eat all of it.”

“I’m sure as hell gonna eat all of it!” Oikawa is quick to retort, but he’s also quick to slump his shoulders. “But that’s not the point! I would’ve—!” His words die away as he stops to take a breath, as though he’s choking back a sob. He lowers his head. “I would’ve done something.”

His voice strained over that last sentence, piercing Iwaizumi with spears of guilt. Seeing Oikawa so upset sends a pain down his throat. “Look, Oikawa, you don’t have to. I don’t really care about—”

“But I want to,” Oikawa argues, his posture squaring. His eyes are so sharp it’s almost painful. “I’ll do anything, so just tell me what you want.”

“That’s—” Iwaizumi presses his lips, abhorring Oikawa’s choice of words. How can he afford to be so tactless? He scratches the back of his neck in personal unease. “That’s unnecessary. You already cooked for me—”

“You have to tell me before midnight.”

Oikawa’s stubborn insistence doesn’t let him say anything after that, disappearing behind his favorite chaise longue with Hanamaki’s cake, presumably to devour it. Iwaizumi makes a loud exasperated sigh, placing his hands on his hips.

He feels the need for a cold shower and rushes to the bathroom.

When he steps past the sliding glass and cascade of chilly water, he feels the tension of his muscles desert him. His dark hair deflates as he douses it with Oikawa’s rosemary shampoo - only because his generic all-in-one has already run out. Iwaizumi soaks every inch to get rid of the grime from
last night, veils of liquid pouring over the curve of his inked shoulders. But a sharp pain ruins the pleasant affair. He leans against the tiles and clutches the back of his shoulder, groaning in discomfort when soap seeps into it his old knife wound. Iwaizumi blinks down.

The water runs with a rusty red.

It’s an angry throb of pain, like jagged bolts drilling into his flesh. Iwaizumi sucks in a breath and stays under the shower until the water runs clear. That job yesterday probably spliced his wound open. Iwaizumi eases out of the shower and wraps a towel around his waist, his brain writhes his focus onto two throbbing cuts - one on his palm, another one on his back. He twists another bandage around his hand, but his back—

He couldn’t reach his back.

Pulling out the first-aid kit from the cabinets, he walks out and heads to the living room. He walks in on Oikawa sitting on the asymmetrical day-bed, holding a book. The floor lamp contours half of his face with a potent white light and the rest in soft shadows muted by the city lights. Iwaizumi pretends to look elsewhere to avoid meeting his eyes, pretends to find other things interesting. His chest caves. Just ask. It’s not that fucking hard. His hand tightens around the handle of the first-aid box, his expression rigid and uncertain.

He draws in a deep breath and releases it.

“The wound on my back,” Iwaizumi starts. He catches Oikawa’s attention immediately, brown eyes blinking in anticipation. He rubs the back of his neck with his bandaged hand. “It’s been hurting lately. Can you check?”

Oikawa’s eyes widen at him, mouth parting. “O-Oh, yeah, of course—!” he stutters, closing his book in an instant, obviously holding back his enthusiasm as he shuffles to sit up. He flings his legs so they hang on the left edge of the longchair.

Iwaizumi sits on the floor, between a pair of long legs. He reveals the meticulous murals laden with symbolism on his back for Oikawa to see. With his quick response, Iwaizumi can tell that Oikawa intends to cater to him. He doesn’t mind. He can go as far as to say that it feels good to have Oikawa spoil him so blatantly—

The touch sends a quiver through Iwaizumi’s bones.

Oikawa’s palms are warm against his skin, fingers slow and graceful and painstakingly soft. He feels his hand trace over his shoulder blades, over the dehisced wound gaping open like the split skin of a tomato, the protective layer ripped due to probable tension. Sitting cross-legged, Iwaizumi puts both hands on his knees patiently. It stings when the antiseptic replaces the warmth of his fingertips. He feels the sterile strips keep his wound tight and apposed.

It seems like Oikawa is getting used to this.

“How’s the cake?” he asks when he sees the box of half-eaten dessert, just to fill the silence.

Oikawa hums a short, disappointed sound. “It’s too sweet. I can’t eat all of it.”

“That’s a first.”

He then hears a soft laugh, a careful silence descending right after.

While he works quietly, Iwaizumi glances down and notices the book Oikawa had been reading.
The cover is unfamiliar, subtle. He hasn’t read that one. He hasn’t read half the books in his house. Dead trees painted black on a snow white canvas. The reckless, calligraphic brush strokes of *Snow Country* at the very center keeps his attention for a minute.

“Iwa-chan,” Oikawa calls from behind, his voice on the low register. Iwaizumi almost flinches in flight. “I’ll sleep on the couch tonight.” He feels Oikawa’s hand stop. “I can’t let you sleep there anymore—”

“No,” Iwaizumi interrupts with a firm tone. “I’m fine with the couch.”

“But your back’s been hurting.” His skin pulses in response, shivering in a tactile wave of awareness when he feels Oikawa’s worried sigh brush against the back of his neck. “I saw how you slept this morning;” he says as he tapes a non-stick gauze over the wound bed. “I haven’t seen you sleep like that before. You really missed your bed, huh?”

Gulping down the knot in his throat, Iwaizumi responds when the silence became too dreadful.

“It wasn’t because of the bed.”

It was because of you, he admits as a discreet afterthought. He doesn’t find the need to deny it, but he can’t bring himself to say it out loud either. Iwaizumi takes a deep breath, his posture relaxing in realization, sparing a second to get lost in his thoughts. It drowns his mind in a hypnotic whirlpool until Oikawa comes up with another suggestion.

“What if we take turns?”

“I’m *not* letting you sleep on the couch.”

Oikawa deserves better than that awful couch.

God knows how uncomfortable that thing is.

“Then let’s share.”

“What?” Iwaizumi blinks in surprise, and at this point he couldn’t help but turn his torso around to stare at Oikawa’s abnormally serious face.

“Let’s share the bed,” he repeats simply as if it’s not an atrocious idea. Iwaizumi then hears the lock of the wooden first-aid kit click into place. His hands slap the wooden box of first-aid supplies with both hands and shrugs. “We already know it’s big enough for the both of us.”

Iwaizumi can only stare at him, his range of view tracking the other’s tall figure as he stores the first-aid back to the bathroom, suggesting that the conversation is over and his decision is final.

Minutes melt by as the night drifts into a more resentful portrait, the patter of a summer storm chanting a soft, mediated tune. Iwaizumi hasn’t agreed nor disagreed with Oikawa’s proposition. Instead, he watches Oikawa trot around, clean up, and prepare for bed. He brushes his teeth, then walks to the bedroom to slip one of Iwaizumi’s old hooded pullovers to add another layer to his rainy day ensemble.

Iwaizumi stops to lean on the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest. He sees Oikawa wearing his old clothes again. “Didn’t we buy something like that?”

“It’s in the laundry,” Oikawa says airily, scrunching his nose. “It still has this chemical warehouse smell.” He then smiles down on his current outfit “Besides, I like this one. It doesn’t have zippers
on weird places."

Hiding behind his wardrobe doors, Iwaizumi puts on a clean t-shirt and fleece sweats that are as gray as the rain splashing on the windows. He turns the light off.

“Have you decided?”

The question echoes, his midsummer voice fighting against the storm outside. Iwaizumi sits on the edge of the bed and furrows his eyebrows inquisitively. A silent lightning catches the tufts of Oikawa’s hair and briefly sprinkles it with an electric blue. “Decided what?”

Oikawa sighs softly and rolls his eyes as though it’s obvious.

“Your birthday present.”

Iwaizumi’s lips part to say something. He falters when he hears thunder roar from the distance, his breath hitching in his throat. His unfocused gaze stays glued to the floor as his conscious mind comes up with a decision.

“Yeah,” he breathes out distinctly.

Oikawa glances at him with two big drops of melted caramel. “Really?”

The mattress springs creak quietly beneath Iwaizumi’s weight when he collapses on it, his back sinking in with the thick comforter of billowing clouds. Measuring the minutes like it usually does, the clock behind Oikawa glares at him, daring him to fall asleep, fully aware that he won’t be able to.

He’s frustrated, angry, and so unbelievably sick of not being able to sleep like a normal human being, and nothing has eased his difficulties. Drugs, acupuncture, therapists. None of them worked. Even in the state of pure exhaustion, his body still refuses to rest, his mind stuck in a cave-like void. He’d be awake all night, and within those countless hours of being alive he’d blame himself for not having the chemicals necessary to initiate sleep—

“Come here,” he tells him, finally, his inviting voice hoarse as he forces it into a whisper. He trusts Oikawa. He trusts him enough to be an inch away at his most defenseless state, and just hopes Oikawa feels the same. There’s an expanding feeling inside his ribcage, trying to burst out of his chest when opens his mouth to speak. “Lie down next to me.”

Oikawa freezes, eyeing the space blatantly left for him.

Heaps of anxiety begin to pile up in his chest. Oikawa holds his breath, the unexpected request clutching him at his feet. He stares at the man who’s sounding more and more like he’s possessed by a different soul. But if there’s anything Oikawa is one hundred percent certain of, it’s that Iwaizumi will never do anything to hurt him. He exhales with providence. Knowing that much, he eventually gives in and hops onto the bed like he always did. Only this time, there’s a bulky figure next to him.

The bed that he had always deemed too big seems so small now. He takes the side that’s closest to the full-length windows, next to the nightstand where a vase of peace lilies rest. At first, Oikawa thinks it’ll be painfully awkward, because unlike before, they’re fully aware of each other. That isn’t the case, he realizes. Somehow, being with Iwaizumi like this feels as natural as temperamental hydrangeas climbing up a tree. There’s still a significant amount of space between them when Oikawa lies on his back and decides to stay motionless beneath his own set of covers.
He cranes his neck towards Iwaizumi. “This is it?” he asks nervously.

Sleep pools on his eyelids. “Yeah.”

“What do I do?”

“Help me fall asleep,” Iwaizumi says like it’s the simplest thing.

“How do I do that?”

Iwaizumi reels himself over to the side and nudges a separate blanket closer. He’s facing him now, the cotton rustling when he shifts.

“You tell me.”

Their correspondence of whispers dies down just as the rain swells into rapids, until all he can hear is the subdued static noise from outside - hindering Oikawa from deep-diving into his dizzying thoughts. He lets himself roll to the side too so he can look at Iwaizumi and his gray-green eyes head-on. His insides quiver as he scours his brain, trying to think of what to do, what he did earlier this morning, only to find himself shrinking and blushing with embarrassment now that he recalls.

But Oikawa pursues his promise.

Hesitantly, he reaches out, brushing his fingers against Iwaizumi’s cheek.

Pale blue light outlines the bones in his cheeks, dampens the tousles of his dark hair. His closeness brings him into a soothing focus. With a racing heart, Oikawa unbends his knuckles, cupping the other’s cheek, his thumb mapping the vulnerabilities across his skin.

Seemingly suspended in comfort, Iwaizumi flickers his eyes open.

“You have to do better than that,” he blurts out.

“I—!” Oikawa stiffens and gulps, a pout curving his mouth. “I-I’m trying....”

The night soon trickles into an ungodly hour. Oikawa purses his lips, still thinking of what to do, thinking how he got here. He searches Iwaizumi’s face for an answer but finds none. How exactly is this calming? His nervousness is oozing out, and his heart is more than ready to slam out of his ribs. Iwaizumi can probably hear it. A delicate tremor runs down his spine when he inches up on the bed.

Oikawa pulls the other with slow, careful hands, tucking Iwaizumi within the confines of his arms and settling him against his heart. He curls up and dips his head down. It’s an angle where he can feel Iwaizumi’s breath against his chest, feel his lashes graze over his collarbones. He wonders if he’s doing this properly, or if his grip’s too tight—

But his doubts disappear when Oikawa feels hands slide around his waist in response, strong arms pulling him into an inopportune slow dance. Oikawa stills at the gesture. The underlying tension between them disappears as Iwaizumi’s embrace fills whatever space is left, as though he has been wanting to do it for a long time.

Oikawa inhales a slow breath, finding an element of solace in the other’s warmth.

“You probably don’t remember,” Oikawa whispers, cuffing a gentle hand through Iwaizumi’s hair. “When you arrived this morning, you fell asleep holding me like this.” His eyelashes flutter close
to lure in sleep, hiding his deep ambers behind it. “I always wake up from a nightmare, but… this was the first time that I didn’t.”

Sliding his right arm around Iwaizumi’s head, he cradles him closer, finding comfort in the scent of rosemary. Tufts of dark hair tickles his nose as he nears his lips to his hairline. Iwaizumi’s lack of protest gives him a slight assurance, but Oikawa can’t help but think that maybe Iwaizumi would’ve liked it more if it’s a woman doing it, even though he seems to be satisfied with him - not that he had a lot of options to begin with.

Iwaizumi stays silent in his embrace, his breath even and composed. Oikawa wishes he can see his face right now. He hears the quiet heave of his chest, the subtle beat of his heart, dousing Oikawa with a magic sedative. There’s a bizarre pull in his chest. It’s hard to believe that this is what Iwaizumi wanted as a present, and he doesn’t appear to be angry at Oikawa’s intimate approach.

“I’m glad your hair’s really soft today,” Oikawa murmurs with a soft smile, barely a whisper. He breathes in a whiff of rosemary shampoo lingering in Iwaizumi’s hair when he exhales a mixture of a satisfied sigh and a soft laugh. “I was afraid I’d cut myself otherwise.”

Oikawa spares a glance when he doesn’t hear a reaction.

“Iwa-chan?” he calls out softly, but the man seeking refuge in his arms stays motionless, wrapped in profound silence while the room fills with the soft rustle of a muffled storm. Oikawa feels the warmth of his breath through the fabric of his pullover when he glances down.

He’s asleep.

Oikawa had never seen him so at peace. He’s usually so angry-looking during the rare times he had caught him taking a nap at weird hours during the day. The rhythmic rise and fall of his chest alleviate the remnants of Oikawa’s anxiety, his own heart gradually slowing down. Oikawa nestles his chin on top of his head and breathes in his relaxing pulse. His palm presses over the curve of Iwaizumi’s spine, the other drifting on top of his head to tuck him closer.

“Goodnight, Iwa-chan.”

☆ ☆ ☆

On a black cedar wall, a cross burns in bright red.

The blood streaming through the neon tubes overexposes Iwaizumi’s face with a waxy, florid glow, casting a crimson gloss over the leather creases of his jacket. The luminous crucifix keeps him in a strange trance. It’s the focal point of life in the room. Iwaizumi thinks it’s funny when people forget that the crucified man they look up to preached kindness and tolerance and nothing else, yet somehow his followers are hell bent on savagery and human vices.

“P-Please! Don’t kill me—!”

The green in his eyes fluctuates between gold and red when it sails down to the floor.

Iwaizumi barely hears the choking cries of a man sprawled on the vinyl, his leg bent in a way a leg shouldn’t be bent. The fear that runs in his black eyes is hollow and cold. Harada Masabumi is freakishly large, physically gifted, but his voice isn’t as lucky. He has an unnaturally high-pitched
voice. Iwaizumi almost laughed the first time he heard it.

His hand came up with a shiny black automatic when Iwaizumi barged in. For a police officer who’s supposed to be fit and strong, he was quite easy to disarm, his arm in shallow angles, open for retaliation. Iwaizumi didn’t use the departmentally issued gun. It would’ve made too much noise, especially in an affluent residential block.

He didn’t kill him there and then like he usually does. When he realized who it was, Iwaizumi figured the guy might know something interesting, so he held back the urge to straight out murder the fucker and opted for a non-fatal blow to the leg.

The three other guys outside weren’t as lucky, though.

His footsteps are silenced by another storm tapping at the small frosted windows. The apartment is upscale, the nature of its modern design dictating that the owner must be quite young and financially comfortable. Bold red accents. Dark flooring. Leather-backed wooden chairs. The neon crucifix hanging above a glassed fireplace catches Iwaizumi’s short-term interest again. It blends seamlessly into the dark corners of the office when he turns towards a clerical desk, his gait casual and placid.

Iwaizumi takes his time.

He picks a piece of paper, crumpled and meant to be thrown out, blood soaking through its clean white canvas when Iwaizumi’s stained fingertips touch the surface.

Iwaizumi listens to the guy’s screams for a long moment.

“I—I’ll tell you anything! J-Just don’t kill me—!” the man begs, holding onto his broken leg, internally bleeding in a crumpled heap. Sweat rolls between his brow, furrowed in an insurmountable pain. He repeats the same thing over and over until it’s replaced by strangled sobs.

Harada chose to speak. Not a lot of people do.

The light dances when Iwaizumi paces over to block the red effulgent stripes cruising through the contemporary facets of the room. With avaricious curiosity, he observes the man he had crippled with his brand new aluminum baseball bat. He’s feeling nice today, especially since he’s been getting a lot of sleep in the past week. Crimson light glosses over the paper when Iwaizumi crouches down to his level and holds it to his twisting face.
The decedent was one of the prime suspects in the Rankei Residences shooting and worked as a shateigashira under Yanagihara Kichihoshi in a crime network called Yaponskaya-kai.

Description of Incident

On 05/05/16 at 0528 hours, the undersigned received a call from the MPD Shinjuku Ward Officer Kasen. Officer Kasen called to report the death of Kazuo Kozlov, Male, DOB: 08/25/75 at the Valhalla Nightclub, Kabukicho, Shinjuku, Room 303. As per Officer Kasen, the decedent arrived at the club—

“Rankei Residences shooting,” Iwaizumi demands, his voice as grim and hypnotic as the somber, rose-colored atmosphere. “What’s Kozlov got to do with it?”

The crippled man bites his lip in an audible rush, bracing himself. His eyes manage to ignore his bludgeoned leg. Being a firm believer of an eternal being, this guy should be devoted to the idea that healing occurs spiritually, and not through man-made medicine. He sucks in a shivering intake of breath and forces his voice out.

“Y-Yanagihara Kichihoshi, he—he was one of Yaponskaya-kai’s lieutenants,” he starts with gritted teeth, squeezing his eyes shut, tears and saliva mixing with the sweat on his chin. “H-His boys… call him K-Kolya—and that—that goatfucker Kozlov was friends with Kolya’s son, T-Tadanobu. When Kolya was murdered by a Kyoudai-krug hitman, Kozlov and Tadanobu… ordered their guys to shoot up a Kyoudai-krug joint… in Ueno.”

Iwaizumi fixes his eyes on the man, unblinking. “Rankei?”

“Y-Yeah, it was—it was… their headquarters—” the man pauses to cough out a pained sob, the words escaping between clenched teeth. “Kidnapped a bunch of Kyoudai-krug folk, sold their organs in the black market, d-dumped them in the bay…”

“This wasn’t in the news.” Iwaizumi’s frown deepens, his brows creasing in confusion and fury.

His thoughts flare in a fleeting exigency. Oikawa is still alive, so he couldn’t be part of that captured group, unless they spared him for a reason. Iwaizumi shakes his head and liberates himself from the images popping into his head. He didn’t want to imagine what Oikawa might’ve gone through. Glancing back at Harada, he angrily crumples the police report and lets it swim in a pool of his friends' blood. This fucker must’ve helped cover the news up.

“Why would Kyoudai-krug assassinate Kolya?” He narrows his eyes and huffs. “That’s just gotta earn them a lot of heat.”

“Co—!” His voice cracks in his throat and coughs out spit. “It’s—It’s because of that… that coalition.”

Iwaizumi raises an eyebrow. “Coalition?”

Still sprawled on the ground, the man wails, eyes shut tight, his words slowly slurring into incoherence as the seconds pass. “K-Kawamoto Ikebe—” he chokes, gasping for oxygen. The mention of the name causes Iwaizumi’s chest to swell with an indrawn breath. “He was a lieu—a lieutenant, like—like Kolya. Huge business tycoon. Fucking idiot wanted to unify Kyoudai-krug…and Yaponskaya-kai—and, and people were against it, so Kawamoto, he, he—”

“He was murdered,” Iwaizumi cuts in. He swallows a dry lump in this throat, the weight of days gone by bulldozing him with a tormenting energy. “I know what happened to him.”
Holding his breath, Iwaizumi feels his disgrace ebbing from his stiff shoulders. He's quick to connect the dots. It's the same old story from three years ago. Kolya tried to revive Kawamoto’s merger. Got killed by an opposing party. Unlawful retaliation by the other party. It’s a typical gang fight, but how exactly does Oikawa fit into this? Does he even fit at all? If he can get the people who knew him before the shooting, he could probably find out who he is—

Iwaizumi scrubs a frustrated hand through the wisps of his dark hair and lets out a quiet groan. He stands up and wipes off the spatter of blood sitting on the leather over his shoulders.

“Police reports,” he says simply. “I need all the reports about the shooting.”

“T-Take them all—! The files, dossiers—” the man bawls miserably at him. His lips twist into dreadful scowls, waves of tears falling from his eyes. “A-All the files… they're d-digital. We get rid of anything that’s on print…” He makes a weak gesture in the direction of his desktop computer. “Use my… computer, take all you need—”

Iwaizumi then walks a few steps back to reach the desk and scrambles through the drawers, then rummages the trash bin where he found Kozlov’s police report. They’re all empty. Harada’s not lying. He glances up at the monitor screwed at the center of the desk.

With an ounce of hurry, Iwaizumi lets himself flop on the office chair and basks in its discomfort. The monitor lights up to an automatic login screen when he awakens it, the white glow accentuating the gilded police badge sitting atop the desk, underlining the contours of his bitter expression.

Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department
User: Harada Masabumi

View Police Reports

Search: ‘Oikawa Tooru’
(0) Search Results for ‘Oikawa Tooru’

Your search did not match any documents.

His heart pulses in uneasiness, another wave of frustration building up inside his skull. His bloody, bandaged fingers clatter over the board as the search box gets blasted by keywords. Rankei Residences. Kazuo Kozlov. Diamond Fund. Yanagihara. Your search did not match any documents. Oikawa Tooru, Tooru, Oikawa, Tooru Oikawa, Oikawa—

Iwaizumi tears himself from the desk and stomps his angry weight back to the paralyzed man.

“Why aren’t there any reports on Oikawa Tooru?” Iwaizumi asks mildly at first. His haunting shadow hovers over the incapacitated figure. “Why isn’t he on the database?”

Harada cowers, eyes wide with confusion. “W-Who’s that? I don’t—I don’t know—”

“The college student!” Iwaizumi snarls, leaping forward like a predator the second before it hunts. He grabs him by the collar, scrunching it up with his fist. The frustration creases the lines on his face as he bares his teeth. “Oikawa Tooru! He went missing after the shooting—!”
Harada wails, anguished, helplessly limp when the sharp pain of his broken leg surges when Iwaizumi grappled him. His eyes are shut tightly as he whimpers between gasps. “I-I don’t know! I swear—! W-We were told to d-delete the files about what happened in Rankei—!”

Iwaizumi uncurls his claws and leans away. He’s interrupted by the retching sounds of distress as he towers over the man who’s about ready to lose consciousness - by shock, by pain, by blood loss.

“Who’s paying you?”

“W-What? Shirato—”

“Don’t lie to me,” Iwaizumi threatens, his dark eyes suggesting he isn’t in the mood to take shit from anyone right now. “Who the fuck do you work for?”

In utter agony and resignation, the corrupt cop lets out a guttural sob, and at this point he’s only capable of speaking in weak mumbles. His face pulls into a placid mask. “K-Kyoudai-krug,” he admits. Iwaizumi purses his lips as he lets the man explain. “I-Ichinose Matvei, he—he’s the kumicho’s senior adviser. N-Next in line. He’s buying all the cops—all the cops in the city.” His features twist in pain, eyes dull with the lack of blood. “The police department… doesn’t answer to Shiratorizawa-gumi anymore.”

“Aobajousai-kai has been trying to take over Shiratorizawa-gumi’s rackets for years,” Iwaizumi snaps back. “How in fuck’s name can this Ichinose guy do it so easily?”

“Ma—Matvei and his crew—they began to take over the police force… right after the Safety Commission chairman died. T-T-Takemura Masayoshi… was strict with the police, prosecuting cops who take so much as a thousand-yen bribe. B-But now that he’s gone… the police are more compliant, gangsters sucking our dicks, y-you know, chinkoro tactic. Kyoudai-krug gives us information in exchange for leniency and media blackouts—”

“Where can I find Ichinose Matvei?”

“I-I don’t know—! I’m—I’m telling the truth!” he yells out frantically, shaking and writhing in pain, face white with fear. “I-I would’ve told you by now if I did! God, oh Lord, please—!” Harada crawls pitifully to hold onto Iwaizumi’s ankles, grip tight in an onslaught of prayer. He looks like his god had forsaken him in his darkest hour, latching onto his leg, his burst of Catholicism filling his eyes and his cacophony of please-have-mercy’s.

Religion flaunts the greatest claims of being the ultimate good. But when put into practice, the ideas of an all-knowing creator only breeds a horrific type of evil. It causes nothing but hostility between men. Iwaizumi doesn’t believe in God - not anymore. He left him somewhere between losing his mother and losing himself.

He lets a deadly calm fall on the room as he treads across to procure his baseball bat. It makes a subtle sound when it’s picked up from its sleep. There’s a ferocity in his expression and it sweeps over the man’s frightened breath. Iwaizumi looms closer. “W-Wait—! I told you everything I know! Y-You won’t kill me, right? Y-You’ll let me go? H-Have mercy, please—!”

His ears pulse in need like an overwhelming drum.

“Hm, let me check.” Iwaizumi offers the man a slight glimmer of hope when he fishes out a tiny piece of paper from the pockets sheathed with mint green cotton, a pop color against the black leather.
Iwaizumi’s breathing relaxes. From this angle, he can make out the man’s expression, afraid and desperate, black veiling over his eyes.

“Sorry, it still says I have to kill you.”

The crash of aluminum to bone pierces his senses.

He hits Harada mid-prayer. The hard impact sends a strong vibration to his own joints, his olive complexion specked with a fine dusting of blood. His bat had bludgeoned the man’s face into a deformed sculpture of broken bone and hashed flesh. There isn’t enough light to illuminate the ugly jumble of his detached jaw and teeth, and maybe that’s a good thing. His hideous head had snapped sideward, still semi-connected to the neck, the rubbery skin the only thing keeping it from completely falling off as gravity cause it to sag. Drips of thick liquid glisten in a watermelon pink, welling from all his eye sockets and from all the other holes in his face.

One hit should be enough.

Shortly after, the ragdoll of a body falls to the floor, face first onto the pool of his own blood and chunks of flesh. An eyeball rolls across the expensive floorboards. The wash of red light of the neon-lit cross crawls across the corpse, painting the scene a sinister luminosity.

It’s true that fear drives people to seek out all manners of protection, but this is just proof that praying to a non-existent being isn’t always enough.

☆ ☆ ☆

In a quiet three-way junction, nestling between a Starbucks and an old winery, a neon green Tsutaya buzzes above a crescent storefront. The bookshop-and-café burns with a welcoming bisque light, the full-length glass panels on the first and second floors allowing the passersby to spare a glance at the hospitable interiors of pastries and bookshelves, accompanied by the smell of freshly baked rye bread and muscovado-infused coffee.

Ten o’clock is not its peak hour, so it’s mostly empty when Iwaizumi steps inside.

On the far end of the second floor is its graveyard clerk, manning the media center’s video rental area. Iwaizumi’s footsteps are mellow on the wooden floors when the staff sees him approaching through the labyrinth of shelves—

“Hey, if it isn’t Iwaizumi-san!” the young man says by way of greeting. “It’s been a while, yeah? We don’t have the new Godzilla movie yet, so don’t even ask.”

Iwaizumi takes a quick eye at him and his romanized name on his employee tag. He hasn’t seen Watari Shinji for nearly a year. The boy is of an average build, a few centimeters shorter, his face set off by a stylish buzz-cut. He looks about the same age as Oikawa, or even younger.

“Ah, I’m not here for that,” Iwaizumi says and crosses his arms over his chest. He scans the store’s
selection of DVDs, cocking his head in thought. “I’ll get whatever’s new… or popular.”

“Oh? Trying something new, huh?” he chimes in inquisitively and picks up cases of new arrivals. “It’s good to see you though.” His buoyant voice rushes around the syllables as he speaks. “I thought Iwaizumi-san got into some trouble or something. The city’s a bit scary these days, don’t you think?” His only response is an insightful glance from Iwaizumi. “Anyway, are you using cash or points? It’s been a while since your last rental. I bet you stacked up on those T Points.”

“Probably a lot.” Iwaizumi clears his throat, either from triumph or embarrassment, sliding his point card across the counter. “I’ve been buying a lot of… milk bread from FamilyMart lately,” he adds hesitantly, brows scrunching at each word, not quite expecting he’d say all those things in one sentence in this lifetime.

“Really? I never would’ve guessed you as a sweet tooth,” Watari says, the amusement in his tone innocent, rather than mocking.

Iwaizumi then catches a jolt of mild surprise shooting through the man’s eyes. There’s an eerie absence of noise before he speaks—

“You have some blood on you, Iwaizumi-san.”

He lifts his gaze with big, panicked eyes. “What? Where?”

Watari points at his own face, tapping under his mouth. “Right here,” he tells him. Iwaizumi mirrors his gesture and feels a wet bead across his thumb. It’s been there for so long that a red pigment had already stained the surface of his skin.

“Shave cut? Do you shave in your car or something?”

“Yeah, sometimes…” he answers the only response his brain could muster despite how untrue it is. He then grabs the black ecobag of DVDs after Watari is done with the checkout. Upon his departure, a voice calls out, cutting through the late night silence.

“Don’t forget to bring it back in a week!”

☆ ☆ ☆

The time ticks away on a large digital wall clock, the tiny date on the bottom corner changing from the 24th to the 25th of June on the stroke of midnight. The once quiet living room is filled with heavy sounds of baritone voices and staggering violins, the television saturated with a Takeshi Kitano movie playing unceasingly despite its unconscious spectator.

Iwaizumi brought home several movies, unsure which ones Oikawa would like. He figured Oikawa would tell him which one he liked and he’ll just get something similar next time. He seems like a guy who’d like foreign movies, although unexpectedly enough, the first one he shoved into his Blu-ray player was a fairly recent Japanese action movie.

Maybe he really didn’t enjoy it as much as he hoped, because after an hour Iwaizumi finds him asleep on the couch, laying on his stomach, a light snore constantly escaping from his parted lips.

He hates the image of Oikawa sleeping anywhere besides the bed, but Iwaizumi thinks this is better
than waking him up. The sudden warmth causes Oikawa to curl up in comfort when Iwaizumi trails a blanket over him. It’s thick, heavy with knitted wool - the kind Oikawa likes the most. He turns off the television and home theater before staring back at the other’s sleeping figure.

There’s a new air around him now, Iwaizumi thinks. Oikawa’s glow is richer, kinder - a contrast against the worn out colors of fear and hesitation, and it brightens his mood considerably. It’s almost impossible to imagine someone else seamlessly adding to his life, someone who’s a fresh mix of novelty and consistency, someone who’s capable of turning a dreary house into a home.

He can barely tear his eyes away.

Stepping into his bedroom, he takes his shirt off and lays down on the bed. It smells different. It smells like Oikawa. His scent sinks deep into the pillows, soaks into the feathers inside the blankets. The remnants of his warmth linger along the sheets even when the rest of him can’t - as stubborn as Oikawa himself.

He had grown used to the prospect of Oikawa being there when needs him to be, that the mere lack of his presence seems mind-boggling.

The past week has been great - more than great. He’d sleep on the bed, next to Oikawa. There are days when there’s a body’s width of space between them, but there are more days when it’s the exact opposite. No words can describe that elating feeling of having his guard down. Even then, Iwaizumi would always ask. He doesn’t know why he feels the need to ask permission to sleep on his own fucking bed. It does, however, allow him to sleep better at night knowing Oikawa is a hundred percent sure he’s comfortable with another human next to him.

Closing his eyes, Iwaizumi only hopes his brain will adjust to the absence of his personal sleep aid and let the pure exhaustion surrender him to the urges of slumber.

☆ ☆ ☆

It was cold.

The draft nipped at his skin like maggots, his body exposed to the unforgiving chill. Disgusting.

He felt disgusting. He wanted to die. Just die. Just kill me. They didn’t let him clean himself before locking him up back inside the bunker. It wasn’t bigger than a broom closet. Too dark. Too cold.

Oikawa didn’t know if he could endure another night in there. Freezing. Trembling. Unaware of what would happen next, why he was taken - or by who.

Footsteps down the corridor. Light. High heels. He heard the door open, a slow harrowing creak.

Oikawa peeled his eyes open to see a woman by the doorway, pity falling upon her features when a poisonous violet light cascaded over his fetal figure. She was about ready to cry.

“Oikawa-san, you need to eat,” she pleaded, voice soft. Her knees made a loud thud when she dropped herself to his level. Oikawa didn’t move, only letting his half-lidded eyes slide towards the tray she placed on the ground. Putri had smuggled in more food for him; deep-fried pork sandwich, rice balls, biscuits, and an energy drink. She raised a hand to comfort him, but stopped in hesitation when Oikawa flinched. “I got you that sandwich you liked.” Her voice was nurturing, like a mother goading her child to eat their vegetables.

Before Oikawa could say anything, a shadow formed menacingly behind her.
“Putri, what did I tell you about giving this cocksucker more food?”

She was quick on her feet and immediately bowed her head. He heard her apologize in a meek voice. Dull, brown eyes adjusted to the light and surged in panic when he saw Kozlov grabbing Putri by the arm and roughly shoving her away from the doorway. Oikawa felt naked and repulsed under his gaze.

“Stand up,” he commanded. “You have work to do.”

Oikawa struggled to sit up, propping his elbows on the uneven cement. The pain raced up and down his limbs and he fell back down. A soft hand reached out to him, holding him up. Putri, even in her high heels, towed his weight up just until he could lean on the wall for support.

“He hasn’t eaten since yesterday,” she said. Her platform shoes made her taller than Kozlov, so she sagged her shoulders in submission, head always dipped low. “You should let him rest.”

Kozlov made a face. His fist crashed against Putri’s skull, his grubby fingers curling into her black hair. He pulled Putri up so her head craned back on her neck. “Shut your fucking mouth, you dumb bitch. Wanna spend the night in the bunker too? Huh?”

Her pained shriek caused a rush of adrenaline through his veins. Oikawa grabbed Kozlov by the wrist, so his anger can redirect back at him. Kozlov’s push barely had strength but it was enough to stagger Oikawa’s sickly body back. He laughed and liberated the woman, her long black hair now a tangled mess. Kozlov then clutched Oikawa by the collar of his shirt, enough to constrict his breathing.

“You still have a way with the ladies, eh? Putri here giving more than she should.” Kozlov raised a boot, then stomped onto the tray of food. The angry clanging of the metal hitting the soles of his boots was deafening, and he stepped on them until they were just an ugly mash of bread and dirt. “No ladies for you tonight,” he added and curled a fist into his hair, yanking him down hard that strands of his hair were uprooted from his scalp. Oikawa clenched his jaw so tight it hurt. “You should be thankful you’re for rent, not for sale. You should see Sudkwan’s joint. Phew, it’s a fucking garbage dump in there.” He dragged him across the hallway, Putri’s fallen figure getting smaller and smaller. He could see her crying. “His trannies are as ugly as him, couldn’t even trick a decent-looking Filipina to work in his club. That’s why he likes you so —much.”

Kozlov stopped in front of familiar red doors.

“I—” Oikawa choked out in protest, tears spilling down his cheeks. He blinked rapidly to clear his vision. He found himself dropping back on the floor, his forehead touching the dirty pink flamingo tiles. He wanted to die. He wanted nothing else but to die. Even then, he wouldn’t know how. A deep ache pulsed in his knee as he begged, arms hugging himself. “I’ll… do anything else —anything … j-just—not this—I… can’t—”

“Look at me,” Kozlov spliced through his sobs. Oikawa slowly looked up, the whites in his eyes red and brimmed with tears. His dry lips pursed when he saw Kozlov offer a fake smile and a considerate nod. “You want to do something else? Sure, sure. If that’s what you want.”

He was dragged into a metal stairwell leading to the basement.

There was barely any light, and the bulb fixed on the ceiling flickered constantly that it only gave him a pulsing headache. It was a gray windowless room of unpainted cement. There were gurneys on one corner, weighing scales, and a makeshift office at the very center. High stacks of cardboard boxes. Clear plastic bags with some kind of white and brown powder inside. Kozlov allowed him
to sit on a chair. Fear seized him. Where was he? What was this place? It was all meant to deceive
him into thinking he was safe. Oikawa knew it. He felt it. He knew it. He knew it—

“You’re worse than Yanagihara,” Kozlov bellowed as soon as the single door opened. “You
bastards can’t afford to be on time, can ya?”

Oikawa snapped his teary vision at a man in a white lab coat, holding a dark blue duffel bag then
put it on the table in front of Oikawa. He unfastened the zippers and spread it wide. Kozlov dug his
hands inside and grabbed one of the ziplocks filled with white powder, weighing it in his hands.

“Is this the shipment from Hong Kong?”

“Yeah,” the man who just arrived said, rolling his shoulders. “Gotta make sure it ain’t mixed with
fucking elephant sedatives like last time.”

“Kwan is a fucking idiot dealing with Chinese mainlanders,” Kovlov spat out, then lit a cigarette
when he was done inspecting the plastic bag. Without windows or any openings, the smoke
remained adrift and clouded Oikawa’s vision for a full minute. The heavy scent was enough to send
his mind into a panic. He looked for a possible exit to run to but found none. “This one should be
good, though. Burmese source.”

The other guy observed him from head to toe.

“Is this our guinea pig?”

“W-What?” Oikawa flinched in panic, eyes wide in horror. Two pairs of hands grabbed him by the
arm and pushed him face down on the table. “W-Wait—!”

“You said you wanted to try doing something else, didn’t you?” Kozlov sneered, a morbid laugh
escaping from his mouth.

The needle of a syringe caught the low light, glistening.

“Is he clean?”

“Yeah, he’s clean.”

His arm was sprawled across the tabletop, motionless with fear. Oikawa yelped when a tight
tourniquet was tied on his bicep.

“We gotta do this every time we have new shipment, Oikawa-san. Gotta make sure it’s high-
quality. The girls get too sleepy to fuck clients when they’re on bad shit.” Kozlov pinched his
cigarette and pushed it down on the back of Oikawa’s palm. He took a sharp breath at the burning
contact. He struggled to get out of their grip. “Shouldn’t be a problem for you, right?”

The tremors passed through his body like an ominous wind, rattling at his bones, knocking against
his skull. The needle pricked the middle of his arm, and he watched as it disappeared inside his
skin, stretching eerily like latex being pulled apart. Then there was a jarring ache of cold liquid
being pushed into his veins, feeling its immediate effect. Squeezing his eyes shut, he bit his lip
until it bled.

Tiny drops of blood oozed out from the needle wound.

It had the beginning of a tremendous migraine. He gasped for air like there was a shortage of it,
tasting blood from inside his mouth even when there wasn’t any. Oikawa suddenly trembled with
exhaustion, then something else, something numb, something almost sweet. His brown eyes opened to see whether he was still alive. And he was. It felt like being dead and being alive at the same time. Wide awake but asleep—

Another needle was pushed into him. He couldn’t feel this one anymore. It felt like nothing. The tourniquet felt like nothing. After what seemed like the third syringe, his wrists were tied to his back by the same elastic rope they used to constrict his blood flow.

Oikawa was hit with a storm of fear and anger, but he couldn’t show it, his body didn’t allow him to. The bile that rose up from his stomach reached his throat before it pulled back again. Oikawa wanted to vomit, but he couldn’t. His throat wouldn’t let him. His groans died into sobs soon after. Helplessly, he watched as the guy in white walk around him and reach for his belt, unbuckling it.

“Come on, don’t OD on us.”

The sound of a zipper rung in his ears.

Oikawa heard heavy breathing, sensed it at the back of his neck, sensed a grip on his hip. But he couldn’t feel it. There was nothing. The pain in his knee disappeared, and every other sensation. He found himself breathing in ragged gasps suddenly, the air bursting in and out, his bent body being nudged repeatedly against the edge of the table.

“God damn, that’s tight—where’d you get him?”

“Picked him up at Ichinose’s place.”

“Ichinose? You mean Ichinose Matvei?”

“Yeah. I took him after Yanagihara threw him out. Thought he’d be useful around here.”

Oikawa could hear their voices echoing in his ears but his head was shoved violently against the wooden surface, blocking his hearing, a rough hand pushing his cheekbones down until it swelled. He had complete awareness of what was happening, what they were doing, but the safe harbor of his opiated brain anchored him into thinking that he was alright. Whatever they injected in him brutalized his senses to the point of banality, debasing his entire consciousness—

“What’s this? Not fighting back anymore?” Kozlov laughed scathingly as he watched. “Guess the little bastard learned to like getting fucked in the ass.”

He wanted everything to be over quickly.

Oikawa squeezed his eyes shut, tried to block out his vision. Tears forced its way out. He didn’t want to see what was happening, only wishing they would just get it over with. Hurry up. The wave of nausea began to rise up again, but he fought it. Hurry up and finish. His heroin-infused brain had flushed out whatever was left of his dignity. Hurry up, hurry up—

“Oikawa—”

Hurry up, hurry up, be done with it, hurry up, hurry up—

“Oikawa!”

He gasps awake, heaving like he had just resurfaced from the ocean. His delirious brown eyes
quiver towards Iwaizumi’s frantic expression, who had dropped down alongside him on the living room floor.

Worry clutches at Iwaizumi’s bones. He presses an urgent palm along Oikawa’s jaw, his thumb brushing over the cheek that’s flushed with sweat. You’re safe, he tells him. Again and again. Iwaizumi reaches out his other hand and wraps it around his wrist to soothe his racing pulse, gently tugging Oikawa into the halo of his embrace. He feels his balmy skin when Oikawa rests his forehead on his shoulder.

“You’re here with me,” Iwaizumi says, voice deep and soothing, his strong grip keeping Oikawa from completely breaking apart. He schools his voice to be kinder despite his own panic. Just breathe. You’re safe. Close your mouth. Inhale through your nose. He rubs both his stretched palms along his back. “You’re fine. I’m right here.”

Iwaizumi makes sure the arms around Oikawa’s huddled figure isn’t too tight, or too suffocating, so Oikawa can push him away when he needs to. He feels a weak tug that pulls him in, and soon enough he realizes Oikawa is more than willing to reciprocate, viciously trembling arms circling around his bare torso. Iwa-chan, Iwa-chan, he whimpers quietly. He seems too tired to put any force in his limbs as he lets himself sink into Iwaizumi’s warmth.

Oikawa’s chest shudders madly against his own, every breath trembling into violent sobs. Don’t leave. Don’t let them take me. His brain is so desperate that it’s attempting all the possible ways to scour into his fuddled memories, wishing it can navigate through all the locked doors.

Iwaizumi can’t stand it.

Deliberately, his hand moves up, stroking the back of Oikawa’s head, the other brushing circles across the tense lines along his spine.

“What do you want me to do?” Iwaizumi whispers, hushed but stern.

It’s not a demand.

He’s asking for a direct order.

“Tell me what you want me to do and I’ll do it.”

Oikawa doesn’t answer, doesn’t speak a word, his mind still in horrible place. It’s evident by the way the young man clings to him in a desperate need, hands clawing against Iwaizumi’s exposed back. Iwaizumi closes his eyes and sighs frustratedly into the dusky air. The minutes drag by in a blurry daze, and Oikawa’s frantic gasps soon soften into sniffles until he’s completely quiet.

Iwaizumi cradles him tighter as Oikawa mindlessly melts into his embrace, perhaps finally succumbing to sleep. He despises this wretched feeling of incompetence that clamps painfully around his lungs. Nestling his nose against the pulse in Oikawa’s neck, he transmits all the words he wouldn’t be able to say out loud, unable to bear the thought of letting go.

☆ ☆ ☆

It smells like lemon balm and coriander seed body wash when Oikawa wakes up.
Fluttering his eyelids open, his vision catches the legs of a coffee table, a widescreen television blurring behind it. His cheeks are warm and he hears the early morning hum whirring along with his own breathing and someone else’s.

Within seconds, Oikawa finds himself burrowed on Iwaizumi’s bare pectorals, and only then he realizes that he’s been using him as a pillow, snug within the security of his arms. It’s warm and comfortable and he stays there, simply because he can. He relishes it. The soft beating of Iwaizumi’s heart against his cheek blankets over his worries, and in this he realizes, that maybe heartbeats aren’t meant to be heard. Maybe they’re meant to be felt.

Oikawa cranes his neck and turns his nose up a little so he can see the underside of his jaw and his lashes. Iwaizumi’s head had lolled down to the side, instinctively seeking the scent of Oikawa’s hair. His hand gingerly inches up. Long fingers brush against Iwaizumi’s face, his skin soft around the cheeks, but prickly with shaved stubble at the bottom. His eyes flash with boughs of maple, and he lets them fall deeply on Iwaizumi’s sleeping face. He’s so serene and young-looking in moments like this, the shadows under his eyes long gone, the angry lines and rough frowns simply sequestered by a calm river of slumber.

The seven o’clock sunlight seeps around the slits between the curtains, thin horizontal sun-stripes settling over the curves of their bodies as last night’s memories lose their clarity.

It’s strange. There’s always a ragged weight descending over him as soon as his dreams wearily slip him back to reality, his insides ready to explode at the lingering billows of having his heart and soul being ripped out. But the moment he opens his eyes and sees Iwaizumi, the ache vanishes, his very presence stitching his heart back into its original shape. No bodies hovering over him. No gripping hands. No lancing pain deep in his guts.

He’s a man made out of a million lawless things, but whenever Oikawa touches him, it somehow feels like walking into a home he had never known. It might be magic. It might be mere human chemistry. All he knows is that he wants to keep him forever, and hopes Iwaizumi can bear to keep him for just as long—

“Hey.”

Oikawa jolts up and extracts himself immediately.

“Y-You—You surprised me!” he squawks, heart hammering as he presses a palm over it, one straight arm holding him up. A feverish pink color clings across the crest of his cheeks when his eyes doze down at Iwaizumi’s bare torso.

Iwaizumi bends his upper body up a little, taut, hardened muscle rippling across the uninked area between his breast and abdomen, his weight handled by his propped elbows.

“You okay?” he asks first thing before sitting up entirely to level with Oikawa’s eyes. Slowly, he reaches out, pressing a palm against his forehead, a sigh of relief escaping from his lips when he discovers it’s just natural heat.

“I-I’m fine,” he stutters before looking away, folding his legs underneath his thighs. Oikawa knows his face his red all over. He can’t really see it, but he feels it. It might be a good time to get a tan to make them less obvious. It’s embarrassing how jittery he is while Iwaizumi remains unflustered. “Were you awake this whole time?”

“Yeah.” Iwaizumi bends one leg upright and hangs an elbow on his knee. Oikawa feels fenced in between Iwaizumi and the angle of their sectional sofa. His voice is low and hoarse. “I didn’t
move. Wouldn’t want to wake you.”

“O-Oh,” Oikawa stammers. He bites his bottom lip, not quite sure whether to thank him or if that’s too much of an overkill. But he snaps back up, ruffled hair following the movement of his head, eyes following Iwaizumi’s figure. “Where are you going?” he asks when Iwaizumi gets off from the carpeted floor.

“I’ll get breakfast downstairs,” he says simply, putting on an old shirt he forgot to throw into the laundry bag last night. He stops to stare at Oikawa. “What do you wanna eat?”

Iwaizumi must’ve noticed that he isn’t in the mood to cook. He’s always been quite good at reading him. Oikawa takes a quick moment to smile before answering. “I’m okay with anything.”

“Suit yourself.”

☆ ☆ ☆

Ogatama is built like an upper class Northeast American diner. Bright teal Formica. Walls replaced by glass so they can lure in passing pedestrians. Linoleum floors. Retro-modern decor. Counter-service. Rounded up, they give the place a welcoming flare like the Japanese magnolia tree it’s named after. Their menu is a potpourri of regional breakfast sets - be it Japanese, American, Vietnamese, Latvian, Korean - it’s all there. All he knows is that it serves breakfast at any time of the day and nothing else.

Iwaizumi forgets the blue-green vinyl booths on the west side of the restaurant and instead seats himself on a stool alongside the lengthy sit-down counter.

The stainless steel backsplash shows his warped reflection. That’s when he sees a bit of color creeping up to the surface of his skin, cheeks and ears burning. What a fucking disaster. Iwaizumi shakes his head in disbelief and drags a hand over his face to get rid of the redness, but he only ends up making it worse. He just slept on the floor, yet he has never felt this refreshed in his entire life. It feels like one week’s worth of sleep.

He had to get out.

Iwaizumi didn’t know when his fake ass facade of appearing calm and collected is going to wither. That’s why he offered to buy breakfast so suddenly, aside from the fact that he didn’t want Oikawa to waste his morning energy after that breakdown last night.

There’s this yearning that’s aimlessly drifting within him - the utter bliss he feels with a simple morning greeting, warm smiles, messy hair, infectious yawns, food he never once thought delicious somehow tastes heavenly now. His line of sight always heedlessly searches for a certain someone, even in his dreams under his rare hours of slumber. Iwaizumi doesn't know what this yearning is. He can't quite put a name to it.

Eventually, he closes his eyes, letting the strong smell of brewed coffee and buttered toast fill his nostrils and calm his nerves.

“Iwaizumi-san!” Kindaichi greets a little too excitedly from behind the counter, bursting him out of meditation. He pauses to cast an amused and almost surprised look when he approaches Iwaizumi. “You’re looking fresh this morning. Something good happened?”
Iwaizumi narrows his eyes, lips pursing around a frown that he’s been smothering. “What makes you think that?”

“I don’t know. You just seem…” he trails off, rubbing his chin. His unusually keen observation makes Iwaizumi uncomfortable. Kindaichi finishes, “…healthy, I guess?”

He stares back in stunned silence. If he hadn’t been getting sleep for the past few days he probably would’ve retaliated with a deathly glare. His shoulders square as he rests his arms on the countertop, grabbing a newspaper neglected by a previous customer.

The chief superintendent of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department was found dead Saturday morning at his home, according to the Criminal Investigation Bureau. Police found Harada Masabumi, 34, around 5:30 a.m., police said. Authorities are working to identify a suspect and motive—

“Anyway,” Kindaichi cuts through the awkward quietude, notepad ready. “What are you having today, Iwaizumi-san?”

Iwaizumi clears his throat. “Two orders of continental breakfast,” he says, eyes focused on the newspaper to avoid eye contact. “Oh, and two coffees. Take out.”

“Hm, I see…” Kindaichi mumbles, slyly observing his patron as he jots down his order.

Iwaizumi glances up, eyebrows drawn. “See what?”

“N-Nothing!” Kindaichi shakes his head with a nervous smile before scurrying off to the kitchen. “Two continental breakfasts coming right up!”

It takes about twenty minutes to prepare his breakfast, and once done and packed, Iwaizumi hurries back up to his pad.

His living room is still a mess, which he finds strange because Oikawa likes cleaning up the slightest bit of eyesore in his home. He comes to the conclusion that Oikawa intentionally left the pillows and blankets on the floor to make himself a cozy little nest. It seems like he had popped in another DVD. The television screen lights up with vivid color, the optimistic score of Jurassic World blasting the morning calm with hefty vibrations.

Oikawa looks up with a smile, still on the same spot. “Sit right here,” he tells him and pats the carpeted space next to him. “You’re blocking the TV.”

Iwaizumi obliges and sits down to set the takeout on the coffee table. One by one, he fishes out their food. Croissants, muffins, freshly baked, jam and butter on the side. Dark roast coffee. Oatmeal with dried fruits and raisins and agave syrup. Berries and currants for dessert. Oikawa has his eyes fixed on the movie, but gets redirected as soon as the scent of breakfast fills the room.

He takes a bite from the muffin first then moans in delight. “Mm, that’s so good.”

Iwaizumi’s curiosity heightens and he grabs one as well. The golden brown muffin topped with toasted pecan is splendidly soft when he sinks his teeth into it, distinctly loaded with banana flavor. There’s a hint of cinnamon spice, too.

Oikawa makes a loud noise when he sips his coffee.
“Sorry about last night,” he blurs out.

When Iwaizumi spares a glance, Oikawa is still looking at the screen, cup of coffee in hand. Iwaizumi pretends to be interested in the movie. It’s easier to talk without the eye contact. “You don’t have to apologize.”

Oikawa takes his time to chew, pale fingers absently tugging at his russet bangs. “I guess it never really leaves you,” he says after a long exhale. “Sure, you forget about the bad stuff for a while, but when the slightest bit of reminder comes along, no matter how small…”

“It brings everything back.”

He hums in agreement. “Yeah.”

Oikawa’s face reminds him of that weight he’s been lugging around for years, only realizing now that he couldn’t carry all that all on his own. He then watches Oikawa reach out for the croissant. Golden flakes scatter all over his chest when he bites into it. He laughs at himself.

“I find it hard to believe that there was a time when my brain wasn’t so scrambled.” Oikawa flicks off the crumbs off his sweats and pops his attention back to the television. “I dreamt about the woman I was with back in the nightclub. She was really nice. She gave me food even when she wasn’t supposed to.”

“What’s her name?” Iwaizumi asks, keeping his expression blank as he eats.

“Putri,” he says with clarity. “I forgot her last name. She probably didn’t mention it.” There’s a quiet seed of sadness writing itself in his voice, and it reminds Iwaizumi of himself nearly three years ago. “I hope she’s okay. I hope she’s back home in Jakarta with her kids.”

Iwaizumi doesn’t recognize the name, but he knows that the women Kozlov were keeping had been rescued, their respective embassies sending them home, mostly to the Southeast. It was all over the news last month. There’s a part of him that wants to neutralize the worry residing across Oikawa’s face, but that means letting the conversation about his past go on. He hates hearing about it.

“Don’t worry,” he mutters at last. From the corner of his eye, he sees Oikawa look at him with appreciation, the line of his shoulders easing. “She’s fine.”

“If that’s the case, then I’m glad.” Oikawa smiles and coils to take the least space possible, bending his knees to his chest. Iwaizumi isn’t very good at cheering people up, but he’s relieved that he’s able to. He lets the movie drone on for a while, just until the scene where they show the genetically modified dinosaur hybrid, to which Oikawa’s eyes start to sparkle with a childlike enthusiasm.

But the scene simmers back into boring conversations, half the screen covered with large subtitles. Oikawa transfers raspberries on Iwaizumi’s plate during this uneventful part. His smile blooms into a garden path when he looks at Iwaizumi.

“You don’t eat enough fruits.”

Iwaizumi stabs the berry with a plastic fork and puts it back on Oikawa’s bowl.

“I’ll live.”
Chapter End Notes

i was supposed to post this on iwachan's bday but that obviously didn't happen, dunno why i didn't just separate this into two chapters im an idiot anyway let me know what y'all think!!! would love to read ur college-level analysis for real

LINKS
Playlists:
Night Call / Unit 3041 / The Rose Club / Maybe It's Time To Wake Up

Twitter & Tumblr
Young and Beautiful

Chapter Notes

Heavily inspired by Hotline Miami
Young and Beautiful by Lana Del Rey

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Iwaizumi drives at a faster pace than usual.

Stubborn raindrops had dotted the windshield corners where the wiper couldn’t reach them, the mere remnants from a short-lived afternoon storm casting a wet glaze over the asphalt. It’s already July, but the random bursts of rain seem to enjoy their extended stay. Moonlight cascades across the drenched street in a confident glow and wades through the fearless artificiality of the city. The dash clock veers with an acid green when Iwaizumi spares it a glance. Nine-thirty. The skies darken with coal, cloudless and speckled in stars, competing against the street lamps lining the boulevard. His radio sounds into a smooth womanly voice as he speeds through the highway.

Commissioner-General of the National Police Agency, Fujita Hideo will be stepping down from his duties due to his declining health. Fujita said in a statement released by his office that his frequent trips to the hospital have become an ongoing challenge. He will vacate the position in—

His body angles at a sharp turn, eyes narrowing at the news. It's strange to hear resignations like these. Wealth and power often keep bureaucrats alive, so an abrupt end to their tenure is a pretty rare event. These men will become frail and old and weak, but they will do everything in their power to stay in their position as long as they're able to breathe in the polluted affairs of the state.

Iwaizumi switches to a music station. He's not too keen on the subject of aging politicians. Ribbons of burnt orange light and black shadows alternate over Iwaizumi’s face in a bizarre loop, only stopping when he hits the breaks at a red light. He peels his mobile phone off the dashboard mount during this brisk stillness.

It casts a waxy white light as he skims through his contacts, his thumb pressing the call option under someone’s name.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite local newsmaker."

Matsukawa’s voice unfurls in his right ear, idly opaque with a sardonic grin. His one free hand grips the wheel, feet pushing the gas when the traffic light gives the go signal. The car lurches forward when he glares at the mild downtown traffic.

“Can you find me a doctor?”

There’s a second of silence before he hears a willing hum.

“It depends on what kind.”
Iwaizumi sets his lips into a grim line. “The kind that keeps his mouth shut.”

“Not a lot of that around here.” Iwaizumi hears a trace of contemplation when the man speaks, followed by the faint sound of fingers tapping on a computer keyboard. Matsukawa seems like he's already weaving through his web of associates. “We don’t exactly hold a lot of healthcare rackets. Gonna be hard to find a guy who can keep a secret.”

Iwaizumi scowls at his own frustrated reflection on the rearview mirror. He’s been wanting to get Oikawa examined since he took him in. The last thing Iwaizumi needs is to be accused of being his kidnapper, so he was initially reluctant to take Oikawa anywhere, scared that someone from the wrong faction might recognize him. It should be the perfect time to bring him for a check-up. Public interest has diminished. The investigation is at a halt.

It’s infuriating to think how cases like this become irrelevant so quickly.

“You gotta know someone,” he insists, chewing his bottom lip as a restless habit. Stopping right before a white painted crossing, his eyes track the sparse, late-night pedestrians walking in front of him. “Preferably scared of us - scared of me.”

The other man bursts a snort of amusement through his nose. “Who isn’t scared of you?” Iwaizumi sucks in a breath. He can think of only one person who isn’t and he’s waiting at home. “Is this urgent? Are you in trouble?”

“No, I—” he pauses, catching his breath. “I just need a check-up.”

The voice on the other side makes a doubtful noise, but doesn’t ask anything else. “I’ll contact Yuda’s senior. I’m pretty sure you know each other. Good friend of the bossman. When do you need ‘em?”

He leans back in his seat. “Tomorrow.”

“Got it.” Matsukawa gives him one last affirming note. “I’ll send you the details.”

“Thanks.”

Just then, the green signals him to accelerate. Iwaizumi glances out the windshield, familiar towers of offices and apartments coming into his view like a pop-up book. Every complex fight to be the highest, to be the most vertical in the flow line, pandering to everyone’s need for a dense, nocturnal playground.

He passes by Roppongi Station that’s packed with salarymen, then an art gallery with an ugly concrete torii gate leering over its front entrance. The city planners probably thought they could hide the sleaze behind sophistication. On the adjacent quadrant lies a high-rise glass structure, square panes illuminated from the inside to resemble floating lanterns.

Moriyome Hills is a tree — the tallest among a family of four. It stands tall and flaunts a facade of modernized traditional design. Symmetrical planes of steel. High pines. Subtle glass patterns reminiscent of woven bamboo fences. Green eyes flicker at the rippling wave of storefronts across the building’s foundation. Coincidentally, they all shine in an inviting emerald glow, chosen by design to fit into this oriental woodland aesthetic.

The elevated ground entrance is smacked in the middle of sleepless boutiques - tea shops, banks, home centers, all forming this miniature shopping center for its parasitic inhabitants. Iwaizumi doesn’t head to the parking garage, not yet, and instead swerves into the opposite direction. The wheels screech into a halt right at the curb, black mica reflecting the apple green sign and
fluorescent interiors of a FamilyMart, lights dancing unevenly against the car’s mirror-like paint as Iwaizumi opens the door.

That one lady stuck in the night shift would usually smile and sing a tired greeting just as the automatic doors would open. This one’s different. The employee behind the counter isn’t the chatty type, doesn’t talk much aside from the ambiguous grunts and glares amplified by a bleached buzz cut and face tattoos. Iwaizumi glances around and finds the store empty - which isn't at all a surprise, because the cashier looks straight out of mid-90s rock band, scaring off all potential customers.

The three LED monitors suspended right above him burn his eyes for a second, two lighting up with ice cream flavors and available bento boxes, the farthest left displaying the evening news. Nothing unusual. David Bowie tribute concert next month. Privacy issues on the internet. Minor earthquakes in the north. Two teenage girls reported missing—

Iwaizumi looks away from the glowing distraction and stops by the shelf of baked goods and sweets. He picks up Kitkats and Umaibou sticks, several ready-to-eat pastries and about four packs of Pasco milk bread - the brand Oikawa seems to favor the most. He likes it better than the fancy ones from an authentic Hokkaido bakery.

He drops his cargo at the cash register with too much confidence, causing the guy manning it to narrow his suspicious eyes at him, then at the items, then back at Iwaizumi.

“What?” Iwaizumi pulls up a blank expression, a single brow raised.

The beep of a handheld barcode scanner fills the crisp air.

“Nothing,” he replies after a slight delay, shrugging his shoulders. He punches the items into the register and snaps up with a judging look. “Don’t ya get tired of this shit?”

Iwaizumi lets out a short huff of breath that sounded like a laugh. “No,” he says, indulging himself by imagining Oikawa’s pleased face. His mouth curves into a small, unconscious smile. “Apparently not.”

Before the cashier could scan that last pre-packed melon bread, the nightly news above them lets out an urgent jingle. Iwaizumi sees the kid’s hand stop midway.

The murder of several men spikes gang war fears as three alleged members of Aobajousai-kai were found dead under the Kachidoki Bridge earlier this afternoon. One of the victims is Miura Howard, an ex-convict known to have made a lucrative income from settling civil disputes—

In the most monotone of voices, the news anchor drones a list of names and their minor criminal feats. Iwaizumi doesn’t recognize anyone. He switches his attention back to the cashier, whose eyes had sharpened in focus, seemingly ready to avenge the offended party.

“Kyoutani,” Iwaizumi calls out. He pulls his eyebrows down. “You knew anyone?”

The young man blows out a small nervous sigh just as the news anchor said the third name. He relaxes and shakes his head. “Nah,” he says with an obvious ache in his throat. “Just some nobodies.” He scans the last item and swipes Iwaizumi’s credit card, his movements heavier, angrier—
“That’s good,” Iwaizumi says with a small understanding nod.

The whole situation is nowhere near good, obviously, although it’s better to know that they didn’t have acquaintances involved - and that they weren’t involved. Kyoutani’s reaction is reasonable. It’s the inherent danger that comes unexpectedly in their line of work. It’s the look of terror. Because it could’ve been him in that list of dead gangsters, could’ve been any of their young, desperate foot-soldiers.

Iwaizumi twists his mouth and picks up the paper bag. He gives Kyoutani one last glance before heading back to his car. “Be careful out there.”

“You too, Iwaizumi-san.”

☆ ☆ ☆

On his two-month mark, Oikawa has already maintained an iron grip on the household — and on Iwaizumi’s vices.

Oikawa developed a habit of ordering him around without fear. It’s almost—cute, in a way, and Iwaizumi wants to ram his head against the wall because he can’t find any other word that’s nearly as fitting. Iwaizumi would’ve considered the rising monarch as a threat to his authority, but he doesn’t. He only pretends like he does. Oikawa must be somewhat aware of his deliberate tolerance to be able to keep bossing him around. He’s clearly cherishing even the slightest ounce of control, and with a history of having been treated as an object, a possession, he became this energetic spirit that simply can’t sit and wait for the day when all this sleeping and eating would add up to something.

When Iwaizumi opens the door, the scent of clean laundry fills the air, Oikawa having just been downstairs to pick it up from the laundromat. The glass fortress that they live in is an urban forest Oikawa is free to explore under a disguise. Everything else outside is off-limits. In his small adventures, he’s able to easily befriend the part-time shopkeeper, Kunimi, plus an 85-year-old lady and her two poodles. Oikawa does have that natural charisma. He can go as far as to say that he’s fully capable to put a person under his spell.

His pad seems smaller, more real, and with Oikawa in the picture, it’s less riddled with monsters who feast on coping mechanisms and misery. It always smells like lavender-scented Febreeze under this new management. Carpets vacuumed daily. Surfaces free from grime and mold. Iwaizumi can probably eat off the floorboards at this point. Oikawa is neat by nature, his showers two hours long, deliriously disgusted with dust and dirt and books that aren’t organized by color.

Iwaizumi meets the source of gravity in the living room, engrossed in another action movie. Oikawa isn’t focused on the screen for too long when he hears the front door open and the sound of footsteps getting closer.

The sweet voice that sings out the words “welcome home” incapacitates Iwaizumi for one whole minute.

He’s still not used to hearing that phrase every night, warranting how his routine had shapeshifted into this sickeningly mundane cycle of going home after bashing some guy’s head in with a baseball bat, buying groceries for Oikawa to make magic out of, stopping over at a convenience
store, dropping by Tsutaya to rent DVDs. Then, he’ll drive home and ride the elevator up, a wide smile and big eyes waiting—

Iwaizumi breaks out of his trance just as the film score intensifies into a more cinematic flair. He steps out of the doorway. “Heads up,” he mutters.

Oikawa whips his gaze to his direction, skillfully catching a paper bag of konbini bread that’s thrown at him. He lights up with a grateful gasp as a hearty sparkle rises up to his eyes.

“I’ve been wanting to try this out,” he exclaims when he fishes out the large packet of curry bread, looking at it like it came from another planet when it’s just common high school cafeteria food. Stretching in his seat, he lifts himself up quickly then offers Iwaizumi a childish smile. “Thanks, Iwa-chan!”

Iwaizumi parts his lips, unconsciously mooning over that goddamn expression like it’s his first encounter with a sunset. He clears his throat and looks away, deciding that this is a perfect time to coop up in his office and rearrange his thoughts — and probably look into that whole murder scene in Chuo.

Firstly, he pulls down the Venetian blinds in his office, so none of the other household lights, including Oikawa, can seep through. Iwaizumi flicks the desk lamp on expecting to find clutter and empty beer bottles, but instead sees his office table looking like a barren desert with a single potted cactus that wasn’t there before. Most of his folders and binders are neatly organized on the wall shelves, the stacks of paper that scattered on the floor all pushed inside old filing cabinets.

But at the very least, the clean space helps the tension off his shoulders, the iMac stamping a bright blue mask over his serious face when he powers it up. His latest e-mail is from Matsukawa, sending a short message and an address of a medical facility located in a rather luxurious area in Aoyama. Under his message is a link to an article.

Updated July 08, 2016 at 9:28 PM
Police in Chuo investigating the bodies found under Kachidoki Bridge: Three suspected members of the bouryokudan were found washed up along Sumida River. Investigators have confirmed that their lungs, heart, liver, and kidneys were already missing upon discovery—

It’s strange to feel the slightest bit of grief when he’s so used at exhibiting outward indifference at the people he himself had brutally murdered. Likewise, the tone of every news article and comment that loads up is the same, cold and unsympathetic, journalists too repulsed at criminal groups that they don’t even consider this whole thing as a tragedy, let alone a crime against humanity. It’s a different story when a high-profile politician dies, or when a police superintendent is found clubbed to death inside his home, painted like war heroes when they’re just as guilty as any other criminal.

He presses his lips into a fine line and doubts the authorities would even push through the investigation, ruling it as everyday gang-on-gang violence, or even suicide. The public will forget it faster that way. Just like how everyone seemed to have forgotten about Oikawa. Local detectives are too lazy to look into complicated homicides that they’ll just scribble suicide under every cause of death so they can close the case as soon as possible, keeping the suicide rates high and crime rates low because that’s somehow a better image.
Iwaizumi closes his eyes, breathing in through his nose when he feels his phone vibrate in his pocket. He expects Matsukawa to call since he has several networks of guys working under him, but a different name appears on the notification tab.

From: Hanamaki

Have you checked the news?
yomiuri.co.jp/national/20160708-00389247.html
I don't know any of these guys, but tread carefully, Iwaizumi.

Right. Hanamaki of all people hates being out of the loop. His tired thoughts spiral around the message, sensing the fear within every letter despite its compact nature. Hanamaki isn’t the type to send short, vague texts, so he probably doesn’t know what’s going on. Zero suspects. No witnesses. Why would anyone target small-time Aobajousai-kai thugs when they’ve been laying low for the last couple of months, especially after that whole diamond loot fiasco?

He searches for Hanamaki in his contacts, hoping to gain more insight. Giving him a call might be a good idea—

“Iwa-chan—!”

His vision catapults to the door bursting open.

“Sorry,” Oikawa mutters with a quieter voice, thinking he had caught him in the middle of a call. He apologetically shrinks and hides half of his face behind the door frame. “Did I interrupt you?”

Iwaizumi slaps his phone face down on the desk.

He shakes his head too quickly. “No, not really,” he tells him, rubbing a heavy hand over his face before turning off the monitor. Iwaizumi then stares at the welcome distraction and leans back on his chair to display a false sense of repose. “Do you need something?”

“Come and watch a movie with me.”

His dry lips twitch, on the verge of starting a sentence, or a protest, only to purse back together. Oikawa declaring what he wants without an ounce of hesitation isn’t quite an everyday occurrence that Iwaizumi finds himself complying out of sheer surprise.

“I’m only like five minutes in,” Oikawa elaborates, tilting his head. “How about it?”

Gold glimmers blindly against the dark when Oikawa rests his hands on his hips, the watch hanging loosely around his wrist reflecting the light behind him - a steady reminder who exactly Iwaizumi chose to give his time to. Oikawa never takes the watch off. He took it too literally when Iwaizumi said that he should wear it all the time. With another sigh, Iwaizumi shrugs and stands up, already yielding.

“It depends. What are you watching?”

He’s called just before a spectacular chase scene on top of a moving train. Iwaizumi makes sure to leave a comfortable amount of space between them, settling himself on one end of the large sectional sofa while Oikawa sits on the vertex. The air-conditioning is at its extremes, emulating
an autumn day to counter the July heat, causing Oikawa to layer himself in pastel blankets, complimenting his eggshell white sweater.

It’s not the first time Oikawa asks for his company during his movie marathons. In fact, he almost always prefers to watch foreign movies with him. Being the overly curious born-yesterday creature that he is, Oikawa loves asking questions out of the blue. Can’t the train operators see there are two guys fighting on the roof? If he fell that high, shouldn’t he be dead? How is he still alive after that gunshot wound? Where did he get digital cable television when he’s in an isolated island?

Iwaizumi answers whenever he can, although he’s not quite certain what got Oikawa hooked into this particular genre of careworn and emotionally constipated British secret agents, but he can’t even make fun of him either because he himself had watched every single incarnation of this stupid franchise. It’s flashy and ridiculous and unrealistically entertaining. It’s hard not to like these types of shows.

It’s quiet for a little while, and Iwaizumi does his absolute best to keep his eyes on the screen and not on Oikawa who frequently darts his tongue out to lick breadcrumbs off his mouth corners. Later on, the screen that darkens into a deep phosphorescent blue catches his attention. It’s Shanghai at night, cloaked in a mysterious electronic bokeh, and the protagonist is walking in slow steps, secretly trailing a man, 9mm Short in hand.

“Doesn’t he look like you?” Oikawa says suddenly, biting almost half the melon bread. He pulls his blankets up as the air gets colder. Iwaizumi only grunts disagreeably. He can’t see the resemblance, and he refuses to believe that he’s as chauvinistic as this guy. Oikawa lets out a bemused chuckle. “Fast cars, fancy suits, murder in the moonlight—”

“It’s hard to move in a suit,” Iwaizumi indulges him and scoffs. The injuries from his previous job throb on cue only to prove his point. “I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Iwaizumi gets a whiff of Oikawa’s shampoo when he feels a casual weight of another’s head on his left shoulder, Oikawa boldly erasing the distance between them the minute he ran out of snacks to chew on.

“Can I ask you a question?” Oikawa chimes in as if he hasn’t been asking questions all night. He pauses only for a brief moment, not bothering to wait for Iwaizumi’s go-ahead. “Does it ever bother you? Killing all those bad guys?”

His question curls up like cigarette smoke in the air.

“I wouldn’t be very good at my job if it bothered me,” he replies. It's plain hypocrisy to punish someone for murder by murdering them, but Iwaizumi already knew that. There’s a certain thrill in strangling some fucker who deserves a slow death - an unparalleled luxury of doing God’s work. He breathes out a shallow sigh. “When they meet me I want them to realize that it’s gonna be the worst day of their lives.”

“I feel special somehow.” Oikawa huffs a sarcastic laugh, posture relaxing. Iwaizumi can feel his breathing slow down. “The day I met Iwa-chan was definitely not the worst day of my life.”

Iwaizumi can only imagine what he considers as his worst. His head dips down just slightly enough to see the top-down curve of Oikawa’s face and fires back with a question.

“How are you so sure that I’m not the bad guy?”

Oikawa hums an ambiguous, thoughtful sound. His eyes are still locked on the screen, a silhouette
of a fight scene playing next. There isn’t any dialogue. No subtitles to catch. Oikawa then feels free to speak, lashes barely fluttering as he blinks less to fully capture the movement on the monitor.

“I like to think that I’m a good judge of character,” he says with a tinge of confidence and a small smile. “You’re kinda like this dude.” His gaze follows the lead actor who’s currently beating up some hooligan. “He’s been killing people for the entirety of the movie, yet he’s the hero. He’s the one we’re supposed to root for.”

Neither of them moves, and Oikawa takes it as an invitation to scoot a little closer. He pulls his legs and feet off the ground and curls up like a ball, molding his own body against Iwaizumi’s side. Iwaizumi does what he thinks he should do and wraps his left arm around Oikawa’s shoulders, just so the other can fit right under his wing. Feeling more comfortable, Oikawa cranes his head to speak, brown eyes searching for a shadow of affirmation within hazel ones—

“I don’t really think it’s wrong to protect lives, but isn’t it wrong to protect people who ruin other people’s lives?”

Oikawa phrases it a bit differently than most people, constructing it based on his own perspective, but it’s the same question no one has the exact answer to. Iwaizumi was taught that death and pain is an intrinsic evil. It’s the reason why murder is communicated in much the same way as any other major crime like torture, rape, or arson. They all emphasize the human condition in its ugliest form.

“There’s always gonna be a gray area between right and wrong,” Iwaizumi says as an indefinite response. His stare is fixed on the screen when he sets his jaw tight. “Inflicting pain is wrong. Killing is wrong. It’s harder to explain why it’s wrong when military conquests are praised and capital punishment still exists. Life isn’t fair or perfect. It never has been and it never will be.”

“I know that, but…” Oikawa trails off, a stiff hand fiddling his gilded wristwatch. “But that’s the point of living, isn’t it? This movie wouldn’t be this exciting if the main character is just an average guy. He got beat up, got shot, almost drowned—almost died. His entire country thinks he’s dead.”

Oikawa can probably relate. He draws in a sharp breath and Iwaizumi can see his lip tremble, sensing a drastic change in his posture as his voice starts to break.

“The thing is I could’ve been dead by now. I—I honestly don’t know how many times I’ve thought of ending it all, you know? Easy way out. I would have gone through it if I stayed another day in that—that—well, you know where.” Oikawa still manages to huff a sad chuckle, shaking his head as if to throw off bad memories. He purses his drying lips and draws his limbs closer to his body. “Sure, life’s unfair. You just have to work hard to make it fair.” He raises his eyes at Iwaizumi. “Isn’t that what you do? It doesn’t bother you because you make life fair for others—even made it fair for me.”

Iwaizumi’s chest aches, speechless as his throat tightens to take the words in. It makes sense that Oikawa’s moral injuries would fester just as deep as his physical wounds would when his entire human experience is shaped by nothing but pain, distorting his sense of justice and feeding the growth of his ambiguity. But for someone who had come face to face with everything wrong and wretched in this world, he didn’t quite expect Oikawa to spring back with optimism when he’s always been the opposite.

“Sorry,” he says, although his tone suggests that he’s not quite regretful. Their position doesn’t allow him to see Oikawa’s softened expression before he fits his head back on his shoulder. “I’ll shut up now.”
He envies him a little. Iwaizumi has never been the one to look on the bright side - always accepted the fact that there isn’t one. Oikawa is looking at both. Bright and dark. Every single one of his memories is laced with pain, that he wakes up in the middle of the night sweating in fear, sometimes in anger, sometimes both. Iwaizumi assumed that Oikawa’s driving force has always been hatred, planting grudges deep in his gut then vomits them out, because the terrible truth is that all the horrendous things that happened to him doesn’t have a bright side, and yet here he is shining like the fucking sun to make an entire greenhouse of bright sides for himself.

In the long period of silence that comes after, the film transitions from an intense frigid atmosphere to a warmer hue, bursting out tungsten filaments of reds and yellows to portray this fictitious oriental city that looks more like a photograph from the opium wars rather than the current decade. Iwaizumi blinks heavily so his vision can adjust to the new colors. The setting then shifts into a slow, sensual pace, the first appearance of the leading lady spicing up the mood.

Oikawa’s questions simmer down along with the movie. Half an hour passes, he grows completely silent, his usually fidgety arms all pale and boneless around Iwaizumi’s waist. Curious, Iwaizumi looks down on his shoulder, tufts of brown hair chafing against his cheeks.

“Hey,” he says, voice hoarse but suitably lulling. “Go to bed if you’re tired.”

Oikawa lets out an incoherent murmur, his head lazily sliding down. “I’m not—I wanna finish the movie…” he manages to say, low and drowsy. Iwaizumi rolls his eyes. Oikawa breathes in and lets the air out in one slow exhale before snuggling even closer to his giant human heater. “I’ll move to the bed later…”

He sighs and pulls the blanket up to Oikawa’s neck. “You know that never happens.”

Iwaizumi draws him close as he lets the movie play, a gentle warmth trailing up to his chest. It heats whatever’s under his skin much better than any blanket. On the other hand, Oikawa struggles to stay awake and insists he’s still watching, not quite ready to end the night and have their time together wasted. He’d often ask Iwaizumi to stay with him for another hour, and he’ll do just that and stays awake for as long as he can.

Oikawa seems a bit more tuckered out tonight, though.

It’s almost hard to imagine that for the first few weeks, Oikawa had no idea what he wanted, simply unable to decide for himself - what he wanted to do, what he wanted to eat, still hanging on to that belief that he had no voice. He was manipulated into believing he didn’t matter for such a long time that he didn’t know what to do with freedom, couldn’t naturally fall into it like a normal human being. The prospect of it might have felt so foreign to him. Both his past and future are both unclear that it’s impossible to find one straight path into finding his purpose. And while Iwaizumi has been giving him a wide-open door, Oikawa simply didn’t want to walk into it, choosing to stay at the only place where he doesn’t feel lost.

Oikawa doesn’t exactly have a family to come home to, which is strange all on its own. The media never talks about his folks or the fact that he doesn’t have any relatives desperately looking for him. His university friends and colleagues that have been interviewed didn’t know much about his past either. Birthplace unknown. Parents nowhere to be found. Was he living alone all this time?

Nearing the final scene, Oikawa’s nap flows predictably into a deeper slumber. The film dies timely with a somber landscape and a bittersweet ending of someone’s funeral, wisps of pale blue and olive green spilling from the screen, touching every surface, touching the lithic curve of Oikawa’s body coiled up over the spacious couch, unapologetically using Iwaizumi’s thigh as his pillow.
Oikawa seems so delicate from this angle; truculent lips barely touching, soft exhales keeping them apart, mussed up hair whispering over his face of tender youth — and all of these things, if combined, a much more stunning visual than any full-length feature in Iwaizumi’s personal opinion.

The only one awake doesn’t dare move, gingerly lifting a careful hand to tuck Oikawa’s loose curls behind his ear. His fingers remain to harmlessly disturb the bed of messy brown hair, brushing his fingers through rosemary-infused locks in an almost meditative state. Within it, he feels an uneven surface against his thumb. Iwaizumi leans down to check. He sees a keloid scarring few inches away from his temple, the small perimeter around it no longer able to grow hair.

He swallows something red and hot prickling down in his throat, pushing away the speculations of how Oikawa got that scar.

The minutes fade and Iwaizumi’s frustration falls into varying degrees of weariness. His insomnia is still a pain in the ass, but he’s beginning to cherish the higher frequency of his long, uninterrupted moments of sleep. It sneaks up on him at more appropriate hours now. His gaze glances over to Oikawa who’s fast asleep on his lap, his serene slumber more infectious than it should be. It’s strange how something that used to be unimaginable as sleeping is now hard to resist.

Sapping every last drop of his wakefulness, Iwaizumi lets the drowse take over and closes his eyes.

☆ ☆ ☆

“Get inside and wait for your turn.”

The door creaked open in an unbearable cement gray.

It was an assault to his senses despite its insipidity, and Oikawa felt his eyes burn at the intense light, his throat constricting at the taste of tobacco and the smell of strong perfume. But all of that was nothing compared to dozens of forlorn eyes staring at him. Oikawa wanted to shrink and die. He felt largely out of place in this tiny room full of women held against their will - all of them young, possibly in their early twenties.

He jerked when the door behind him closed suddenly in a loud thundering sound.

The noise of laughter behind another stainless steel door mingled with the silent whispers of foreign languages, an English or Japanese word getting lost in their surreptitious conversations here and there. Majority of them were migrants. Oikawa guessed it was easier to enslave women who had nowhere to go and thousands of miles away from home.

With a blank face and a bruised eye he couldn’t open fully, Oikawa walked inside in slow, painful steps. It was his first time in this room. The space looked unfinished, unlike the heavily decorated nightclub. Cement block walls. Concrete slab floors lit up by rows of fluorescent tubes fixed under fiberglass ceiling panels. He nervously searched around the small room, searched for an empty seat, although there weren’t a lot of chairs to begin with. Some of the girls just sat on the ground in clusters, all of them squeezed together like sardines in a can as they gossip about him in their native tongue so Oikawa wouldn’t be able to understand.

The other girls never talked to him. They didn’t do a lot of talking in general. Finally, Oikawa saw
a familiar face and a hand waving at him.

Putri was the only one who didn’t act weird around him, and he had unconsciously sought her out like a child seeking his mother. She wasn’t that old, but she definitely belonged to a much higher age bracket. It helped her get along with almost everyone, even got on Kozlov’s good side. Her smile was a breath of fresh air. Most of the trafficked girls looked at him the same way they looked at the other men in the facility and Oikawa couldn’t really blame them.

He sat down on the cemented floor next to Putri, hugging his knees.

It was hot inside, felt like there wasn’t any air circulating. His shirt and sweatpants didn’t quite help in cooling him. Suspended in a vacuum of humidity and unpredictability, Oikawa tried to think of something else other than the complete lack of comfort and locked his brain from showering him with any more mental stress.

He really didn’t know where he was. He’d often study the faces of these traffickers at every given opportunity, two of them idling by the metal door and insulting the women who didn’t fit their standards.

“Did you get some sleep?” Putri asked in her usual cheery and heavily accented Japanese.

“Oh, yeah, just a little.” Oikawa lied. He couldn’t sleep with all the pain surging through his body. The bags under his eyes and the fresh bruises on his arms and legs were the implications of that. His tired brown eyes cruised up towards the metal door on the other side of the room. “W-What do they do in there?”

“Monthly check-ups for the girls,” she said. Her gaze moved towards a young lady across them, her skin evidently red with rashes. Oikawa watched how Putri’s face twist into pity. “It’s to make sure the girls aren’t… sick.”

Oikawa drew in a nervous breath, realizing why this was the first time he was taken here. His face had been sheltering this black eye for days. Throat aching. The sutures in his side were swollen. His knees had been hurting so bad that the guy he was thrown at yesterday got mad at him because he could barely go down on all fours. He wouldn’t have been taken to this rundown clinic in the basement if there was nothing wrong with him. His chest caved in. God, he didn’t know how he would react if it turned out that he was infected with something. Even if he didn’t have some kind of disease, he would just be forced to fuck strangers until he’d get one. The overwhelming fear kept Oikawa’s mouth shut and his brain unresponsive as he nervously played with his bruised fingers.

“It’s just blood tests and that sort of stuff,” Putri reassured him, thinking that was the thing that scared him. She placed a hand over his shoulder to push down the visible tension in his muscles. “I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

That short moment of solace was broken when the heavy steel door opened and a woman walked out, arms around her chest. It must be colder inside. One of the two guards held a piece of paper, which Oikawa assumed were names of everyone waiting in there like cattle.

“Kawabata Hiromi,” the man called out.

Oikawa recognized her immediately. She stood up from a flimsy folding chair and walked meekly into the room, staring down on her toes to hide her face. The guy talked to her, and her voice was so hauntingly like a little girl, because she was one, and she wasn’t supposed to be in a place like this.
“I heard what happened.” Putri glanced at the door closing then back at Oikawa. She offered him a smile. “You took the blame for her, didn’t you?”

Oikawa’s eyebrows gathered in, pressing his face on his bent knees. He couldn’t answer. He hated himself for regretting what he did, wished he didn’t take the blame. Acting like a hero only led him into a room full of monsters who liked to rape and beat the shit out of him. It was a stupid move. His indiscretion didn’t matter - didn’t help anyone. At the end of the day, that little girl would still be forced to entertain sleazeballs thrice her age. He just saved her from one angry slap to the face and nothing else.

“Kozlov killed her father.” Oikawa’s eyes widened. He could only listen in silent shock. Putri breathed out a long tired breath. “He had told Hiromi that her father sold her, but I had to tell her the truth in secret. They took her when she was coming home from school. It was her first day in ninth grade.”

The guilt began to consume him from the gut up boiling to his throat and he squeezed his eyes shut, pressed his forehead on his knees to subdue his sniffles. He was embarrassed that he could barely keep himself from crying while none of the girls dropped a single tear. He was a coward. The reality was that they were all stronger than him. They were all tragically radiant and petite, barely five feet, while he was this large mountain of hopelessness. Oikawa felt jealous somehow. Some of them can still laugh and smile at each other even when they were at the very bottom of hell.

When he lifted his head back up, he made eye contact with a woman who had wavy platinum blonde hair and skin paler than his. He noticed that she was intentionally left out by the others and that her hands were on her visibly large belly. He couldn’t imagine how terrified she must be. Imprisoned and pregnant. No hope for escape. Oikawa already knew what Kozlov would do to that unborn child. The woman was young and pretty and they would want to keep her for as long as they could.

Youth was a commodity and men had a sick appetite for it.

“Where did Kozlov get him from? Is he mixed?”

Oikawa looked at the owner of the voice. The two men guarding the metal door had their arms over their chest, scanning the tiny room until their gaze fell on Oikawa.

“Huh? You mean that yaposhka?” the other said with a thick Baltic accent, raising one brow at him. Oikawa only scowled back. “Ha, fuck if I know. Kozlov took him in when Kolya Junior threw him out of the warehouse.”

“What about that lady next to him?” he asked next, his voice changing from disgust to curiosity.

“Indonesian, I think. Those two are Filipino, and that one with the fake tits Kozlov got from Bangkok. Thought she was about to hit jackpot and marry a millionaire.”

Both of the men laugh. Oikawa noticed how Putri shifted her shoulders, rolling her eyes when she overheard their conversation. She shook her head in disappointment and clenched her jaw.

“Youth is a commodity and men had a sick appetite for it.”

Eventually, Oikawa found the energy to speak. “Was it like that for you?”
“It’s much worse than you can imagine.” She took a deep breath - a sharp, painful sound. “My husband was in a lot of debt. He told me that he knew someone who can get me work outside the country. I thought I was going to a better place. This man offered me to work as a housemaid, earning ten times more money than I make in Jakarta. Then, when I got here, my passport was taken, sold to meet other men for sex. I realized that my husband sold me to them. I endured for two months. I didn’t try to escape like the others because I knew there was no way out. Kozlov treated the girls well as long as we keep turning a profit. He then found out that I could speak Japanese. I used to work in Okinawa as a supermarket cashier during my younger days, you see, and he transferred me to do office work, sometimes as a hostess to foreigners who only speak English.” She sighed heavily and Oikawa could only listen. “I’m no longer in sex work, and I’m glad, but I still want to go home. It’s been a year. I miss my little girls.”

Putri’s face stuck in his mind, guilt stabbing at him for asking. He rested his chin on his knees. Oikawa was relieved that she didn’t have to go through what he was going through anymore. He allowed himself to look at her, tears stinging in his eyes while she remained stalwart and strong despite telling her story. Oikawa wished he could tell his, except he couldn’t really remember how he got there.

“He’s next,” one of the two guards said. They didn’t bother calling out his name when he was the only guy in there.

It was a trial getting up, with his knee all busted up for some reason. He looked back at Putri who threw a smile at him, mouthing that he was going to be fine. Unlike the girls, he was grabbed roughly by the arm and pushed ahead.

This room was smaller than the initial one, and there were two men inside. It was designed for a specific purpose, unconventionally dim with a yellow light and medical equipment concentrated on one corner. In it were Kozlov and another man in dark blue scrubs. Oikawa couldn’t quite see his face, half of it covered with a surgical mask. He sat down on the plastic chair by the doctor’s desk.

Oikawa burst in panic when he saw him prepare an injection. He only felt less anxious when he noticed it was empty.

“Hey, got any more of that shit Yanagihara uses on his patients?” Kozlov asked. He looked high on cocaine or something. Red eyes. Fidgeting constantly. He was jumpy and a little more hostile than normal, rummaging the old filing cabinets.

The nurse’s voice was muffled behind the mask. “What? Ketamine?”

Kozlov laughed loudly, only stopping when he breathed in the cigarette pressed in his mouth. “What am I? A fucking animal? I meant the good shit!” He marched towards Oikawa as soon he noticed him. His mouth curved into an insulting grin. “Hey there, long time no see, huh?” He sucked on his cigarette, red glowing from it embers when he clicked his tongue at Oikawa’s black eye. He dragged his hand over his face in mild annoyance. “I told those goddamn idiots not to fuck his face up. Who’d wanna fuck a one-eyed ladyboy? Make sure to get that shit fixed quick, alright, sensei?”

“Yeah, yeah,” the guy in scrubs mumbled with disinterest and held his arm down firmly on the plastic armrest, rolling his sleeves as Kozlov watched behind a cloud of cigarette smoke.

“See? This is a clean facility, Oikawa-san. We don’t want you spreadin’ fucking syphilis to my loyal customers. Folks here are always expectin’ a quality product. I get ‘em nice and cleaned up.”

Oikawa whimpered under tight lips as a syringe was pushed into his arm, feeling like a thousand
ants bit him all at the same time. He realized that they weren’t shooting him up with heroin this time. They were collecting his blood. Despite the unpleasant feeling, Oikawa glared at Kozlov who stared down with a repulsive grin. Oikawa felt like he should say something but his mind was blank with dread. Bad-mouthing Kozlov never really did anything good for him.

Seconds later, the man handling the syringe pulled out the needle. Red liquid spilled out in sparse dots. It was an eyesore until a cotton ball was taped over it.

“Never seen him before,” he said behind his mask, preparing another injection with gloved hands. “Is he one of Kwan’s? You usually don’t keep pretty boys in here.”

“Oh, he’s proving to be quite a bestseller that I might just get more guys like him. I value equality in my club, see? I got him from Yanagihara. He’s Kwan’s favorite whenever that bastard visits. Gotta make sure Oikawa-san here’s clean as a whistle. That fucker may be a slob, but he doesn’t like it when his toys bleed an’ shit.”

Oikawa kept his head low to avoid Kozlov’s cruel inspection. Every muscle in him tensed, his shoulders frozen solid when another needle pricked him. He kept still, kept his fists and forearm firm and taut.

He let out a hoarse cry of pain when a brutal hand grabbed him by the jaw.

“I really want to keep you for a long time, Oikawa-san,” Kozlov seethed, easing closer to his face. Oikawa squeezed his eyes tight, unknowingly holding his breath. He stiffened as the grip grew stronger, nails digging into his jawbone. His heart pulsed against his ribs as Kozlov admired his possession. “I haven’t even gotten a test drive of my own product yet.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Kazuo,” the other man called warningly, cursing in almost perfect English. Oikawa didn’t even notice that the syringe was already pulled out. He felt himself able to breathe again when the hand on his face vanished. “Can you at least let me fucking finish? His blood pressure’s gonna be off the charts ‘cause of you,” he snarled, rolling his eyes. He shook his head and unwrapped another syringe because the second one failed. “You can fuck him as much as you want later, alright?”

Kozlov threw his hands in surrender. “Alright, sensei. I’ll behave.”

A deadly silence descended as he heard various apparatuses being prepared, and Oikawa fought back the tremors taking roots under his skin. He wanted to cry. He could hear his own rapid heartbeat, his own pulse about to explode out of his veins. Kozlov watched him with purpose, waiting, and Oikawa swallowed hard, ears ringing. He was going to get hurt again. There was nowhere to go. Kozlov would hurt him again after this—

“Oikawa, wake up. We’re here.”

He drifts awake into a daze.

His mind deletes his dream in an instant, memories swimming laps around every intangible thing he doesn’t recall with clarity. Oikawa opens his eyes. His retinas unwillingly soak up the flood of ruthless sunlight. He glances out the tinted windows and sees Iwaizumi had parked in a secluded area behind a building.

“Hey, you feeling okay?”
Looking to his right, he’s greeted with Iwaizumi in a well-pressed suit and a concerned expression. His collar is unbuttoned, loose without a tie. He can't tell if he left it like that on purpose or actually forgot to put one.

Oikawa nods absently. He straightens his back and bends his neck side to side. Feeling a little stiff, he groans. “My neck hurts.”

“I told you to sleep on the bed last night,” Iwaizumi scolds him, eyes rolling.

“Maybe you should’ve woken me up or carried me to bed.”

“No way. You’re too heavy.” Oikawa giggles and risks a tentative glance. Before he can apologize, Iwaizumi continues. “I didn’t intend to fall asleep there until morning either, so don’t worry about it. Come on, let’s go inside.”

Oikawa bites at his lips, tingling his fingers, unable to hide his nervousness. His heart feels like it’s going to burst out, and he doesn’t know why. He might’ve woken up from a bad dream which he intentionally refuses to recall. Trying to remember things always feels like looking at a painting with too many of its details chipped off.

Iwaizumi releases the brake pedal before switching the engine off. He’s about ready to get off when he turns at Oikawa, a timbre of sympathy clear in his voice. A hand squeezes his shoulder. “This won’t take long. I’ll be with you the entire time.”

When Oikawa hops out of the car, he feels like he just jumped onto another reality.

While they’ve had plenty of dinners downtown, Iwaizumi never takes him out during the day, so this is the first time he’s washed over by the eight o’clock sun, raw and prickly, his skin instantly flushing after the exposure. It’s a rather unpleasant feeling. He’s wearing a baseball cap that casts a balming shadow over his face and he wishes he had put on a shirt with longer sleeves, or taken a certain letterman jacket with him. He quickly follows Iwaizumi as they enter a back door and into a well-lit hallway.

“This certainly doesn’t look like the usual place we go out to eat,” Oikawa mumbles, managing to cloak his anxiety behind a joke. He wraps his arms around himself at the sudden burst of indoor cooling.

He breathes out a shaky sigh as his heart rate elevates, grabbing Iwaizumi by the sleeve. Fear rushes through him. Iwaizumi assured him this morning that he’s bringing him to a private clinic, not a hospital. It’s hard to think this building isn’t one. White tiles. Still life paintings. Ridiculously bright corridors. Wall sconces. Light poplar wood panels. The lack of people eases his worries somewhat, but an irrational horror still plagues him as he walks further into this white abyss.

The watch that snakes around Oikawa’s wrist glistens when the overhead elevator lights wash over them, red indicator lights shifting its numbers until it stops at the 18th floor. The automatic doors open. Oikawa notices that it’s just as white and empty as the ground floor. His throat bobs with a nervous swallow, realizing the only exit is the same elevator they just went through. It’s dizzying. The walls are pushing in and swallowing him whole. He’s in the belly of the beast and he’s walking right into it—

He freezes like a trapped animal, his eyes darting around like he’s looking for a way out.

“I can’t do this.” Oikawa stops and blinks down at the ground, his voice stung with fear mixed with anger. “I’m—I’m scared and I don’t even know why.”
Iwaizumi stares at his petrified figure, a tinge of guilt beating hard in his chest. He’s beginning to think that maybe this isn’t a good idea. While Oikawa has been more comfortable in social situations, he still has this white coat syndrome that he’s still unable to move past through, his repressed memories giving him visceral warning signs.

He takes him by the wrist, thumb circling over Oikawa’s racing pulse.

“Oikawa,” he calls him assuringly. Iwaizumi wishes he can simply wipe away the deep lines of anxiety haunting Oikawa’s face. His voice remains low as he places a comforting hand on the side of his head. “I know this guy. He’s not stupid enough to do anything to you while I’m here.”

Oikawa looks away, eyes skimming the empty lobby, scanning for danger. His next words are slow and stern. “Nothing can hurt you as long as you’re with me. I told you that, didn’t I?”

His brown eyes widen before he hesitantly nods his head. The corners of his lips shudder into a thankful smile.

Iwaizumi lets him follow close behind. They step inside an office with a soft ambient light, clean lines blending nicely into a friendly environment of indoor plants and vertical window blinds. It’s a bit more intimate than the other parts of the building. It must’ve helped with Oikawa’s fear with how his shoulders slackened.

“Good to see you again, Iwaizumi.”

Mizoguchi Sadayuki walks in like a standard medical professional in his white coat and white Crocs, walking out from his pantry with a cup of coffee in hand. His features are all straight lines - eyebrows, nose, eyes, carrying an air of authority around him despite his casual get-up. He’s one or two years before forty, his hair dyed blond in the hopes that it will help him look ten years younger. The dirty golden color reminds him of teenagers attempting to bleach their stubborn black hair for the first time.

“You’re pretty damn early. I see you brought a friend along, too.” With raised brows, he sits behind his desk. Oikawa puts his feet together, slightly leaning forward to offer a curt bow. Mizoguchi acknowledges it before sipping his coffee. Iwaizumi stares back with a hopeful hint. “You and Matsukawa didn’t exactly provide me with a lot of details. Is he the one who needs a medical examination?”

“Yeah,” he says, nodding. Oikawa turns discreetly to him, his eyes frantically asking him what he should do. Iwaizumi places a gentle hand over the small of his back to give him the slightest push, gesturing him to sit across Mizoguchi.

“I’d give you a form to fill out but I’m pretty sure you’ll just check every box in the list.” Mizoguchi finishes his coffee and gets to his feet. He stares at Oikawa. “Hm, you look about the same age as Iwaizumi when he came bursting through my old clinic with a cracked skull.”

Wide, worried eyes snap up at Iwaizumi.

“I’m fine,” he says quickly. “That was a long time ago.”

Mizoguchi lets out a tight, amused laugh. “So, what’s your name, kid?”

“Oh, um, Oikawa,” he croaks, stealing another paranoid glance at Iwaizumi, unsure if he can even say his name out loud.

“I know you’re scared, Oikawa,” he says with a rough but strangely fatherly voice, making sure he mentions his name. The man in the white coat then snortles another laugh. “If it makes you feel
better, I’m just as scared as you are because that guy behind you won’t hesitate to shoot me in the head if I make the slightest mistake.”

Iwaizumi didn’t expect that morbid joke to pluck a faint laugh out of Oikawa.

“You can change in there and we’ll begin.” Mizoguchi points his eyes towards a door on the other side of the room.

It leads to a narrow changing room. Oikawa takes off his wristwatch first, giving it to Iwaizumi for safekeeping as Iwaizumi hands him a cotton hospital gown in blinding mint green. It’s the kind that stops at the ankles, but against long, lean legs it ends just below Oikawa’s knees. Mizoguchi calls them in to gather in a clinical suite. It’s spacious and bright with natural light, the ground shining with oak and floor wax. Iwaizumi keeps a hand on Oikawa’s back as they enter.

He’s kindly asked to sit atop a padded exam table, the bolstered upholstery the same color as his robe. Oikawa easily hops up without the use of the pull-out step stool. Iwaizumi stands right behind him, arms crossed.

Mizoguchi speaks as he adjusts the backrest. “Iwaizumi told me a bit about your situation.” He places two fingers on his wrist to check his radial pulse, counting the beats as he continues to talk. “Can you remember any history of, let’s say, tumors, maybe some surgical procedures that might have caused memory loss?”

Oikawa silently shakes his head, absently pressing a hand against his side. His words come in stutters. “I don’t know—I… I’ve had these stitches when I—I mean, I don’t know how they got there…” Mizoguchi brings out equipment for blood pressure as Oikawa talks, then wraps an inflatable rubber cuff around Oikawa’s arm. Blood pressure is high, he tells Iwaizumi. “I’m not sure what happened—to me, or what—I don’t—”

“Alright, alright,” Mizoguchi cuts him off cautiously. “Let’s have a look then.” He eyes Iwaizumi and gives him a knowing raise of his eyebrows.

Iwaizumi springs into action and sits on a cushioned stool next to Oikawa, lowering himself. “Is it okay to….?” he asks as Oikawa stares down at him.

His thin eyebrows are squeezed together, glancing around uneasily. “Y-Yeah,” Oikawa stammers and gives an affirmative nod. Iwaizumi unties the ribbon that keeps the gown from showing his upper body. The canvas of skin is clearer than before and his scars are carefully slipping back into Oikawa’s natural complexion. His skin is paler, Iwaizumi notices, having to stay indoors for a long period of time.

Mizoguchi narrows his eyes. “Couple of old stitches here,” he says as he palpates the area on his stomach and abdomen. “Sloppy handiwork. Someone obviously didn’t care.” His fingers then graze over a large diagonal keloid across Oikawa’s side. “They’re mostly minor cuts, not too deep, but this one—”

Iwaizumi dreads. He’s not quite sure what to expect and Mizoguchi’s serious expression isn’t quite relieving. “Why? What is it?”

“Nephrectomy.” Mizoguchi’s tone is low and emphatic, almost like it’s hard for him to say it. “Kidney’s been removed looks like.”

Oikawa stares at Iwaizumi with a choked noise and furrowed eyebrows.

His body instantaneously locks in pure horror and Iwaizumi soaks in the terrible sight, instinctively
putting a comforting hand over the other’s quivering ones. It’s okay. We’ll fix you. He tells him again and again, as though it’s as easy as fixing a flat tire.

He’s not sure how—but he’ll fix it.

“You’re sure about this?” Iwaizumi asks, concerned. It’s obvious how Oikawa fights off the visible fear from appearing on his face. He himself can tell that the surgery isn’t the consensual kind.

“Pretty sure. We can run some radiology tests if you guys want. Maybe some renal function tests would do some good, too.”

Iwaizumi came into the clinic expecting the worst results, but he didn’t add up Oikawa’s heartbreaking reactions into the equation.

“Can you check his knee next?” Iwaizumi requests. Oikawa blinks questioningly at him then pulls the gown off his legs. He exposes his shins and knees, a long pink scar running vertically across his entire kneecap.

“Another surgery,” Mizoguchi concludes almost in an instant. “It doesn’t seem too old, but looks like it healed pretty well.” He lifts one eyebrow at Oikawa. “You an athlete?” Oikawa shakes his head again, his lips pursing in thought. “This incision only means you got a knee replacement surgery. Injuries from extreme activities like sports or car accidents can cause the patella to break. You’d need at least two months of physical therapy to completely heal. Do you experience pain when you walk? Does it often swell?”

“Not… really,” Oikawa replies, constantly glancing at Iwaizumi before every word. “It—Well, it hurts sometimes, like when I walk too much, or if I’m standing for too long.”

Humming in thought, Mizoguchi bobs his head. “This doesn’t really prove much, in terms of your memory loss I mean.” He proceeds with the visual exam shining a tiny flashlight right at Oikawa’s eyes, watching how his brown pupils adjust to the light. He clicks off the torch before asking another question. “Do you have experience with drugs?”

“I—” Oikawa stops as his lashes flutter in reluctance, biting on his bottom lip as he searches for reassurance in the other’s hazel eyes.

“Oikawa.” Iwaizumi reaches to land a soft grip on his shoulder and lets it stay there. “You can tell him.”

Oikawa bows his head, hand nervously twitching against the hospital gown. His vision remains downcast as he wades through his memories. “I was—I was like this… guinea pig for… experimental drugs. I don’t—I don’t know…”

“I’m… sorry to hear that,” Mizoguchi says and softens his voice afterward. “Do you remember what kind? MDMA? Methamphetamine?”

“I don’t remember,” Oikawa murmurs, looking like he’s trying his best to scour through his memories. “Uh, heroin, maybe? It’s usually injected in my arm.” He stretches his right arm for Mizoguchi to see. Iwaizumi holds his breath and frowns when his old track marks come into view.

“I see,” Mizoguchi says primly. “Do you remember having head injuries? Things like that can result in a wide range of neuropsychiatric symptoms.”
“He has a wound on his head,” Iwaizumi cuts in.

Oikawa blinks wide. “I do?”

It’s the wound he discovered last night - a raised scar near his temporal. Mizoguchi leans closer to check where Iwaizumi had pointed.

“I see it. Can’t really tell its cause, but there’s no swelling so it’s not something to worry about. Might be from a fall or other high-impact contact, possibly blunt force trauma based on his… past circumstances.”

Oikawa cranes his head at Iwaizumi, absent-mindedly pressing a pale hand on the side of his head. “I didn’t know that.”

“I saw it while you were sleeping,” Iwaizumi says as he ties the twill tapes tight to keep Oikawa’s hospital gown from easing off his skin.

“Oh.”

Mizoguchi squints his tepid gray eyes and gives Iwaizumi a weird look before awkwardly clearing his throat.

"Anyway," he says and breathes out a heavy sigh, evidently tired from having to take in all these depressing information. Mizoguchi looks at Oikawa’s direction before clapping his hands once. “Let’s finish up checking your vitals quick so we can head on over for some laboratory tests.”

☆ ☆ ☆

The entire floor is a ghost town.

Mizoguchi probably made sure of that as he leads Oikawa from one unlabelled room to another, each for a different type of examination - pathology tests, urinalysis, checking for tumor markers, ultrasound, even made him run on a treadmill with electrodes stuck to his chest. Iwaizumi hovers around him on each procedure, following him close like an unavoidable patch of rain clouds, laying down yellow bricks for Oikawa to step on without worry. It ultimately helps the young man relax as the day goes on but keeps Mizoguchi on his toes.

Lastly, Oikawa is taken to the radiology wing.

Iwaizumi trails him until they reach a dim, incandescent imaging room. Surrounded by giant machinery, Oikawa looks lost in the woods, as though he’s encircled by vicious hounds. His fear comes back in full force and Iwaizumi can practically hear the other’s rapid heartbeat. He’s frozen again, and it’s probably not because of the intense air-conditioning.

Mizoguchi tells Oikawa to lie down on a large rectangular table. He moves an overhead tube mounted on the ceiling to align the grid on Oikawa’s torso.

With Oikawa laying down, Iwaizumi brushes his hair away from his face.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be right behind that glass.”

Oikawa exhales with a short laugh.
“Sorry,” he apologizes and Iwaizumi doesn’t know why. “Iwa-chan’s been telling me not to worry all day and I just can’t seem to.”

Iwaizumi dismisses his apology with a small, unguarded smile, disappearing instantaneously when a loud voice rips through the air—

“Hey, Yojimbo-san! Would you kindly get out of there so we can start?”

Mizoguchi separates them this time around, instructing him to stay in the control room. Iwaizumi stands behind a glass window. He intently watches Oikawa lay in a supine position, illuminated by a suspended light beam.

“I’d usually have a radiographer to do this for me, but I did promise you a highly classified check-up.” Mizoguchi sighs, not sounding too happy to do all the labor. Iwaizumi raises his eyebrows. Does he think he’ll shoot up his staff the moment they lay their eyes on Oikawa? “We’ll start with a chest radiograph then lower extremities. It’s a good thing everything’s digital nowadays so this shouldn’t take very long. Back in my day—”

Iwaizumi waits beside him with his arms crossed as he babbles on. In just seconds and with some simple calibrations, the computer monitors light up with an optimized X-Ray image of Oikawa’s upper body. It’s a contrasting black and white, his ribs and collarbones sticking out the most. His eyes widen—

It looks normal.

He doesn’t see any foreign objects standing out, and he can’t help but express a sigh of relief. Mizoguchi walks out of the control panel whenever he needs to reposition the equipment then comes back to the console.

“You have me curious, Iwaizumi,” he says as he works with the touchscreen display. “You could go to any physician for a check-up this simple, although I sort of understand why you’re being this discreet.”

Another image pops in the screen. It’s Oikawa’s abdomen this time. Iwaizumi can’t really tell if there’s anything wrong, only able to distinguish the spine and pelvic bones. They all seem pretty ordinary.

“I know who that kid is, by the way. He was all over the news a few months ago.”

He replies with a frown. “I didn’t kidnap him if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Mizoguchi chuckles when he sees Iwaizumi’s offended expression. “Oh, I know. He’s looking well-groomed and has grown quite attached to you. I was thinking more in the lines of… taking an abandoned puppy home.”

Iwaizumi grimaces and locks his jaw.

“Oikawa isn’t just some animal up for adoption,” he says sharply.

“Uh-huh.” He casts a tight-lipped smile as he types something into his computer, unfazed. “How did you find him anyway?”

A mixture of fury and uneasiness clutches inside his stomach. There’s a displeasing dryness in his mouth when he makes a strange, choked sound just before speaking. “I found him in a club in Kabukicho,” he explains. The X-Ray equipment whirs to replace his brief pause. “Turns out to be
an underground sex trafficking ring.”

“Ah, shit,” Mizoguchi sighs out the words heavily, regretting his previous choice of words immediately. He shakes his head. “That’s—that’s awful. I’m sorry.”

Iwaizumi accepts his apology with silence and lets Mizoguchi focus. The computer screen flashes with another processed image of Oikawa’s bones. He glances away from the monitor and focuses on Oikawa who’s waiting patiently. He’s awfully relaxed surrounded by all those machines. What is he thinking about staring into space like that?

His breath leaves him before bringing up a question, eyes fixed on the young man outside the window.

“What do you think happened to him?”

“Hmm…” Mizoguchi is not quite sure how to proceed. His gaze darkens with fossil gray as he cascades all of Oikawa’s digital radiographs, stitching them together in a few clicks. “I could be wrong, but it looks like he was involved in a little… harvesting.”

“Harvesting…?”

“Organ harvesting.” Mizoguchi scowls, straightening his back for a quick stretch. “That knee injury is most likely sports-related, but that huge stitch on his side indicates kidney removal. Hundred percent. His tests and X-Rays don’t imply renal agenesis, which means, whether he liked it or not, it was taken out at some point.”

Iwaizumi closes his eyes and sighs. His stomach rolls out when he puts two and two together. If Oikawa was taken during the Rankei Residences shooting, that would imply he has some kind of connection to Kyoudai-krug. It would explain why they wanted him alive, and how he got into Kozlov’s hands. And yet Oikawa’s record is clean. No connections with any criminal network. No connections with anyone—

“Do you think this is related to what happened yesterday?”


“Some guys from Aobajousai-kai were found dead,” he says solemnly. “Organs missing.”

He wrinkles his nose in uncertainty. “I can’t really say. You’re going to be surprised how many gangs are into this whole ‘organ procurement’ business. It’s the new trend in the black market. Local triads absolutely love this type of shit.”

The digital wall clock waltzes behind them in sluggish ticks. Twelve-thirty. That’s four and a half hours and Iwaizumi doesn’t notice that they’ve been there for that long. He takes a glimpse of the monitors again, Mizoguchi focused on examining them.

“Did you find anything wrong with his tests?” he asks, mouth compressing into a thin line.

“Nothing out of the blue. His blood and urine tests are all fine so far, creatinine levels are normal, so he doesn’t need a special diet or anything like that. I don’t see anything wrong with his X-Rays, but that titanium knee cap might cause him some problems if he’s not careful. Swimming should be a good exercise for him. Get that strength back to his knees.” Mizoguchi folds his arms and looks straight at Iwaizumi’s eyes. “It’s obvious he’s been through a lot. He experienced physical abuse and probably drug-induced hysteria at some point. As you already know, there are major neuroanatomical structures involved in memory loss. It’s usually bilateral damage to these
structures that cause disorders like amnesia. His brain could’ve erased these traumatic events to cope with the stress, you know, like psychological repression, quite common among people diagnosed with PTSD, and if his memory comes back…” he trails off purposely, exhaling a whistling sound. “Well, I can’t say it’s going to be pleasant.”

Iwaizumi takes a deep breath. He already expects that much, he just isn’t sure how to deal with the situation once it arises. There’s this nervous tension that comes dangerously close to fear. It’s not quite a regular guest in Iwaizumi’s brain, but rather a novelty he prefers not to encounter on an everyday basis. He’s glad Oikawa doesn’t seem to show any decline in physical health, but Iwaizumi wanted it officially written on paper to thoroughly ease his worries.

“Thanks for the help,” Iwaizumi says earnestly. “I appreciate it.”

“Hey, it’s no problem. I do this all the time to Seijou bosses,” he says, clapping a hand over Iwaizumi’s back. “You already know executive check-ups like these aren’t cheap, but you know keeping my mouth shut isn’t free either, right?”

Iwaizumi scoffs with a smug smile. “I already wired the money to your account before I even came here.”

“Splendid.” Mizoguchi pats him again on the shoulder as he passes by him, visibly happier. “Anyway, you can tell the kid to get dressed. You two wait in my office while I compile his results. The RNA test takes a while though, so I’ll send it over some other time. Confidentiality guaranteed.”

Iwaizumi offers a swift bow of the head before going back to Oikawa’s side. He watches Mizoguchi as he walks out of the radiology room, leaving them alone with a flaxen halogen light and colossal machines. The privacy helps calm his mind a bit, the strange mix of emotions easing into a low simmer.

“Iwa-chan?” he hears Oikawa call, his voice painted with innocence and relief. He takes Iwaizumi’s presence as an indication to sit up, batting his hopeful lashes at him. “Are we done? Can I stand up now?”

“Yeah,” Iwaizumi says, grabbing his hand to help Oikawa off the Bucky table. “Come on, let’s—”

Oikawa’s mirthful presence cuts gently into his awareness as a pair of arms circle around his neck. Iwaizumi stumbles back a little, but he’s able to reflexively rebalance their bodies together as the young man buries his face in his neck. Oikawa’s chest thumps against his, the heart that couldn’t stay still all day now beats in a gentle rhythm, slow and mellow - a ballad recorded by the needle of an electrocardiogram.

Iwaizumi lets the yearning wash over him this time and dutifully wraps his arms around the other man, hands circling around his waist until they sprawl across his back. His breath stirs his hair gently. Oikawa is still in his hospital gown and awfully quiet while he’s pressed against him, relishing the warmth.

“You did great,” he praises him in half a whisper. “Sorry I took you here so suddenly.”

He catches a whiff of hand sanitizer and the mild balm of ultrasound gel, replacing Oikawa’s usual scent of rosemary.

“You owe me lunch.”

Iwaizumi gives off a short, breathy chortle. He can’t see him, but he can already imagine Oikawa’s
pouting face based on that whiny, petulant voice alone. Oikawa untangles himself, finally, smothering a smile as he stares back. Iwaizumi fishes the wristwatch from his suit pockets, snapping it back on Oikawa’s wrist.

“What are you craving?”

☆ ☆ ☆

It’s a quarter before six.

Rain doesn’t come despite the weather forecast of scattered thunderstorms. It’s a difficult time to move unobserved through a city at this hour, but Iwaizumi thinks otherwise. Six on a Friday has the population running around, too busy, too absorbed in their own absurdities to notice the small things. He drives north at medium speed as his radio buzzes.

Criminal organizations are being targeted by the police. The National Police Agency is re-launching a campaign originally issued by former Safety Chief Takemura Masayoshi to stop the ongoing gang wars and violence between several organized crime groups by patrolling the area to hunt down anti-social forces—

The traffic eases a few hundred meters later as the street narrows into a commercial lane of bars, sex shops, and 100-yen stores. Kabukicho is riddled with people of various backgrounds, the sidewalks barely visible as the drunken foot traffic increases. Parking is allowed on either side of the road, so when Iwaizumi sees an empty spot in front of a Ministop, he swerves to the curb with haste. He pulls a piece of paper from his jacket pockets.

Your target is a Montblanc briefcase. Room 1788. Avoid detection. Do not kill. High police presence in the vicinity. Leave target at MI-306. Failure will be classified as insubordination.

His mind lapses into a gradual silence and lets the revelation hang in the air. Who the fuck are writing these notes? They’re becoming more threatening with each job, but he doesn’t think too much of it. Iwaizumi doesn’t take the rubber mask they always leave out for their operatives. He remembers it being a third-rate Star Fox this time - all the more reason not to use it.

The call he got an hour ago mentions a residential building near this area. Tonight, the crowd is thick and washed over by heavy neon lights of insobriety and Friday night thrills. Iwaizumi decides to proceed on foot. He slides out of the door and mingles effortlessly into the horde of nocturnals.

Sweat forms in brisk drops, clinging onto his skin and seeping under the bandages gloved around his hands. It dampens the edge around his forehead. The green-white trucker cap he’s got on doesn’t help much. Iwaizumi thinks this isn’t the right weather to wear a black bomber jacket, taking it off and tying it around his waist instead, exposing his dark grey Henley and a little bit of ink. The heat is a nightmare. It slaps him like a gas furnace as he keeps his hands in his pockets.
Farther ahead, Iwaizumi spots a black glass tower, the word ‘Vimur River Suites’ burning in yellow neon on its summit, another building resembling it being constructed on an adjacent street. The bangs and creaks of a tower crane and construction work resound all throughout the neighborhood, bouncing in billowing echoes. Iwaizumi thinks it might help muffle certain noises.

In the lobby area, he notices the surveillance cameras first thing.

There are only three people inside, waiting for their Uber drivers. He passes by them casually. Iwaizumi doesn’t feel like slicing through cables to sabotage some cameras and opts for a simple solution. He brings out his phone and turns its flashlight on, shining it directly towards the cameras as he walks into the elevators. Auto-exposure constricts the aperture. It should keep the recordings blurry.

He reaches his desired floor and the room where his target is supposed to be. No cameras. Iwaizumi walks by to eavesdrop. It sounds like there are residents inside, two men at most. Going through the front door isn’t optimal if he needs to remain undetected. He doesn’t exactly have the deadliest weapons as of the moment. Stepping back, Iwaizumi eyes the unit right beside it. Room 1789. There’s an old, dusty Christmas ornament hanging on the door even though it’s July. People haven’t been home in a while—

It’s locked.

Iwaizumi supposes it’s a common five-pin tumbler lock. Very pickable even with a torsion tool made out of a paper clip - which he possesses, as they’ve proven themselves to be quite useful in missions. Iwaizumi checks both sides of the hallway. Empty. With a rotational pressure, he inserts the makeshift torsion tool into the lock, then the pick. The tip finds each pin until the cylinder turns—

He gets inside but the lights aren’t turning on.

Looking around, he finds a loft bed and a retro kitchenette and figures the floor lamp by the loveseat should still work. It illuminates the tiny studio apartment with a muted lemon color. Iwaizumi opens the drawers until he finds a hammer below the sink. He weighs the steel tool with his right hand, the textured rubber grip molding nicely into his palm. It has a heavy head and a sharp claw. Compact but deadly. He settles for that.

The living space coincides with the dining area until it stretches far back towards a glass door that leads to a balcony. Iwaizumi doesn’t go outside. Not yet. He peeks at the adjacent unit. The railings are about ten inches apart, so he can jump onto the other side with ease. Patiently, he waits and clears his mind on an armchair facing the open balcony, the dull blueness of the moonlight leisurely wandering over his features.

With a loud creak, light spills out from next door as one of the men steps out for a smoke.

“Sometimes, I just wanna talk to ‘em. I’m up for fucking, that’s for sure, but I’m just a simple guy who wants a vacation away from the wife and kids, you know?” a gruff voice bellows in the middle of a conversation, smoke sneaking into on the studio be broke into.

Iwaizumi fantasizes about cigarettes within that inky darkness before he hears another man’s voice. It’s faint, coming from the inside, but easier to hear now that their balcony door is open. “With how much you’re payin’ you better be getting some good pussy. Go to a hostess club if you wanna waste your money paying for cunts to act like they give a damn.”

“Hah, money ain’t a problem. The boss used to throw fuck fest poker nights every week, gave us
guys free service. That goatfucker got it all covered - hookers, ladyboys, porno shoots, and if you been good he’ll let you do anything to ‘em.”

Iwaizumi rolls his eyes and takes a deep breath. This fucking city never seems to run out of perverts. The man finishes his blunt and turns away, lazy footsteps vanishing back inside.

From the outside, the apartment next door is a yellow-lit square contrasting with the deep black of the reflective glass tower. Iwaizumi quietly steps out of to foster the humid atmosphere, the summer breeze drying the sweat that had gathered on his hairline. His heart beats steadily as he leans on the railing.

He strains his ears to listen in.

“It was fucking wild I tell ya. He’d sometimes have sick fuckers hurt the girls, but before that he takes ‘em downstairs to his office for a personal stamp of approval. Man, I used to fuck Ukrainian ladies day and night. Lemme tell ya, if you like to fuck high-quality products, Kozlov was the man you wanna see.”

Iwaizumi stiffens, hand tightening around the rails.

“Hey, you were in Valhalla for a year right? You remember that Japanese kid?”

“Ha? Which one?”

“The yaposhka. Kozlov had us fuck the shit out of that cocksucker a couple of times.”

“Fuckin’ hell, you into ladyboys now? Kwan finally got to ya? Hah—! Should’ve known you were into that kind of shit!”

“The fuck you talkin’ about? I ain’t no fag. It’s just beating up another guy! It doesn’t count—”

His sentence is cut short, the clawed side of a hammer shoved into the side of his head.

The city lights behind Iwaizumi casts him in an ominous cloak, shadows crawling away from his body when he enters. His face remains dark under the beak of his cap, striding with a menacing weight that can make anyone grow weak with fear. The loud stomp of his feet harmonizes with a body flopping on the wooden floor, the weight of the hammer stuck in its skull hastening the fall.

The other man flounders back, horror-struck, clumsy with panic. “Wh—Where the hell did you come from!? How—!” He climbs unsteadily to his feet and heads towards the bathroom to lock himself in, crying out a wordless sound of a coward encountering a wild beast in the jungle.

Iwaizumi doesn’t rush. He never does. He’s always patient on the job, letting his victims assess the situation and realize they’re in for a treat. He puts a heavy boot over the split-open skull to help him pull the claw hammer out. The fallen body spasms as an aftereffect, twitching like a roach on its back against the floor that’s now shining wet with shades of red. Hot blood came spilling out of the filthy old fuck’s head as his horrified eyes bulged out, staring up at Iwaizumi as though he’s still alive—

And it feels good.

It feels so good Iwaizumi feels like singing.

He forgets about his instructions entirely, the psychological relief blocking every sense in his brain, giving him a heroin high that overpowers whatever’s holding him back. Knowing this guy
had a role in Oikawa’s past instantly negates any qualms he may have had, letting out the need to quench his ugly thirst for retribution.

The fleeting moment of omnipotence rapidly shifts into endless varieties of bitterness. It rises up inside him in the most hideous way as Iwaizumi tramples over to where the other guy is hiding. Does he think he’ll just leave like that? He shrieks when Iwaizumi pounds the door with the hammer, wood scraping off as he swung it the second time. He’s about to hit the door again when he suddenly hears a frantic voice from behind it.

“W-Wait! Listen, please—! I got money stashed in the safe! You can have all of it! I’ll give you the code! Just leave me alone! Please—!

Iwaizumi feels more of his anger spilling out. “You know how many assholes like you offered me the same shit? It doesn’t work. I don’t want your money. I want you to tell me why I shouldn’t beat the fuck —” he pummels the steel hammer against the door, creating a large hole, “—out of you as soon as you come out of that fucking door!”

“I’ll tell you anything! W-Whatever it is—! I’ll—I’ll tell you—!” the man sobs, his sounds hardly human.

He swings his handheld weapon down on the knob and kicks the door open.

Iwaizumi’s dark green eyes sail down towards the helpless, shivering man. He’s thin, legs so short it looks like mere appendages to his upper body. Iwaizumi marches inside the small room. White tiles. White porcelain.

His is voice thick with raw anger.

“How many times did you rape under Kozlov’s orders?”

His bloodshot eyes blink frantically. “W-What—What kinda question is that? I-I didn’t rape anyone! Those were Kwan’s boys! I never—never—!”

“Who?” he tilts his head.

“Sudkwan! He’s Kozlov’s business partner! He—He’s the guy running whores for the sex clubs!”

“Was he the one who brought in Oikawa Tooru?”

The man shakes his head like he’s having a seizure, his jaw shaking uncontrollably as he speaks. “W-Who—Who is that? I—I don’t know him…!”

Iwaizumi jabs him in the apple of his throat. The man chokes out a cry as he staggers, hitting the back of the head on the sink. Clutching his neck, his face distorts into pain.

“Think, you dumb fuck!” Iwaizumi fists the collar of his shirt, cutting off his oxygen ever further. He leans down. “Your dead friend called him yaposhka, remember?”

“I-I-I don’t know where he is—I don’t know!”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

“I’ve seen him—that kid—in the nightclub! He was one of Kozlov’s yardbirds—!”

“Who took him? Who kidnapped him? Was it this Sudkwan?”
"I don’t—I’m not sure! He might be—!"

“What’s this fucker’s name again?”

“S-Sudkwan—S-Sinla—Sinlapa—pachan…”

Iwaizumi jabs him in the face. “Speak clearly!”

“Sudkwan… Sinlapachan—!” He’s slobbering all over now that Iwaizumi lets him go. “I don’t know where he is—He ain’t from around here…!”

“Alright, next question,” Iwaizumi says and straightens up. He looms over him. “Where’s the briefcase?”

“W-What briefcase?”

“Do you want to die that badly?”

“N-No! Please! B-Briefcase is—if you mean the foreman’s laptop, that—that ain’t with us! It’s with Lucky!” Iwaizumi squints his eyes in doubt, and the man must’ve noticed his confusion. “Francisco ‘Lucky’ Diaz. Filipino, mean, ugly as fuck. His boys call him that ‘cause he ain’t got any. He hangs out on that construction site, the one next to this—this building. You oughta be able to rough up some bastards in there who’ll give him up!”

“Tell me about him,” Iwaizumi demands, assessing whether someone deserves to die or not. The man he’s interrogating had substantially calmed down. “What does he do? Did he work for Kozlov?”

“No—! He—”

“Spill it.”

“The boss didn’t work for anyone! L-Lucky started out in street-level pimping. He has a prostitution ring, delivering teenage girls to hotel rooms for five grand a night, taking half for himself. He’s been cutting deals to local cops so they won’t raid his brothels—!”

Iwaizumi halts to breathe. The other man sees his eyes; morbid and sharp, but red as the blood of the corpse already rotting on the adjacent room. “What do you do?”

Panic grips his throat that he couldn’t speak at first. He knows he can’t lie.

“I—I work for Lucky… I-I-I drive the girls to—to their clients.”

Iwaizumi sighs and reaches a decision. The man falters, bursting into tears, sensing his disappointment.

“W-Wait! I—I told you everything I know!”

Iwaizumi clutches the last guy by the hair and lifts him up with little effort, up until he’s a dangling puppet with strings cut off. With a speed of a pitcher, he drives him down and smashes the man’s skull onto the tiled floor. It all happens within a second that the man barely had time to scream. He bashes his head in a repetitive note until dark red spurts out of all the crevices of his face, bright scarlet liquid pooling all over the white bathroom tiles.

Iwaizumi takes a moment to think as he breathes in the stench of fresh blood. He wipes any traces of bodily fluids off his face, covering his stained shirt with his jacket despite the heat.
His bloodlust rejuvenates when he steps out of the apartment.

☆ ☆ ☆

In the early evening, the construction site bustles with activity - skeletons of stainless steel and reinforcement bars plaguing the field, forklift trucks and bulldozers causing an unbearable noise. The tower crane looms over the site like a supreme pontiff, bestowing a thick shadow that makes even the most monstrous equipment seem small.

The security on the eastern side is slack that Iwaizumi is able to sneak in by pretending to be a worker, stealing a safety helmet left by some guy in a load-shifting machinery beforehand. It’s a large gray space with countless people. He’s vigilant and cautious but doesn’t appear to be so, glancing around simply looking. If the Nightcall had told him earlier that this is where that stupid briefcase was, he wouldn’t be having a hard time.

He spots a man in smart casual and a hard hat striding next to some low-rise scaffolding. Iwaizumi assumes he’s not just a normal laborer with that clean pastel pink Polo shirt.

“Hey, uh, Tsukioka-san.” Iwaizumi calls him, able to say his name the second his work ID came into view. The guy turns to examine him with a scrutinizing gaze, his polite voice evidently unfamiliar to him. “Know where I can find Lucky? I have some section reports he still needs to go over.”

“Oh—you mean Diaz, yeah, he’s still on the 7th floor, I think. By the way, are you—?”

Iwaizumi bids him farewell before the safety supervisor can ask what his name was. Passing through several workers in hard hats, he reaches a passenger hoist. He steps inside the galvanized open-air platform and presses the button to go up. It makes a belching sound of metals creaking. When he arrives on the floor, he sees a man talking on the phone, alone, leaning over piles of paper over a table saw, turning the equipment into some sort of makeshift office desk.

He easily notices the beige Montblanc briefcase on top of it.

“I don’t give a shit where you find ‘em! We made a fucking deal!” Lucky screams over his mobile phone in vulgar, patchy Japanese.

Iwaizumi crouches behind a stack of drywall, the large shadows from the beams and girders concealing him sufficiently. The air is hot. Floodlights border the open space like a broiler. He takes off his jacket once more, tying it back around his hips to expose his bloody shirt. He’s growing impatient. This entire thing is taking too long and he all he wants to do now is to go home and eat dinner, feeling his stomach rumble violently.

He listens in, wondering when he’ll finish this phone call.

“Yeah, you heard me!” Lucky yells at the other line. “Tell that prick to shove it up his ass—!”

“Shove what in his ass?”

Lucky spins at the sound of his voice, and Iwaizumi catches the urgency in his face before slamming a heel down on his instep. He grabs him the wrist. Twists his arm behind as though he’s arresting him. The phone slides out his hand and disassembles upon impact. Lucky gasps and
groans in pain. The mechanical noise from the cranes and the bulldozers are so loud his shrieks only end up sounding like metals clanging.

Iwaizumi shatters his wrist with one sharp twist then releases his grip. Lucky loses his footing, dropping down on the plywood floors. His knees rattle the surface as his heavy, ungainly body curls in excruciating pain.

“Ah—urgh …! Fucking bastard! You broke my hand! What the fuck—! Ugh … !” Lucky spits out, his pathetic face wrinkling and seething. He cradles his hand that’s now limping. With tears in his eyes, he angrily spits out, “Who in fuck’s—name are you—fuck—!”

He grunts, annoyance plain in the taut edges of his face. “I’ll break the other if you don’t shut the hell up.”

“N-No—” His groans shift gradually into cries of anguish. “I-I need a doctor…! Help me—!”

Iwaizumi isn’t sure if Lucky’s talking to him, but he decides to play along, his voice sullen and monotonous when he squats down next to the guy. “You want me to call the ambulance? You better tell me something worth hearing then.”

“Okay, okay—!” Lucky squeezes his eyes shut before looking up at Iwaizumi in painful focus. “W-What do you want to know—?”

Those idiots back in the apartment were right. Lucky has pig eyes and a deep, repulsive voice. His skin is ghostly pale and pockmarked, embellished by a thick mustache that sticks out under the tip of his bulbous nose. He’s quite hard to look at.

“Did you work with Kozlov?” Iwaizumi asks.

“I-I worked with him a couple of times…”

His next question makes him grit his teeth.

“Do you know Oikawa Tooru?”

Lucky replies with a frantic shake of his head. “I don’t know! Kozlov had a lot of guys workin’ for him! He’s dead but still got some boys running heroin in the streets, tryin’ to get everybody in the city hooked. Heroin ain’t that popular, you see, but Kozlov and his crew made sure to get the word out—that guy you talkin’ about might be one of ‘em!”

Iwaizumi’s profession allows him to learn how to read the truth that people often hide behind their eyes. Lucky isn’t hiding anything. His flat face is flushed with pain and sweat but Iwaizumi can still tell. This guy doesn’t know a whole lot. He’s just another sleazy pervert able to run freely in the streets because he has money to bribe cops, probably got a hold of Kozlov's minions after he died.

He straightens up and grabs a drill lying on the table saw, checking to see if it’s plugged. It lets out a sharp, ear-splitting shriek when Iwaizumi powers it up. Lucky jerks back away from him, trembling, wildly shaking his head. He pushes himself further by paddling his legs like a toad stuck in the mud.

This isn’t about a simple briefcase anymore.

“P-Please—! D-Don’t!” he barks a horrified gasp. “I have three little girls! I beg you—!”
Iwaizumi presses his lips together to smother an irked scoff. He turns his head away to breathe out a short laugh. “You’re selling girls, yet you have three girls of your own,” he mutters, his mouth twitching with a certain kind of madness. “Fucking unbelievable.” Iwaizumi stares back down, feeling the sobbing scream burn its way into his brain. “Wanna know what I think? I think your kids will grow up better knowing you’re fucking dead.”

The man crawls, inching towards him with one working arm and grasps his leg. “D-Don’t kill me! Please—! Forgive me! Forgive me—!”

“Forgive you?” Iwaizumi holds the power drill like a pistol, pushing down the trigger switch as the massive spade bit begins to spin at an incredible speed. He responds with a casual shrug, their eyes meeting once more. Iwaizumi offers him a cold gaze and a frown. “That’s between you and God, Lucky. It’s just my job to arrange the meeting—”

The spinning brass bit penetrates the hard plane of his head in one forceful push. His screams of agony serrate through the air just as the drill does. Blood gushes out in an instant. It comes away wet and red and in sporadic splatters, sticking over Iwaizumi’s bandaged hands and face. Lucky shakes uncontrollably, and Iwaizumi makes sure to have a good grip on the power drill before yanking it out. The man’s face is stuck with a blood-stained, gasping expression, reduced to a photorealistic painting of a man with a red, almost black, tunnel in the middle of his forehead.

“I doubt you’ll meet, though.”

☆ ☆ ☆

There’s a thin line of ghostly white light seeping through the crack under the bathroom door.

Iwaizumi steps under the cold spray of water. That power drill must’ve destroyed his eardrums somehow, the harsh gush of water reticently muted as it washes someone else’s blood and then his own exhaustion down. The brisk shower is enough to get rid of the coppery odour that clings to his skin as he watches the pinkish puddle go down the drain.

A chill chafes his damp skin when Iwaizumi gets out, goosebumps popping out on his biceps. He ties a towel around his waist and grabs his phone from the sink.

Iwaizumi lifts his head up and stares at his face in the mirror, beads of cold water dripping down his face that was covered in blood spatters just a minute ago. Water droplets stick onto his home screen as he pushes his phone to the side of his head.

“Can you help me with something?”

Iwaizumi’s indrawn breath is loud within the tiled bathroom. He waits for a response.

“What? You need to see another doctor?”

“I need you to find a guy for me,” he rasps, his gaze straight towards his insipid reflection. Iwaizumi grips the edge of the bathroom sink, the other tightening around his phone. His knuckles turn white as the porcelain. “His name is Sudkwan Sinlapachan. His crew calls him Kwan.”

Matsukawa doesn’t reply immediately. “Don't tell me you're back on heroin again.”
“No,” he says with a scowl, eyes squinting down in confusion. “What makes you think that?”

His phone lets out a loud static sound before he hears the other speak. “Kwan is a salesman, and the things he sells aren’t exactly legal. Huge heroin supplier, among other more… illegal things. He’s a Grade A asshole. What else do you need him for? That hookers?”

Iwaizumi feels his jaw ache when he clenches his teeth, the silent fury burning behind his eyes. “I just need to talk.”

“Just talk, huh?” The other man chuffs in disbelief. “I can try to trace the guy. I’ll call you if he’s in town.”

Consecutive beeps ring into his ears when Matsukawa hangs up.

Iwaizumi leaves the bathroom and picks up a Nike duffel bag. Putting on some clean clothes he’s been keeping in the back of his car, he sits on the edge of the queen size bed, engulfed by an eerily still and dusty air which implies that the hotel room is only used as a drop-off point rather than accommodation.

Momo Inn must’ve been a fancy place once. Industrial. Western-influenced concrete. The white paint and cubic shapes reflecting the optimism of the Late Showa period. It’s reduced into a budget hotel now, together with its fading signboard and old exterior lights. The room that’s sheltering him has ungenerous lamps, no carpets, all four corners drenched with a sullen blackness that worsens Iwaizumi’s growing frustration.

He sinks his back down on the mattress.

The clock in his head tells him that it’s about seven, or just a little past seven- and he’s right. By the bedside table sits a phone with an attached digital clock. Seven-fourteen. Iwaizumi wonders if they’ll demote him with a hamster mask for not following instructions. He doesn’t worry. He’s been violating the Nightcall’s employee code of conduct for years and never got in any trouble aside from Hanamaki giving him an earful. They’re just the middleman anyway. If he needs to be punished, Aobajousai-kai will be the one to impose it. The important thing is he didn’t get caught and that he’s not stupid enough to leave evidence.

Iwaizumi stares, unblinking, his eyes on the spinning ceiling fan.

The stab of relief comes running through his chest again. It pierces through his ribs. He knows it’s only for a fleeting moment. Knowing from experience, the sweetness of revenge doesn’t really last that long. Killing the thugs who murdered his father didn’t bring his father back. Killing the men who hurt Oikawa didn’t magically get rid of his trauma. The satisfaction boils into a scalding flare - a self-destructive spark of anger not directed to anyone but himself. What if he had been in the right place at the right time? He could’ve found Oikawa earlier somehow, in some goddamn way, and maybe he wouldn’t have suffered the way he did. Oikawa’s skin would’ve been free from scars. His smile would’ve been brighter—

It’s enraging that anyone would ever think Oikawa is theirs to use, the voice in his head granting him an overpowering need to mutilate every single person who contributed to Oikawa’s grim past.

Iwaizumi doesn’t consider himself as a hero like how Oikawa makes him out to be. He’s just a bad guy who hates other bad guys. With constant thoughts of butchering them and bringing them to their demise, Iwaizumi has grown aware that he’s not that far from the assholes who he hates so, so much.
That’s the thing about hate. It hurts him far more than the people he despises, poisoning his thoughts, so he alters himself as someone who just accepts the murderous intent and acts on it. There will always be blood and grunting and organs spilling out like any other night. It’s a comically dull routine. Hysterical wailing. Desperate please-don’t-kill-me’s.

Tonight has been the same, but strangely different. It reminds him of his first kill. It’s the kind that helps him let go of the hatred in his heart, knowing the people who hurt Oikawa don’t exist anymore, lost all the power they spent all their lives gathering. It’s the transcendent feeling of relief knowing that there’s one less asshole in the world - one less person in Oikawa’s undisclosed hit list.

They may still linger in the deep corners of his conscience, but they disappear in time.

Iwaizumi glances to his side and sees the briefcase sitting on an armchair. It’s made from cowhide, weathered and oily from use, stacks of folded paper stopping the zipper from closing completely. His gaze burns through it for several seconds before he gives in to his curiosity.

It looks like the laptop is Seijou’s actual target. With it, Iwaizumi finds several folders and dossiers inside - mostly related to construction firms and private correspondences. There’s one particular folder that stands out. On its cover is a phrase written in English. Blood red marker. Capital letters.

BETTER TO REIGN IN HELL
THAN TO SERVE IN HEAVEN

Iwaizumi opens the folder with only a few pieces of paper inside. The night hangs heavily on his shoulders, his dissatisfaction fading away when his vision catches some familiar names.

To: Yanagihara Tadanobu
Intelligence Report 2016-041
CONFIDENTIAL: YANAGIHARA KICHIHOSHI MURDER CASE

Detail:
- Former intelligence officer from Kyoudai-krug, Kohaku Utkin, claims that Kyoudai-krug ordered the murder of Yanagihara Kichihoshi through an underground telecommunications company called ‘Nightcall’.
- The killer is confirmed to be an independent hitman with no previous or current ties to Kyoudai-krug. He was anonymously hired through the ‘Nightcall’.
- Intentions for the order of Yanagihara’s murder correlates with his involvement in the establishment of the Brotherhood Coalition.

That police chief from a couple of weeks ago was right. Kawamoto Ikebe’s coalition is the catalyst for the bad blood growing between these two groups, and this other Yaponskaya-kai lieutenant wanted to revive it but got killed before he can make a political move.

Iwaizumi knows that already, but Oikawa’s involvement is still unclear, because he's beginning to think that he's not just some guy who accidentally walked into this mess. He shuffles through the papers and sees the very last one in red ink, just like the folder label. Singling it out, he instantly finds a sea of names—
“Oikawa,” he whispers, catching a name Iwaizumi knows too well. His heart pumps out more and more blood until something turbulent hits the bottom of his stomach. Nausea. Burning nausea. His breath leaves him like he got hit by a train, and he can’t bring himself to tear his eyes away from the big, red characters of Oikawa’s name. Stunned with bewilderment, he forces his gaze towards the rest of the red font.

Some kind of alphanumeric code. It might be a key to something—or somewhere. It obviously hints to an address. But his confusion over the cipher is overpowered by a sudden ripple of unease, having to come across Oikawa’s name for the first time, and his brain scrambles on what to do next. The files are all addressed to a certain Yanagihara Tadanobu - the dead lieutenant’s son and an acquaintance of Kazuo Kozlov. It could only mean Oikawa is connected to Kyoudai-krug one way or another.

Iwaizumi doesn’t understand the cryptic code, has no slightest idea on how to decode the fucking thing, certain that its chance of ending up in his hands is nothing but coincidence. Life is built on the foundation of freak chances and luck, and he knows this encrypted address, if he finds it, would surely answer a lot of the questions.

Grabbing his duffel bag of bloodied clothes, folder pinned under his arms, Iwaizumi leaves the briefcase inside and heads to the black Lexus parked outside.

☆ ☆ ☆

It’s eight o’clock when Oikawa hears footsteps prancing outside the door.

He glances up from the movie he’s watching and listens to a digital lock sing with an upbeat
chime. The door swings open, a rather jaded Iwaizumi walking in and dropping a duffel bag by the doorway. Before Oikawa has a chance to greet him, Iwaizumi wanders straight into the kitchen with an expectant tone.

“What’s for dinner?” Iwaizumi asks and looks for food in the fridge.

Oikawa swallows, stealing a reluctant glance over the kitchen isle. He pauses the film and follows Iwaizumi into the galley.

“I didn’t cook anything today,” he croaks like a deer scared to wander into the woods, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. “I thought maybe we can go out for dinner instead. I had this killer headache this morning and…”

Iwaizumi’s sigh causes Oikawa to trail off as he closes the fridge door with a soft thud. A worried frown frames a pair of caramel eyes. Oikawa wants to mentally kick himself as guilt crawls up to his chest. This is the only time Iwaizumi comes home tired and hungry as a hound and he ends up not preparing any food. He really has terrible luck. Pursing his lips, he gazes at the other’s figure. He can’t tell if Iwaizumi is disappointed or simply tired, but either way, Oikawa feels an awful need to apologize—

“Get dressed. I’ll wait in the car.”

He blinks in surprise, lashes fanning rapidly. Iwaizumi turns to look at him and Oikawa finds his features free from ire, but lamented with tension, his hair notably damp. His body posture is slack and his usually virile gait isn’t quite present. It’s obvious that he’s not in the mood to argue. Concern strains the air between them until Oikawa offers affection that he’s confident enough to give, lifting his hand to hopefully relieve the weary lines from Iwaizumi’s face.

“Are you sure?” he asks quietly as he stares into dark green, trying to read into him. His hand stills and Iwaizumi relaxes beneath the caress. Oikawa slides his palm down to the back of his neck, then to his shoulder, unknowingly lulling Iwaizumi into a blank, dazed expression. “You don’t look so good. Did something happen? You feeling okay?”

Iwaizumi blinks out of his trance. “I’m—I feel fine,” he stutters, his head shaking, brows creasing. Oikawa presses his lips together. It’s strange to hear Iwaizumi stammer. His voice is neither mean or complaining, but obviously agitated.

The abrupt weight of Iwaizumi’s hand on his arm sends a warm tint to his cheeks. He then walks past him, patting Oikawa on the back before heading to the door.

“Hurry up and change. I’m hungry.”

Oikawa straightens like a soldier and rushes to put on something decent. He attempts to shake his worries off and goes to the bedroom. The weather is still within the prickly tides of summer, so he settles for a white cotton t-shirt and dark blue jeans, putting on a cap and dark-trimmed eyeglasses before he stepping into some suede Vans. He hurries to the high-speed elevator. Once he reaches the underground parking lot, a Lexus GS F comes into view, parked at its usual spot.

“Huh, that was fast,” Iwaizumi comments, a ghost of a smile stretching the sides of his mouth as he diverts the car radio to FM.

He hops in and closes the door, smiling. “Yeah, well, you’re not the only one who’s starving.”

The sleek vehicle accelerates at an abrupt speed but the entire drive is carefully slow. In the passenger seat, Oikawa feels the night tear past him, blurred city lights and frantic neon signs
breezing through his vision.

A few pop songs later, the radio prances to a slow ballad that sounds like it belongs in a TV drama.

Oikawa spares the other a glance. His clothes are different from when he left this morning. While he has the same jacket tied around his waist, the charcoal V-neck shapes his collarbones nicely, loose sleeves rolled up to his elbows, exposing a portion of Iwaizumi's tattoos. The blazing street lamps dotting the road flash in Iwaizumi’s eyes that are no longer haunted by dark circles and chemical abuse. Shadow and light play across his classically handsome features, the absence of nicotine plumping his lips into a healthier color. He's often more relaxed, less knitted brows, less frowns. Iwaizumi probably doesn’t notice the hint of a smile toying at his mouth whenever he responds to something Oikawa has said.

He tears his eyes away when a pair of hazel stares back.

Shortly after, the car skids smoothly to a stop in a dark street. It’s far from the main road, gray blocks emitting a mix of both residential and commercial establishments. The neighborhood settles in a stagnant blue when they reach the sidewalk, the air singing in murmurs along with the distinct sound of night cicadas buzzing about.

Iwaizumi takes him to a modest restaurant shaped like a traditional two-story house. It nestles between mid-rise office buildings along a narrow alley. The storefront where the entrance should be is replaced by tempered glass, barricaded by four outdoor AC units, large grilled fans emitting warm air as they pass by. Large oblong lanterns burn in red and hang candidly on the roof gutters. They don’t sway. Hot summer nights in mid-July didn't offer much of a breeze to make the row of lights dance. On the left side is an open, cluttered garage with three delivery motorbikes parked next to what seems like the only entrance to the place, moldy guardian lions on either side of the door. Beer crates. Empty wired baskets stacked together on one corner. Rusty industrial trolleys. Oikawa guesses Peony Noodle House isn't very particular with their exterior design, thinking it might fit well in a vintage Cantonese movie.

The inside of the noodle house is just as tight and compact and discreet, and the waiter bows to greet Iwaizumi with a friendly tone. Not too crowded. Limited seats around an open kitchen. The furniture is tacky - plastic stools that have yellowed from age, varnished wooden tables, ceiling lights losing its luster. Oikawa feels like stumbling across a secret when Iwaizumi ushers him towards a secluded corner table.

“Usually, you’d order a bottle of whiskey first thing,” Oikawa says and tilts his head with a teasing smile.

Sitting across each other, he can see every microexpression coloring Iwaizumi’s face - dark lashes drifting downwards to read the menu even though Oikawa’s pretty sure he already knows what to order. The way the waiter interacted with him suggests he might be a regular. Oikawa places an elbow on the table and rests his chin on his palm.

“You’re not drinking again today?”

Iwaizumi blinks up briefly then looks back at the menu.

“I don’t feel that I need to when you’re around.”

Oikawa looks at him with moon eyes then quickly turns to look at the menu below to hide the roses staining his pale skin. He parts his lips to try to respond casually but is saved by the waiter who approaches their table. He’s wearing a tie-dye shirt under a red apron and a similarly colored
bandana, a small wirebound notebook in hand. This restaurant really doesn’t care much aesthetics or uniforms. Oikawa thinks that maybe they make up for it with the food they serve.

Iwaizumi gets some kind of fried noodles, while Oikawa opts for something with hot broth. The humidity outside is horrible, but the inside isn’t that great either. The intense air conditioning is overkill, Oikawa thinks. It feels like a morgue. He flattens his arm goosebumps by rubbing them with his palms, hands cupping a cup of Oolong right after.

Their food comes in after a few quiet discussions.

Looking down on his bowl, Oikawa furrows his brows in confusion. He had expected a misty light brown broth, but it’s a terrifying orange-red. He must’ve accidentally ordered the spicy variant. The menu didn’t have pictures so it’s hard to tell. He’s given a bowl of hand-pulled noodles, thick but soft, a reflection of perfect pulls as he pinches them with his chopsticks. The soup fills the bowl and lets the beef brisket, tendon, and tripe swim in it, complimenting the bright green of scallions and Chinese cabbage.

It’s delicious and not overly complex. Rich and warm and aromatic. Oikawa doesn’t regret ordering the spiced up rendition until he feels his throat burn just after two bites. The amount of concentration required to hide the pain in his mouth is demanding, and he squeezes his eyes shut as he exhales a warm breath. Involuntary tears well up in his lower eyelids. He then chugs on an entire glass of water, but it isn’t enough to soothe the stabbing discomfort all over his tongue. He grabs the tea next and drinks it in one go.

His forehead itches with a sheen of chili-induced sweat, the heat rising when he picks up a spoon to quietly scoop out the red chili oil floating on top of the broth, transferring it to an empty saucer. He hopes Iwaizumi won’t question it—

“Just order a new one,” Iwaizumi tells him sternly before taking a bite of noodles from his own bowl. “I’ll ask them to pack it as take-out. I can eat it at home.”

Oikawa puffs his cheeks. “Then, I’ll have what you’re having,” he whimpers with a numb tongue and tears in his eyes. Iwaizumi’s mouth twitches in a flicker of amusement.

He gets another bowl several minutes later. This time it’s diced pork belly fried together with fresh noodles, the yellow soybean paste giving it a dark sauce and savory aroma. He’s then given a plastic take-out container of the spicy abomination.

Between scrapings of wooden chopsticks and spoonfuls of hot broth, their hushed conversations take a nonchalant course - playful banter, the flamboyance of foreign films, the banality of everyday life. Mostly simple chatter, but never empty.

Oikawa smothers a smile all throughout.

Time melts, both of them mopping up most of their dinner. Iwaizumi pays their bill and grabs the plastic take-out bag. When they head outside, a sudden layer of mist settles in the air, bruised with gray and blue and heavy with static-like noise.

“It’s raining,” Oikawa says and listens to the soft pitter-patter of raindrops along the gutters of the restaurant. Water droplets roll down to the lantern tails and gushes like a waterfall across the aluminum roof edges. He steps back to keep himself dry.

Both of them remain still in contemplation, staying under the roofed area of the side entrance. They could go back inside but it’s ten times colder in there. His eyes then glaze over at Iwaizumi who’s
just as placid, green eyes watching the rain fall. His car is parked on the other side of the block and Oikawa knows they’re going to have to wait for the rain to subside when he sees Iwaizumi lean back on the cement wall with a resigned sigh—

“Let’s wait for it to clear up.”

Oikawa gingerly trails next to him, stopping at a green beer crate full of empty Tsingtao bottles. He places plywood on the top so he can sit on it, reducing his height substantially. Oikawa stretches his legs. One of the two dilapidated komainu statues sits beside him with its mouth open, then Iwaizumi on his right. The electric spring lanterns above them hum delicately with bold reds and sparks of gold, its scarlet blotches taking shelter in his bleak features, pairing his sentiment with the weather.

There’s something about the rain that stirs up Oikawa’s jumbled mess of memories. The downpour was just as heavy as this when Iwaizumi raised him from perdition. It all feels like ancient history - almost - like it all happened between his pipe dreams and fantasies. It’s not the first time Oikawa replays that night in his mind, not the first time he replays every single time Iwaizumi comforted him or held him or brushed his hair.

Every memory of his warm touch brings forth a tropical sunset over his skin. He’s hyperaware of his constant need for Iwaizumi’s affection, lacing it with meaning even though it probably only holds nothing but pity and leniency.

He lets his vision fall to the wet asphalt, the sadness and bitterness all oxidizing into this renewed vigor and Oikawa lets it stay, lets himself smile, lets the woeful weather soak his consciousness down to his bones.

“You seem happy.”

Oikawa glances up. Iwaizumi examines his smile that doesn’t quite fit the weather. He lets a subtle pause hang in the air, catching a whiff of that earthy rain smell before Iwaizumi speaks again.

“It’s a good look on you,” he says softly.

“That so?” Oikawa chews his lips to stop a flattered smile. From this angle, he can pick out the red streaks of light contouring Iwaizumi’s jaw, eyes far away. “Yeah, I’m happy. Iwa-chan takes me out more frequently now, and there’s more to do at home.” Oikawa lifts his head up and meets his eyes. “I know you’re tired, but thanks for spending time with me anyway.”

Iwaizumi crosses his arms and peels his eyes away from brown ones that look more like burnt sienna under the silk lanterns. “You don’t have to do that every time.”

Oikawa tilts his head. “Do what?”

“Thanking me.”

“Oh, okay, sorry—”

“And stop apologizing.”

Oikawa stiffens, mouth forming into a pout like a child.

He’s grateful for where his feet lies on at this very moment, for the food, the clothes, the soft bed, and for all the other well-meaning gifts including Iwaizumi himself. How can he stop thanking him? Oikawa thinks of all the inner demons still screaming for his attention, goblins dancing
around and jeering that he’s not worth it. It’s easier to keep them all at bay now, because he can always hold on to this source of light that stands at five-foot-ten.

That transition between then and now seems so surreal.

Oikawa watches water plummet down as a chill runs down his spine. He wraps his arms tight around himself, breaking the silence with one loud sneeze and a consequent sniffle.

“Ugh—cold,” he whines, rubbing his nose. “It was so hot when we got out of the house.”

Something warm and heavy drops over his shoulders, embracing him like an old friend. Oikawa jerks back and feels the familiar leather graze his skin. It’s Iwaizumi’s jacket - the one Oikawa picked out at the mall. His head whirs to cast a thankful smile at Iwaizumi who’s already back to his previous stance, staring at the distance, arms crossed.

“What time is it?” Iwaizumi asks. His voice doesn’t cut through the rain and blends in without a hitch. Oikawa catches him reflexively looking at his empty wrist. “I was thinking of running by the rental store before it closes.”

“It’s eleven-forty,” he says when he peeks at his watch. “It’s probably closed now. We can always go straight home. I haven’t even finished the last batch of movies you got for me.”

Thunder snaps loudly in the distance, and Iwaizumi sees Oikawa flinch slightly at the sound.

Oikawa is someone Iwaizumi knows so much yet so little about. But the small, insignificant things he knows about him span shelves. Oikawa likes everything that’s sweet - sugary bread, romantic movie scenes, pastel sweaters, Fruit Punch Gatorade. He gets spooked by thunder but isn’t afraid of thunderstorms. He likes Hawaiian pizza. He hums random songs he makes up in his mind. He puffs his cheeks at the slightest bit of disappointment—

A rush of guilt runs under Iwaizumi’s skin when he realizes it’s not the same for Oikawa. He knows nothing about him - aside from his preference for tofu and his irritating need to keep stupid trinkets of his old, normal life so he’ll be able to uncover his past and descend into the lowest stage of depression at any given time.

“Hey, do you like being with me?”

Oikawa’s voice startles him. It catches him like lightning and Iwaizumi stays silent, at loss for any kind of verbal response. None of their heads move, intently watching the rain pour. Iwaizumi’s heart beats loud suddenly. Oikawa knows how to ask questions, how to cut a heart open until it bleeds out gold. He has that strangely niche skill.

“Because I like being with you,” he continues, and Iwaizumi side-eyes him, making out a serene demeanor and a soft smile that greatly contrasts the sullen mood. “I like the restaurants you take me to, and Iwa-chan telling me I should stop asking for three bowls of rice because it’ll just make my stomach hurt. I like it when you still watch movies with me even though you’ve already watched most of them. I always look forward to spending the day with you, or anything that puts me in the car beside you.”

Iwaizumi likes his company. It’s the porous and humid kind of company - sticky and stubbornly warm like afternoon rains in summer. He's not certain where Oikawa is going with this, letting out a breath he doesn’t know he’s been holding.

With a sigh, Oikawa dips his head down. He lets his hands dangle between his spread knees. Then he laughs and takes his hat off, flicking a hand through his hair.
“I honestly don’t know how long I can last living in your home without ruining our friendship.”

Iwaizumi winces at the word ‘friendship’ as if it’s the weirdest thing in the entire context of that sentence. His head whips towards Oikawa, a jolt of surprise shooting through his veins and plucking his heartstrings. He can’t read him. Oikawa is this huge ball of mental trauma and effortlessly perfect hair. He's a maze, complex and messy, but delicate in more ways than one, easy to read on most days.

Today isn’t one of those days.

It might’ve been some kind of auditory hallucination, although he’s been remarkably sober for the past month. He blinks dumbly, brows scrunched in utter confusion, trying to find something - anything - to say. He manages an unconvincing choke.

“Oikawa, what are you—”

“I’m saying that…” he trails off with a defensively loud voice. It cracks at the last syllable, contradicting the perpetual smile that’s beginning to look like a farce against that pretty face. “You should throw me out now before I mess everything up.”

In this empty, damp storefront, Iwaizumi feels his feet float from the wet pavement, feels like a million other things all at once, feels like dying in front of this cheap noodle house at the age of twenty-six, next to an amnesiac who might just want to deliver the final blow.

His knee hits the ground hard when he stoops down to Oikawa’s level.

Bending on one knee, Iwaizumi stares at the young man that’s now in front of him, stares at the dramatic vermilion light glossing over his eyes, all big with surprise and intrigue. Then he stares at the loose curls that had fallen flat over his forehead, all thanks to the humidity and the baseball cap for combing them down. He doesn’t fight back the urge to tuck his hair behind his ear - a habit of his that formed as naturally as sunshine after a storm. Oikawa’s lips part at the touch, nervously purses them into a pout, and Iwaizumi isn’t sure why he finds that endearing. It shouldn’t be, yet it is.

He awakens to the realization that the most intense emotion he is capable of experience isn’t anger. It ignites a spark of humanity in him, ignites a gravitational pull fueled with desperation, and it steers him into a maniacally strange spell. His shoulders square to mechanically stop his arm from moving, to stop his hand from going where they want to go, but a force of nature lures him into its lovelorn biddings, his fingers lacing around the other’s neck.

Iwaizumi leans in, noses brushing before he presses his lips to Oikawa’s mouth.

It’s his wordless answer to all of Oikawa’s doubts, and he breathes in a gasp that shivers out from the other’s throat, catching the tenderness of his lips. It almost feels like a first kiss - sweet and light and devoid of any barbarity, tailor-made to appeal to a certain kind of sensitivity. It isn’t all that breathtaking, though Iwaizumi thinks it probably should have been. Time doesn’t stop for them. The rain doesn’t stop for them. He thinks it should’ve happened in the midst of a life or death situation, with racing hearts and ragged breaths and adrenaline-infused eyes staring at each other.

Instead, it happens in front an old Chinese restaurant, under the electric souls of red and gold lanterns and a sky that’s suffused with a haunting black, their stage lit up by a thick fog of wistful rubies.
Iwaizumi’s lungs constrict, his chest clenching inward like his heart wants nothing but to flee from his body, fingers trailing through dark brown curls, gently, slowly—as though Oikawa is made out of glass that could break beneath his touch. He tips his head to suck softly on his bottom lip. But he doesn’t let the gentle pressure unfold further, hesitantly pulling himself away.

Oikawa looks like he’s lost the ability to speak, closing down like a beach house in winter, his eyes the biggest Iwaizumi has ever seen.

“W-W-What—What was that—What—?” Oikawa stammers in panic, eyes blinking frantically. He’s fresh out of defense mechanisms to react properly, his face heating up with blooming peonies that rival all the lanterns illuminating their surroundings.

The street grows abnormally still as the rain continues to cascade all around them.

“I’m telling you that you can stick around for as long as you’d like.”

There’s a painful ache burning in his throat when Iwaizumi sees his own reflection swimming in Oikawa’s glassy eyes. Without knowing it himself, Oikawa bursts into tears. Iwaizumi brings both hands to his face, frantic, sketching his shocked outline with a soft caress.

“Wait, Oikawa—Why are you—? Did I—?”

Oikawa scrambles his hands to wipe the tears in his eyes and cheeks. He looks like he didn’t intend to cry like that. It must’ve felt so freeing for him that Iwaizumi is able to sense a waterfall of stress drip off his body. He’s shaking his head as he laughs at himself. Iwaizumi searches his the tightness in his features, can’t tell whether he’s happy or upset.

“N-No—It’s not you...! I just—I just don’t get it...” he counters with a nasal voice. His eyes start to sting, from the salt of his tears, from having them opened for too long. He squeezes his eyes shut before fluttering his eyelashes back up at the rueful man. Oikawa then places a hand over Iwaizumi’s to tow it back down. “I mean, I’m just this fucked up kid with more worries than hair on his head. I can’t... give you anything in return. I’m—I’m just...”

Oikawa stops to gulp down whatever’s blocking his throat, tentative eyes cruising down at the takeout bag Iwaizumi had placed beside his feet. He lifts his gaze up at Iwaizumi’s worried face and bites his bottom lip. His chin shudders with a lingering grimace as he tries to speak, another batch of tears forming over his cinnamon eyes.

“I’m just someone else’s leftovers.”

His words shriek in Iwaizumi’s mind, a form of hatred burning in his chest, nagging painfully at him like a dental cavity. Why is he talking like he’s some pre-owned car? Everything, from his heart to the soles of his feet, pulsed with frustration and rage and the need to vigorously soothe an aching soul. He turns away, nostrils flaring. His heart could only break at the sight of Oikawa’s pinched face of tears and self-hatred.

Oikawa doesn't know that he’s a forest that’s thick and stubborn with canopies of pine trees and wildflowers sprouting in the underwood. They grow back, like everything in nature, no matter how badly they’ve been stepped on or cut down, no matter how many forest fires blaze through. His body isn’t a temple like what the books tell him. Temples can be destroyed in war, desecrated by heathens. Bricks don’t grow back as trees do.

He’s young and beautiful and everything this cruel world doesn’t deserve.

“I never once thought of you that way, and you shouldn't either.”
Oikawa draws a breath as though he’s about to speak, but no words emerged. Iwaizumi sweeps his palm over the other’s hands that had curled into fists.

It’s times like this that Iwaizumi wishes he has a talent with words.

“I didn’t expect anything from you,” Iwaizumi continues, his voice hushed and tender enough to channel angels in. His eyes drift to meet Oikawa’s in their purest form. He brushes a thumb over the other’s cheek. “I only wanted you to take all the time you need to heal.”

Iwaizumi is pinned down by big brown eyes that he forgets to breathe. Oikawa has a strong mind but a fragile heart, heavily guarded by thickets of thorns and poisonous vines. Nobody can get through it, not unless Oikawa himself decides to cut them all off. He can’t figure out what Oikawa wants at first, if he’s able to cut the wall of perennial vines inside his chest, but then Iwaizumi sees him smile, staring back with newborn diamonds underneath his long eyelashes, telling him wordlessly to do what he wants to do.

He comes back with conviction, kissing a smile like he wants to devour and keep the other’s laughter inside him. His heart melts when he feels those same lips part beneath his to take him in - lovingly willing, warm with spice and soft as the rain.

Their chasteness from the prelude flees in an instant. Oikawa hungrily pulls him in with clumsy hands, filling up Iwaizumi’s senses with a burning desire. Oikawa doesn’t know what to do with his hands, mindlessly finding their way against the solid wall of Iwaizumi’s chest until they find the confidence to circle around his neck.

The beer crate clangs noisily against the wall as he pushes Oikawa forward, nudging him with their connected mouths until the back of Oikawa’s head and spine hits the concrete wall - until there’s absolutely no space between them. He props one arm on the side of Oikawa’s head, the other circling around his waist urgently. Blood surges through him just as Oikawa pulls away to gasp for air, promptly, then sinks back again with a hoarse moan and an open mouth, pressing his lips against his in another eager exchange.

Too soon for Oikawa’s taste, Iwaizumi draws back a little to catch his breath, their ragged exhales mingling. “Can I…” he asks softly, providing him an escape route, making sure Oikawa is still in favor of this new speechless language. His arm flinches like a defective robot limb, like he wants to touch Oikawa wouldn’t dare continue without a green light.

Oikawa pants, a short laugh mixing through.

“Yes,” he whispers politely against his mouth and smiles. “Yes, please.”

Iwaizumi latches on to that certainty and free falls for another kiss.

It’s slower, less frantic with need, but still potent enough to let Oikawa know that he’ll rip this city apart for him - and that he’ll cast divine retribution to anyone who conspires to take him away. The summer rain doesn’t falter, drumming a slow song of raindrops for them as their figures reflect on all the purples and reds that swirl into the wet asphalt, melting onto hard concrete.

Lost in each other’s warmth, the air between them beckons back the July heat.

Chapter End Notes
heyyyyy sorry the update took so long i was really busy from june up to now. wasnt able to reply to the awesome comments but just know i read all of them and i appreciate every single one!!! thank you!!!!!!!
the quality might've gone down, but thats what happens when you dont write for like half a year lol
i hope this monster chapter makes up for that long wait!!

EDIT: fixed some typos, added small changes

LINKS
Playlists:
1 / 2 / 3 / 4

Twitter & Tumblr

Related artwork
my art
thanks to everyone who drew my fic!! please check out their works!!
@olaus_ @artPMVP
His footsteps trace over the pristine white tiles, the wheels of a poorly welded shopping cart stifling the background bustle of the neighborhood supermarket. It’s too cold and too bright for his taste. Oblivious to the music blasting from the speakers, Oikawa absently bats his eyes at the overhead fixtures that seem to move as he goes, the gold in his wristwatch reflecting the intense light from all directions.

Eight-thirty. The ready-made food section becomes awashed with office workers and students picking up whatever’s available before they head home. Anything with short shelf-life gets discounted before closing time, so they’re all shuffling to get the side dishes and bento boxes from the shelves. Oikawa can’t help but feel envious, wondering if he had lived like that before - a creature of routine. He shrugs his thoughts off before they can meander into the darker parts of his memories.

Oikawa passes by the flock of people unnoticed before he flickers his gaze at the man walking ahead of him.

“Iwa-chan, are you mad at me?”

It pains him that Iwaizumi refuses to meet his eyes.

“Why would I be?”

The clanging of the metal cart messes with his thoughts before he decides to hold back a whining sound. His eyes follow the moving clock hands in his wristwatch with an empty gaze as he speaks. “You slept on the couch last night.”

“I just happened to fall asleep there.”

Oikawa bites his bottom lip and hangs his head down, the bill of his baseball cap casting a shadow over the uncertain lines of his face.

There weren't a lot of things to be said after they had gone home last night, Iwaizumi settling for the sofa immediately before Oikawa could dispute his decision. Oikawa knows he isn’t angry. It’s easy to tell if Iwaizumi wants to actually punch someone. Instead, he feels a heavy, defensive wall between them, fortified by each other’s cycle of guilt.

His thoughts wander off and a tinge of spice trails back on his tongue, the humid air that flattens his hair, the sound of rain hitting cement, the warmth of Iwaizumi’s touch burning his skin—every sensation from the previous night nudes back into his memory, the butterflies inside him whirling into a potent chill as Oikawa comes to a realization that his unsolicited insecurities that ultimately ended their romantic tryst might’ve been responsible for Iwaizumi’s indifference.

It was a fairytale scene Oikawa wished had lasted longer. The real world isn’t so kind, having
endured the utter worst of it, though it’s a lot less terrible when he’s with someone he could happily drown into. He could stay for all eternity in Iwaizumi’s embrace - if only his stupid, broken brain hadn’t stopped him.

The air becomes colder as they approach the frozen section, more delicate the longer he stays quiet, and Oikawa doesn’t count on Iwaizumi to be the talkative one. He looks down on his fists squeezing around the handle, not exactly sure how to fill the awkward silence, even though he insisted on buying groceries together to purposely confront him about what happened after their dinner yesterday. Iwaizumi becomes a little more doting when they’re outside and he intends to exploit it.

That way, he wouldn’t have the heart to chase Oikawa off even if he wanted to.

“You know, I said all those things last night ready to be dumped,” Oikawa blurts out, his voice somehow lost, the urge to shove his hands into his pockets impossible when he’s tasked to push the barely filled cart.

He halts before the cart could hit Iwaizumi. His eyes snap forward, not quite sure if he’s ready to meet Iwaizumi’s gaze who had been rendered motionless, his trademark jacket covering most of the ink on his arms.

Iwaizumi turns and grips the other end of the cart as if it’s a conduit.

“What did you expect me to do?”

Oikawa freezes and keeps his half-lidded eyes down, the muscles around his mouth locked tight. “I—I don’t… know.” His voice strains as he feels Iwaizumi study his every move. “I thought… you’d be grossed out with what I said, about liking you, then ditch me in the middle of a storm.” He swallows down the burning knot trapped in his throat, then chuckles at how pathetic he sounds. “…that sort of stuff.”

Slowly, Oikawa blinks up to an unreadable expression. Irritation. Bitterness. Displeasure. It all twists into an odd, vulnerable mask. There’s this ruthless allure in the forests in his eyes that made little sense because of how often it’s negated with kindness - something Oikawa didn’t want to take advantage of, yet continually craves for, that despite his irreparably fractured psyche, his heart still holds on to the hope that Iwaizumi didn’t kiss him purely out of pity or sympathy.

“Listen—” Iwaizumi’s harsh voice sends a deep physical response to his body that Oikawa feels his breath stop. “If you think what I did was a mistake, tell me right now so I don’t look like a fucking idiot.”

Oikawa parts his lips but nothing comes out, his words tangled in his lungs. He doesn’t really feel like having a heart attack in the middle of the frozen aisle. It pains him how hurt Iwaizumi sounded, and the guilt that follows it becomes an unwelcome guest in his already anxious heart. Closing his eyes, he inhales through his nose and plucks all the courage that’s left inside him—

“It wasn’t,” Oikawa chokes out, having full conscious knowledge of what he’s saying this time, eyebrows curling down in desperation. His face is flushed with red and his bones shiver as if he hadn’t already confessed the night before. He bites his lip before adding, “I want to be with you, but I don’t know if you—”

“How many times do we need to have this conversation?” Iwaizumi cuts him off, as though he knows exactly what Oikawa’s about to say. His shoulders drop, frigid presence thawing as his voice softens. “Haven't I made it clear enough last night?”
Despite his mutinous heart rioting inside his ribcage, the assurance tilts Oikawa’s lips into a penitent smile. Iwaizumi’s message was loud and clear. It’s his self-doubt that keeps subduing it with white noise. He watches the other scoff, moving along until all Oikawa can see is his back of lightweight faux leather.

His vision fogs with dry ice when Iwaizumi tours the long row of freezers, grabbing a pack of frozen gyoza and throwing it in the cart. Several minutes pass by conjunctly with a dozen enticing bargains. The lull that comes within this timeframe is a little less uncomfortable, but Oikawa still feels the need to pierce through it.

“I didn’t know you like… guys,” he quips, voice shifting from curious to reluctant at the last part. Iwaizumi has always been taciturn when it comes to his personal life, and Oikawa suspects he’s about to enter an uncharted subcategory.

Iwaizumi doesn’t bother to look at him and fixates on the nutrition label across a frozen pack of imitation crab instead.

“I don’t.”

Oikawa frowns at his nonchalance, a mix of confusion and intrigue cascading over his features. “But I’m a guy.”

“It doesn’t matter what you are.”

Oikawa blinks wide in pleasant surprise, a pink tint tracing his cheekbones. He didn’t quite anticipate Iwaizumi would act so casual about it. “What if I was from outer space?” he appends as a joke. The color on his face feels warm as he hurries to accelerate the cart just as Iwaizumi steers to the dairy aisle. “Would you still like me then?”

Iwaizumi hums a vague sound. His mouth curves into a fleeting smile and Oikawa’s glad to have caught sight of it before it disappears. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“That’s a shame,” Oikawa retorts in feigned disappointment. “I’d be a lot less miserable with six eyes and slimy tentacles for hands.”

“I’ll shoot you on sight if you looked like that.”

Oikawa gives him a soft huff of laughter. “Well, since you’re being awfully nice today…” he trails off before detaching himself from the cart then comes back to Iwaizumi’s side a second later, showing off both of his now occupied hands and a pair of pleading brown eyes. “Can we get two cartons of chocolate milk?”

Iwaizumi narrows his eyes, his lips curving into a frown. “No. Put those back.”

With a petulant whine, Oikawa unwillingly puts them back on the shelf as Iwaizumi walks ahead. He sticks close to Iwaizumi’s pace as they wander aisle to aisle, sneaking in some items, hoping Iwaizumi wouldn’t notice. There’s one huge lane braced with chocolates and snacks, the distinct throng of colorful packaging a bit of an eyesore. His sight quickly finds the familiar chic design of chocolate-covered chips and he steps back to grab it—

“No junk food.”

“What?” Oikawa chuffs in disbelief, his arms now tangled over his chest to protect his prized snack. “You brought this home before!”
Iwaizumi turns, his sinister silence and raised eyebrow enough for Oikawa to surrender. He puffs his cheeks, lips pressed together in a childish pout before stepping away from the sweet tooth’s aisle. The rest of the grocery shopping doesn’t go well for him as Iwaizumi kept him from putting items in the cart. Too much sodium. Too much sugar. He’d often check the label before deciding but it seems like almost everything is forbidden. No sodas. No instant noodles. No potato chips. No candy—

Oikawa’s breath leaves him in an irritated mood. “Mizoguchi-san said I don’t have any dietary restrictions,” he points out, assuming their last visit to the doctor is the reason why Iwaizumi has been so strict with his food intake. While his memory loss has been unpleasant, he’s a bit thankful that he doesn’t remember a whole lot, and that his health has been in good condition ever since Iwaizumi took him in. “I still have one functioning kidney...”

“I know,” Iwaizumi snaps back, his tone dark and serious. “You should watch what you eat nonetheless.”

Concern isn’t something Iwaizumi bothered to hide, especially when it comes to his well-being - and it might be flattering enough to make a rose garden bloom over his cheeks. He considers Iwaizumi’s words before speaking. “Then let me have at least one packet of milk bread.”

Iwaizumi glances in his direction and sighs. “Fine.”

They patrolled the rest of the supermarket until they reach the produce section, switching roles so Iwaizumi is on cart duty while Oikawa shows off his expertise and picks out the ingredients. He gathers a moderate amount of vegetables - spinach, bamboo shoots, ginger, cabbage, onions, and some discounted greens that he’s yet to find a use for but takes them anyway because they’re on sale.

Oikawa feels more comfortable engaging in small talk with the market staff, his fear for social interactions with strangers waning in a slow but sure pace. It’s definitely still there. He can feel his terrors waiting for a chance to strike. But it doesn’t have the opportunity to do so when Iwaizumi pins his jitters down without a hitch. Iwaizumi’s company grew into this harbor that his subconscious recognized as a sanctuary, although Iwaizumi as a person is clearly not safe in any way, shape, or form - his brain seems to think that it's better that way.

Getting to his feet, he drifts away from the vegetable section. He remembers Iwaizumi requesting for miso-glazed eggplants the other night and makes sure he gets all the items needed to cook it. Strolling away to find condiments, Oikawa catches the fleeting reflection of themselves on the blurry glass doors of a freezer. They seem normal enough that people don’t stop and stare, but Oikawa would sometimes feel a tinge of anxiety when he catches someone’s attention. It makes him wonder if they look weird together. Iwaizumi dresses young and simple, ruggedly handsome in an all-black ensemble that covers his tattoos, so he might be mistaken for an edgy college student instead of a gang member, while Oikawa is this tall human creature hiding his face, shuffling behind like a baby duck—

“Excuse me, young man?”

Oikawa winces in panic until his ears track the voice of a woman. He whirls and finds a radiant smile beaming up at him, belonging to a stout elderly lady, her face healthier than what her age would imply. She wears an emerald green dress and holds a small purse in the same shade. Oikawa thinks it might be her favorite color.

“Would you give this old lady a favor and get that for me?”
Eyes wide with urgency, Oikawa leans up to where her wrinkled finger’s pointing. It’s a box of tea bags on the top shelf.

“O-Oh, yes, of course—!” He hurries to reach for it with ease and hands it over. “Here you go, obaasan.”

The old woman’s face puckers into a wider smile and bows. “Thank you, sweetie.”

Oikawa hurriedly bows back even deeper as she walks away in slow, short steps. He turns back to face Iwaizumi who had been watching the interaction.

“You’re doing pretty well talking to other people,” Iwaizumi says with one corner of his mouth tilted slightly upward.

Oikawa laughs softly and saunters back to Iwaizumi’s side. “If I got to befriend a scary guy like Iwa-chan other people seems so easy.”

They make a pit stop at the baked goods section before heading to the electronic self-service counter. The robotic female voice that sings whenever Iwaizumi touches the kiosk’s interface is a bit creepy, and even though Oikawa had reached his total limit of socialization for today, he’d actually prefer to have a cute girl behind the register packing their groceries.

Several attempts to swipe Iwaizumi’s credit card later, they’re left with a couple kilograms of groceries all packed and ready on the floor.

“Hey, are those liquids? Let me carry it,” Iwaizumi offers as soon as he sees Oikawa pick up one of the heavier bags.

Oikawa directs a smile at him. “No, it’s okay,” he assures him and carries two bags of groceries like dumbbells. “I can carry them! Look, I’m really strong!”

Iwaizumi breathes out a light chuckle before picking up the rest of the eco-bags at his feet.

☆ ☆ ☆

Oikawa takes off his shoes and makes it to the kitchen first to unpack the bags of groceries.

They went for a quick dinner at a yakitori bar after leaving the supermarket, so they're both too full for the night. Oikawa fires up the Blu-ray and lets a movie drone in the background, making sure to remove all the pillows and blankets from the sectional sofa so it leaves Iwaizumi with no choice but to sleep on the bed.

Oikawa basks in the mundane calm - like every other night. Iwaizumi sets up the laptop on the island counter to scalp quick profits in whatever he's trading online, browse the news, skim through e-mails. He’d hoped that there might be some slight changes in their lifestyle. Oikawa doesn’t know exactly what, but there’s a burning cloak over his skin that’s aching for something more, his body craving for far more than just food.

Taking in a deep breath, he fights off the indescribable hunger before recalling a package he had picked up in the mailbox lobby downstairs while Iwaizumi was gone the entire morning.
“By the way, you got this in the mail today,” Oikawa tells him, bringing out a thick envelope that’s almost as wide as his torso and placing it on the kitchen island. “It doesn’t say who’s it from.”

Iwaizumi closes his laptop shut as the three pendant lamps above them provides a yellow tinge over the envelope. He doesn’t say anything, leaves the letter unopened for a short while before finding the courage to take a look. Curious, Oikawa leans on the side of the counter and takes a peek, the sound of paper rustling occupying the dead calm.

“It’s from Mizoguchi.”

Worry flares in Oikawa’s wide eyes. His knees tremble below him, glancing up to look at Iwaizumi’s reassuring expression. Stacks of documents take over the island countertop as Oikawa skims through them. Bone density chart. Ultrasound printouts. Blood glucose results. Electrocardiograms. There’s a lot more he can’t really understand, although he wonders why Iwaizumi has such an intense glare on his digital X-Rays. Maybe he knows how to read them.

His vision easily finds a white A4 with the least amount of text, and upon picking it up discovers that it’s none other than a clean bill of health.

Oikawa relishes the huge wave of relief and heaves out a liberated sigh. It’s a big weight off his mind to know that he’s not infected with some serious disease. The back of his eyes sting but he smothers the tears, not really in the mood to cry in front of Iwaizumi. It’s getting a little old.

Wordlessly, he gives the piece of paper to Iwaizumi, who might’ve had more or less the same reaction.

“See? You should’ve let me have my chocolate milk,” Oikawa chimes and casts a tender smile at him. He rests his elbows on the counter, chin on his palm before adding, “and my chocolate potato chips.”

Iwaizumi raises an eyebrow and studies him a moment, his eyes more brown than green under the warm light. “I don’t get why you like that stuff,” he says. “Potato chips and chocolate? Really?”

“It’s the perfect combination.” Oikawa tilts his head before matching with Iwaizumi’s stare with a knowing look, which earned him the smallest sign of a grin from the other man. Glancing down, Oikawa begins to tidy up the mess on the counter before catching a pink square that seemed to have been ripped off from a memo pad. He picks it up—

While there’s nothing physically wrong as of now, I suggest getting him a therapist. I can warrant a psychiatric referral if you want.

“Oikawa,” the man sitting in front of him calls softly at his eerie silence. “You don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

Oikawa straightens up and pulls himself off the counter. “Yeah, I’ll have to pass,” he affirms with a solemn mask, voice pitched low as he starts to put the stacks of paper back into the envelope.

Time melts in a bolt of lightning, the clocks simultaneously shifting to eleven in the evening.

Iwaizumi doesn’t head straight to bed after Oikawa had cleared the counters and finished a film. He waits for several minutes until Oikawa disappears into the bedroom, hoping the young man
would fall asleep first after he’s done with his fussy nighttime routine made out of scalding showers and the winding noise of a hairdryer.

Opening the door to the bathroom, leftover steam from Oikawa’s bath seeps out, the scent of rosemary shampoo and lavender body wash lingering in the air. The clouds of mist hold the same tensile warmth that consoles his inner turmoils. Taking his time, Iwaizumi takes a shower as well, dries himself off, and slips into a white shirt and a pair of old sweatpants.

The bedroom lights are off when he comes in. Softly, the room glows in cobalt blue, the city’s shameless light pollution muffled by the full-length curtains. Iwaizumi’s eyesight soon adapts to the darkness, his gaze reaching Oikawa’s figure, the dimmed lamp above the headboard diffusing a luminous veil across the bed. He’s laying on his side while a thick comforter envelopes him entirely from his feet up to his chin. Iwaizumi leaves the door shut halfway, a knifelike wedge of amber light slicing through the pitch-black room.

Grabbing a separate blanket, Iwaizumi positions himself on the space Oikawa had intentionally left for him, making sure there’s more than an inch’s space between them. He tucks in one arm under the pillow and rolls to his side—

Oikawa blinks innocently at him, the starlight in his eyes awake and still distinctly bright even in the dark. He speaks in intimate whispers.

“Were you waiting for me to fall asleep?”

“Maybe,” Iwaizumi answers and purses his lips tight.

His muscles stiffen as if they haven’t been sleeping next to each other for the past couple of weeks. The scent of a freshly showered Oikawa numbs his mind and soon enough all he can think of is rosemary and how much he wants to bury his face in his hair.

“Face the other way.”

Bitter disappointment washes over Oikawa’s features, his scowl instantaneous. Iwaizumi watches as the other man chuffs a tantrum and angrily rolls away from him. His abdomen churns in remorse at the other’s response. He soothes Oikawa’s sour mood by circling his free arm around his slender waist, pushing the cold tip of his nose against the back of his head. Iwaizumi pushes himself closer so he fits the curve of Oikawa’s spine.

His eyes clench shut until a voice confuses his nocturnal thoughts.

“I still can’t tell if you’re mad at me or not,” he murmurs before shifting against the sheets to face Iwaizumi again - an act of rebellion which causes Iwaizumi to briefly lift his arm to give Oikawa space to move. “Iwa-chan, Look at me.” Oikawa sidles closer until their heads fall on the same pillow. The softness fades from his face, now replaced by troubled eyes clashing against his own.

Iwaizumi doesn’t know how to tell him that it’s taking everything in him not to kiss him right now.

The rustling of cotton and wool chafing together disrupts the stillness as Oikawa slips an arm from underneath. He brushes Iwaizumi’s hair away from his temples until his palm stops at the side of his head, enough to drift him off into a trance.

“I’m sorry,” Iwaizumi murmurs to the man in his arms. His pulse marches into a rapid pace. It’s hard to think when Oikawa’s face is so near, his gaze planted directly at him.

Oikawa’s lips are made for smiles but he isn’t smiling now. “What for?”
“Last night, I—” he says, a pause in his thoughts. His stomach recoils at the idea of desecrating this person he had grown to cherish, a fluid of self-loathing flowing into his bloodstream. The subsequent guilt draws his eyebrows into a culpable line. “I acted out of impulse.”

Oikawa shakes his head to reassure him.

“You’ve always been impulsive,” he mutters, voice hushed but bold. His lips purse around a smile he can’t suppress. “But you’re not the type to take what isn’t yours.”

Hazel eyes widen at the subtle implication. In Iwaizumi’s mind, such possessive behavior might’ve breached a forbidden frontier in Oikawa’s mental injury, and that it’s wrong for him to want him all for himself - but to think Oikawa would suggest otherwise brings a streak of mirth in his heart.

A palm raises once more, fingers relaxed across his cheek. Iwaizumi hears him draw a deep breath in before his long lashes flutter. Oikawa leans forward, slowly, fitting his mouth against his. Iwaizumi’s mind goes completely blank. It’s the concentrated heat on his lips that made Iwaizumi surrender and close his eyes, all of his other senses forgotten.

Oikawa smiles over his lips, a modest sign that he’s opening himself to no one but him. He wonders if he still knows how to do this kind of thing, wondering if his past self ever did at all—

Iwaizumi pulls back before Oikawa can.

He’s never had that much faith in his emotions, spent years of his life deeming them as unimportant and a hindrance, but with every look Oikawa bares at him, every small act of intimacy, Iwaizumi feels his cold-blooded, inhuman facade dissipate.

“Oikawa.” Looking into a caramel gaze, Iwaizumi brushes a thumb over his cheekbones before tucking his loose fringes behind his ear. His voice softens as he whispers. “You don’t have to force yourself.”

The young man doesn’t answer and instead brings his lips back to his starved mouth, wrapping his arms around Iwaizumi’s neck with no signs of hesitation or fear - and it’s enough of a response. Iwaizumi takes in his soft exhales and calibrates their bodies into an angle that leaves no space and no room for air to flow through. Helplessly, his fingers comb through russet brown locks and guides Oikawa’s head closer, his tongue tasting the fullness of his open mouth, jolting his heart into a fitful rhythm.

Oikawa eventually separates himself, out of breath and endearingly delirious because he didn’t want to stop. His sleepy laugh right after is cold with mint toothpaste. Iwaizumi is tempted to return but would rather give Oikawa the liberty to decide. A wet, curt peck on Iwaizumi’s lips leaves him famished for more. He waits for a few seconds. Nothing. He concludes that it might’ve been a wordless goodnight gesture. Oikawa shifts downward and brushes his nose against the apple of Iwaizumi’s neck, his limbs curling up tightly around him.

Iwaizumi comes to terms with his decision and pulls Oikawa close. He lets their heartbeats sync, wishing the sun would never rise.

☆ ☆ ☆

The days pass swiftly with unusual peace.
Shinjuku regresses into a dull, gray town in the morning. The bars and restaurants and the ethically diverse crowd that provide the area with its signature vibrancy are all concurrently dormant, their neon souls drained of its cerise gas. What used to be a volatile red-light district is now a concrete monotony, all of the filth hidden behind legitimate fronts. He drives slow and steady until he spots Isetan in the distance - a behemoth-like structure that dominates the lane of beige contemporary buildings, its art deco metalwork sticking out like a sore thumb. It’s his indication to turn left and steer into the main road.

He comes across a streetlight and hits the brakes. With the night operations at a temporary halt, most of the tourists are gone, so the majority of pedestrians are locals - a rare sight in this part of town.

Iwaizumi switches the radio to a news station to take a break from the music - the obnoxious summer pop Kanjani Eight songs not quite befitting for such a tranquil morning.

Harusaki Atsushi has been appointed as the new Chairman of the National Public Safety Commission, who aims to end the reign of violent groups and other criminal organizations to guarantee the safety and security of the Japanese public by strengthening national law enforcement and police surveillance. He succeeds the late Takemura Masayoshi, who was brutally murdered—

Waiting for the light to turn green, Iwaizumi mindlessly picks up a folder from his cluttered dashboard - the one he had gotten from Lucky’s briefcase.

He didn’t have the time to think about the files he had found. He doesn’t even know how to begin on figuring out who made that list, let alone start deciphering the weird code that came with it.

*Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven*— it’s nothing but a generic phrase, that when Iwaizumi searched it on the internet yielded random results. Films. Poems. Biblical bullshit he knows absolutely nothing about. The passage appears in literary articles and foreign movies, all unrelated to Oikawa’s situation, and most likely a random English phrase some pretentious dude in Yaponskaya-kai thought was cool. Yesterday, he had searched the names that came with Oikawa’s, too. All of them are missing persons. Kidnapped, just like Oikawa.

Raw fury pulses through his veins. Oikawa’s captivity runs through his head as his retinas slither across the red text on the cover. He angrily chucks it in his already cluttered glove box, not caring if the folder crumples. His muscles brace with rage and with no outlet, fists just about ready to crush his steering wheel.

Mizoguchi’s suggestion for therapeutic treatments would probably be beneficial, but it’s far too dangerous to disclose any information to outsiders. Oikawa needs all the help he can get, and he would gladly provide anything that would make him feel at ease—

He’s itching to give Oikawa everything.

But not now - not until he gets to the bottom of things.

The traffic light signals him to accelerate, dismantling his train of thought. Iwaizumi steps on the gas pedal, sending air and fuel to the engine, speeding his Lexus as he heads to his destination, the buildings growing shorter as he drives further out from downtown.

Iwaizumi pulls up in front of a cream-colored building located just in the outskirts of Kabukicho,
vending machines standing by the entrance like Nio temple guardians. His worn-out Air Jordans scratch the dirty pavements of a Tuesday morning as he hops off, the glass exteriors reflecting his moving figure when he pulls the doors open.

The Shinjuku Batting Center looks like a ghost town, with its patrons - mostly students - all stuck in school. The narrow, rectangular shape condenses the indoor arcade machines like canned sardines, with very little space for an adult-sized person to walk through. Reception is void of staff, the claw machines and taiko drums are unplugged, the row of batting cages are all empty except for one—

Iwaizumi follows the sound of a ball hitting aluminum and arrives at the very end of the indoor arcade area. He slips into one of the several glass doors on his left and arrives at a vast, open-air field, enclosed entirely by green netting and the morning light.

His vision sucks in the sunshine that trickles into the stadium.

“Why’d you call me out here?”

Matsukawa straightens from his batting stance, waving his free hand in invitation.

“I can’t just hang out with a friend?” he says, obviously out of breath. Looks like he’s been batting for a while. “Don’t just stand there, get a bat.”

Iwaizumi complies and gets an obsidian one from the rack. He didn’t plan on dropping by the office today, his casual fit consisting of loose ankle-length joggers and a dark gray Henley shirt with sleeves rolled up to his elbows. It’s a stark contrast against Matsukawa’s sleek gray suit, although Iwaizumi has never seen him wear anything else after he graduated from business school.

“I saw Kyouhatai working in a FamilyMart at my place,” he says and slips into the cage adjacent to Matsukawa’s, a veil of thick netting the only thing separating them. “Did you put him there?”

“The guy loves his Famima chicken, so I might as well keep his motivation up and have him work a decent job.” Matsukawa waits for the pitching machine to throw a ball, his body swinging as he hits it. “He keeps lashing out on us because we never let him do some of the dirty work. I told him we don’t do protection rackets. Does he think we’re still in the eighties or something? He should join other groups if he’s looking for some action. Besides, he only listens to you. Keep him at bay for me, yeah?”

Iwaizumi rolls his eyes. “I’m not his babysitter,” he says, pushing the bright red buttons of a lectern-like machine next to him.

He sets the equipment to the fastest ball speed and rolls his shoulders. Iwaizumi puts his back foot on its toe, elbow planted firmly against his side, grip tight around the weighted handle. The pitching machine makes a loud burst of wind as a ball shoots towards him in high velocity.

Iwaizumi hits it with a perfect swing, the ball traveling all the way back to the other side of the arena.

“Damn,” Matsukawa crows in awe as he watches the ball fly to the opposite direction. “You were always better at sports than Hanamaki and I,” he says with an impressed grin. “Except volleyball. We definitely beat you in the height department.”

Iwaizumi glances at him, arching an eyebrow. “I don’t recall you two ever wearing the number four jersey, though.”
Matsukawa doesn’t take offense and lets out a lighthearted laugh. “You got me there.”

Another ball comes into his direction. Iwaizumi keeps his weight centered on his rear leg and releases a burst of kinetic energy with a strong upswing. The automatic pitcher throws a couple more, Iwaizumi hitting all of them with flawless aim. After a dozen hits with no misses, he turns to Matsukawa who’s more or less already tired. His athleticism still dwells with his tall gait and overall build but the lack of physical activities obviously took a toll on his stamina.

“It’s been quiet lately,” Iwaizumi blurs and rests the baseball bat over his shoulder. Local news from the past few days are mysteriously free from gruesome headlines. No gang violence. No scandals. It feels like the calm before a storm, and if anyone knows about certain things, he knows it’s this guy.

“Haven’t been getting calls?” Matsukawa asks knowingly, thick eyebrows raising. “The bidding’s been closed for more than a week now.”

“Bidding?” he repeats.

“The Nightcall uses a bidding system,” Matsukawa starts. He sighs, putting his hand on his waist and the other using the baseball bat as a support cane. “Think of it like an auction. One group wants this, let’s say, government intel, but another group wants it too. They’ll pick the highest bidder. Always. When it comes to contracts, they’re able to send out an operative as long as you’re paying, no matter which side you’re on. You’re paying them ‘cause they can gather intel in seconds. They don’t kill cheap, though. In reality, no one can afford to hire their hitmen twelve times a year. Requesting to locate precious gemstones isn’t the same as locating petty land titles. Putting a hit on a high-profile politician isn’t the same as a random street thug.”

Iwaizumi goes back and reselects the fastball pitch on the machine. He hits another ball thrown at him as Matsukawa continues.

“But here’s the catch - civilians are off-limits. They only accept targets associated with criminal groups. Bad folks only.” Matsukawa fixes his blue tie that had shift out of place earlier. “Isn’t it cool? You’re like Batman.”

His growing irritation materializes into his swing and sees the ball at its contact point, his supply of brute strength primarily ramped up by imagining he’s bashing all the people who had harmed Oikawa in the past. The ball smacks a far wall with a frighteningly strong impact. He side-eyes Matsukawa and scoffs.

“I’m pretty sure Batman doesn’t kill bad guys.”

“Well, you both have a hard-on for revenge and vigilante justice so there’s that.”

Iwaizumi grimaces at the vulgarity. He lowers his bat after the twelfth ball, recalling his past few slip-ups with his jobs. He suspects Matsukawa doesn’t know that he royally fucked up that last job by eliminating people he’s not supposed to eliminate. Perhaps it was a Seijou member of higher rank who issued the contract.

“How do you even pay the Nightcall without a paper trail?” he asks and sets the machine to pitch another dozen at high speeds.

“It’s the black market, Iwaizumi. What do you think?” Matsukawa lets the question linger to give Iwaizumi a few seconds to guess. The other man casts him an impatient look. “Cryptocurrency,” he says matter-of-factly. “The digital marketplace doesn’t accept anything else. You should know
better than I do. You were majoring in IT, weren’t you?”

Iwaizumi remains silent, jaw taut as blurry chunks of his past spins in the privacy of his thoughts.

Life decided to fuck him up before he could finish his university studies, but he knows enough from basic encryption and network routing courses that the Nightcall’s place within tech circles remains undefeated - their systems incredibly powerful that Matsukawa often notes how it outclasses other intelligence agencies in the world because of how they’re able to efficiently utilize electronic surveillance and passive digital footprints.

“You’re not afraid of being a target?” Iwaizumi asks and tilts his head a bit.

Matsukawa straightens up, his body language confident. “Our enemies don’t even know who’s dealing with who. From an outsider’s view, I’m just some dude in finance.” He scratches the back of his head and barks a chuckle. “That’s what makes the Nightcall special. At the end of the day, we’re all just faceless assholes trying to one-up each other, and since we move the money anonymously, we virtually have no ledgers tracking us.”

In the corner of his eye, he catches a glimpse of Matsukawa leaving the cage, a raspy voice saying he’s going to take a short break getting quieter the farther he goes. Iwaizumi’s arms grow heavy after a few more swings. He puts the bat back on the rack.

Stepping out of the cages, he’s greeted by the strong indoor air-conditioning, the coolness brushing over the sweat on his forehead. He roams towards the vending machines right next to the Time Crisis booth. It’s only then Iwaizumi realizes that the batting center is still closed when the sign says the place opens at ten, the digital clock behind the reception desk telling him in red numbers that it’s only seven in the morning. He had no idea this old batting center belonged to Aobajousai-kai.

“By the way, were you the one who took out Oshima or Harada?” Matsukawa asks and inserts a few coins into the vending machine until a bottle of Pocari Sweat drops down with a muffled thud. He presses the same button to get another and throws it over to Iwaizumi.

Iwaizumi catches it with ease. “Harada,” he replies unconcerned and sits on a stool in by a Tekken arcade cabinet. He takes a sip of his drink, the mild fruit flavor reminding him of after-school practice and sports festivals. “That was a couple of weeks ago, though.”

“He tore down our law firm in Marunouchi and arrested several of my guys. Corrupt fuck—” Matsukawa stops to take an angry swig. “Stole a lot of money and took more bribes than any cop in history.”

“Harada said he was no longer under Shiratorizawa-gumi’s payroll,” Iwaizumi tells him, hoping the other would confirm. “Said he worked for some bloke from Kyoudai-krug called Ichinose Matvei.”

“Really.”

“You don’t sound surprised.”

Matsukawa chuckles. “I have little birds telling me Harusaki Atsushi has ties to Kyoudai-krug, pulling the strings in the National Police Agency.”

The name rings a bell and he pauses to think. “Wait...” Iwaizumi’s eyes widen as soon as he’s able to pluck this morning’s radio news from his memory. “That’s the new Safety Commission chairman.”
He takes an irked breath, making a rough sound of affirmation. “These days It seems like Kyoudai-krug has been winning the popularity polls.”

Iwaizumi’s eyes narrow. “I don’t get it. What makes them different from all the other two-bit yakuza in the city that they have politicians on their side?”

“For starters, they don’t like being called yakuza, even though they’re the first Japanese mafia to establish a transnational criminal network,” Matsukawa explains, raising his chin up to drink until the bottle’s empty. He exhales in refreshment. “Our local gangs never exported drugs or sold weapons. We are, however, localized extortionists, but our rackets have always been confined inside the country. Kyoudai-krug doesn’t care about our image and operates outside Japan. Drugs, bribes, harassment, theft…” Matsukawa trails off, shaking his head in disapproval. He stands to throw the plastic container in a bin. “Whatever it takes to get money, whatever kind of business, they’ll get it by any means possible. Because unlike their brother, they still have connections with their mom.”

Iwaizumi remembers about the intel he got from Hanamaki.

“Mokoshka?”

“Yeah.” Matsukawa nods, sitting on a stool across him. He springs out a cigarette from his suit pockets and lets it hang between his lips as he shuffles for a lighter. “I heard they pay the Russian mob monthly dues in return for information, legal advice, resources and all that.”

“Yaponskaya-kai doesn’t have connections with the bratva anymore?”

“Those guys are totally independent. With three strong lieutenants—well, two of them are dead, as you may already know.” Matsukawa stares, the look he casts in his direction apologetic. “I won’t dig into old scars.”

Iwaizumi disregards his last phrase. “I’ve never heard of a third lieutenant.”

Idly clearing his throat, Matsukawa fishes out a silver lighter and ignites his stick. The smoke floats in the air between them before ultimately escaping to the open glass door leading to the batting cages.

“Tanabe Yoko is the last one standing, which isn’t a surprise. She’s pretty passive. Not the kinda gal who’s into this violent gang war bullshit. She got married off by the patriarch of her clan to a Russian oligarch and became a lieutenant because of it. But with only her, Yaponskaya-kai is at their weakest. You know how folks here don’t like to see ladies in power. Most of their leaders are dead, and it’s all thanks to Kyoudai-krug.”

“Both of those groups have been targeting Seijou,” Iwaizumi points out. He breathes in deep, the cold air mixing with the nicotine. It occurs to him that he hasn’t smoked in a very, very long time, not since he started living with Oikawa. He swats the cigarette smoke away from his face and hopes it won’t stick to the soft knit of his clothes. “If Kyoudai-krug has the National Police Agency in their pockets, isn’t it going to be harder for you guys to operate?”

“The higher-ups think we should lie low and let Shiratorizawa-gumi handle it. Police corruption is their thing. It’s not our fight.” Matsukawa lifts his gaze towards Iwaizumi, his dark eyes sharpening. “You know we always keep it safe. We’ve lasted this long because we always keep it safe,” he adds in clear warning. “We can’t afford being targeted by those freaks right now, not when they have the Butcher of Ikebukuro in their hands.”
Iwaizumi raises his brows at the tacky title. “You mean Ushijima?”

“Who else?” A wry grin crosses his lips. “Do you want a cool nickname, too?”

He finishes his energy drink and shoots it in the nearby bin. “No thanks.”

“If it makes you feel better, ever since that incident with Kazuo Kozlov, some Yaponskaya-kai guys have been calling the killer Volkov.”

Hearing that name causes an infuriated acid to rise up from his stomach. He clenches his jaw, nostrils flaring as he glances at the other man curiously. “Volkov? What does that mean?”

“It’s kinda like…” he pauses in thought. He doesn’t seem too certain about it as well. “You’re the wolf that caught the goat.”

The rage that flashed across his face slowly melts away when he remembers the night he slaughtered the guy, thankful that he decided to torture him instead of putting an easy bullet to his head. He’d kill that asshole twice if he could.

“Huh,” Iwaizumi huffs with disappointment. “I thought it was a Command and Conquer reference.”

Matsukawa snorts a short laugh before heading back to the batting cages.

“God, you’re such a fucking nerd.”

☆ ☆ ☆

Waking up early to find Iwaizumi gone, Oikawa decided to sleep in and skip breakfast.

It’s around an hour after one when he fully wakes up, brews himself a cup of coffee, then curls up in his favorite lounge chair facing the cityscape laundered under the late noontide. His intent to read a novel he’s been hooked on remains undisturbed as he gets a lap blanket to keep his legs warm within the harsh coldness of the pad. The book in his hands is in English and one of the few in the bookshelf that’s foreign. He didn’t even know he could read the words at all.

An hour later, he moves to the sofa. His hands graze over the remote control but he remembers he’s not allowed to turn it on unless it’s plugged into the DVD player. Oikawa stares at his reflection on the flat surface, the screensaver of a bouncing DVD logo peering back at him. Iwaizumi’s initial household rules suddenly come to mind - some of which has already been revoked, some still heavily enforced. He’s been allowed all kinds of freedoms except for a select few. Iwaizumi had granted him the liberty to explore the condominium building as he pleases now. It’s only luck that the man lives in an entertainment district, so the lower floors have much to offer in terms of enjoyment.

Communication is still restricted. No internet. No phones. Oikawa would think he’d be allowed to watch television, but Iwaizumi has been strict. It’s tempting, he admits. There aren’t days when his rebellious spirit wanted to peek at Iwaizumi’s computers, or turn the radio on, or even watch local channels. The truth is that Oikawa knows he can get away with it, but it’s his compliance that won Iwaizumi’s trust and completely reworked their dynamic, that it aches him to even think about breaking Iwaizumi’s faith in him.
In the back of his mind, he still recognizes Iwaizumi as his jailer - someone who’d stolen him from a place that had stripped away his humanity, only to put him inside another cage - a prettier one, softer, kinder, but a cage nonetheless. It offends Oikawa that he would still think of him that way when he’d never laid a hand on him. Iwaizumi can slit his throat and feel nothing. That’s the kind of person he’s living with, and yet a part of his brain simply didn’t care, the fear he had once felt replaced with a yearning he’s now fully embraced. He’d often question his own sanity, and that maybe he’s a victim to the same psychological distress that made hostages sympathize with their kidnappers.

The only anomaly is that he’s literally of no use to Iwaizumi.

He isn’t being kept here to be used, nor is he being kept as a prisoner threatened to be killed if his demands are not met. Iwaizumi never infantilized him. Never treated him as someone who’s helpless. He would always pull him out of his lonely corners - be it literally or figuratively. Up until now, Oikawa doesn’t know why Iwaizumi saved him, and he’s too much of a coward to ask.

His thoughts circle around Iwaizumi’s intentions for a while until his body craves for any sort of movement. Oikawa learns he’s always restless, like there’s an engine inside him that won’t turn off. He paces around the house to get his mind in order - watering the plants, vacuuming the carpets, taking out spoiled food from the fridge, taking out the trash. Several other mindless chores later, Oikawa eventually decides to cook an early dinner.

Iwaizumi’s kitchen of intimidating black and steel had evolved into something a little more domestic. Clean surfaces. Flowers and succulents in the center island. Long, leafy plants hanging from the shelves. Beechwood kitchen utensils. Fresh spices and herbs that give the area a unique and cozy smell. It didn't take long before it became Oikawa’s second favorite area right after the lounge chair.

Oikawa grabs an apron from the side of the cupboard and ties it into place around his waist.

When he cooks, Oikawa feels himself untether from his body. It feels good. It feels even better than actually eating. In small ways, Oikawa is able to discern Iwaizumi’s personality by his tiny preferences. He likes his tofu crispy, not soft. No mirin on his omelet, but prefers it with soy sauce. Red rice over white. Mango yogurt instead of Greek. His favorite fried rice recipe has hotdogs and sriracha—

He finds himself smiling and takes the recipe book off beneath the island. Bringing out the ingredients from the fridge, Oikawa pulls out a container. It’s the marinade he’d prepared the night before - pork belly drowning in soy sauce, mirin, ginger, and sugar. Iwaizumi had requested shogayaki yesterday and he’s more than happy to fulfill it.

Oikawa grabs a cast-iron skillet and heats a moderate amount of vegetable oil. It’s a good thing that Iwaizumi had brought pork belly that’s already thinly sliced, so cooking it becomes easier. With a wooden spatula, he presses the pork pieces so they lie flat, letting them brown. The quick trip to the hot pan causes the oil to sizzle loudly with the fat. When he’s done and transferred the cooked meat into a bowl, Oikawa picks up some clean chopsticks and pinched a tiny slice with it.

He gently blows it with his breath before taking a taste. The sugar and mirin helped the pork strips caramelize as the sharp ginger taste perfectly rips through the sweetness. It’s hard to think he was able to create a rich flavor with so little ingredients. Fighting the urge to devour the entire thing, Oikawa plates it with rice, arugula and sliced tomatoes on the side before covering it with a cling film. He reserves it for Iwaizumi and eats his portion alone.

A movie plays in the living room, the sounds of laser guns and exploding spacecrafts warding off
the dreary summer outside until time ticks towards sundown. The gilded watch stays in place around his wrist. Glancing down on it, the hands hasten and until they point at five-forty.

The sun gingerly slips beneath the Tokyo skyline when Iwaizumi’s usual gallant stride and tired frown arrives by the front door, opening with a chime of a digital lock and creak like always. Oikawa is apparently too preoccupied with a film to notice. The volume is too high, the subwoofers lazily arrayed on the floor thumping with intense bass. Iwaizumi watches him for a while, amused at how Oikawa, tall and lean as he is, sits up with his knees bent to his chest that makes him look small, eyes focused at the action scene sprawled across the television.

His bare footsteps get lost beneath the film’s obnoxious sound effects.

“I’m home.”

Oikawa squeaks a half-done profanity and jerks up in surprise, his head spinning towards his voice. He puts a palm over his chest to calm his startled heart.

“Iwa-chan, don’t sneak up on me like that…” Oikawa whines, exhaling a heavy billow of air. He swiftly grabs the remote to pause the movie before glaring at Iwaizumi. “You scared me!”

Iwaizumi steps closer and shows off an armload of blue Tsutaya plastic bags to serve as his genuine apology. “I got you more DVDs,” he says and deposits it into Oikawa’s hand. He studies as the other takes a peek inside, a glint of excitement polishing his features.

Oikawa gasp and chirps with garish enthusiasm as he takes the plastic cases one by one, sunset-infused bronze eyes examining each cover to see what catches his attention the most. He glances at Iwaizumi, who flops down on the left arm chaise of the sectional sofa. “Have you watched any of these?”

“Some of them,” he replies, his arms limp and sore from batting with Matsukawa and having to spend the rest of the day in Keyaki Plaza.

Cheeks a subtle shade of peach, Oikawa hums a thoughtful noise. “Which one would you suggest then?”

“Godzilla.”

He tilts his head to the side. “What’s that about?”

Iwaizumi can’t help but stare in disbelief. Everyone knows Godzilla. But based on Oikawa’s clueless expression, it seems like he really didn’t have an idea. His brain probably didn’t bother to retain giant kaiju lore. That’s understandable, albeit a little disappointing.

“Just watch it when you’re bored.”

Oikawa shows his appreciation by smiling brightly at him - an annoying habit he’d cultivated because he knows how much it makes Iwaizumi’s heart pound without warning. His happiness is considerably contagious that Iwaizumi feels the tendrils of fatigue leave his shoulders.

“This one looks cool,” Oikawa says and shoves it into his face that Iwaizumi doesn’t have the choice but to scrutinize the two-year-old movie. “Have you watched this before?”

The cover art is a lone man walking in an astronaut suit, walking in a desolate, snowy terrain. He leers quickly at the paused movie which has more or less the same overarching elements. Spacesuits. Interstellar wars. Extraterrestrials. Oikawa’s affinity towards science fiction appears to
be a reoccurring theme in his taste in cinema.

“No,” Iwaizumi replies.

Oikawa grins wide, eyes shining with delight. “Let’s watch it tomorrow, then!”

Iwaizumi blinks at him and purses his lip, trying very hard not to catch that infectious smile.

“Sure.”

With a tender expression, the young man then glances back on his current fixation and unpauses the film, the jarring soundtrack and shrill sci-fi sound effects suddenly saturating the air with vibrations. Iwaizumi gives him privacy and heads to the kitchen in search of food.

“By the way, I cooked you dinner!” Oikawa proclaims with perfect timing, his voice a little louder than usual, so it’s not drowned out by the film. His gaze is still fixed on the screen when he adds, “It’s on the counter!”

Predictably, Iwaizumi finds a dinner plate on the island, parallel to the bar stool farthest to the right. Shogayaki with rice and vegetable salad. He sits down and pulls the cling wrap off before pinching the thin slice of meat between his chopsticks, a little bit of juice oozing out as he did so. Iwaizumi takes a bite.

A quiet hum of pleasure escapes from his lips - the tangy twist of ginger nips at his taste buds, the touch of sweetness giving rise to the savory flavor of the meat.

Iwaizumi takes a deep breath, his chest clenching as he pines for the past. It’s the salaryman’s meal, his father used to say. His parents used to cook shogayaki a lot since it’s a cheap dinner choice for families who didn’t have much, as the pork cuts used are usually the most inexpensive. Iwaizumi swallows another bite and licks his lips with leftover ginger sauce. He stills for a second and lets his sentimentalities die down, not letting his old memories resurface. It usually doesn’t turn out well.

He consumes his dinner faster than usual.

Sparing a quick glance at Oikawa who’s still enamored with the screen, Iwaizumi shoves the plate away and replaces it with a laptop - the one that’s stationary on this island counter. He could’ve gone to his office but figures he’d prefer to be in the same room as Oikawa to occasionally watch him. Iwaizumi flips the laptop open and clicks on the browser. It carries about a hundred tabs on the top bar - all of which are search results of everything Iwaizumi had found in that Yaponskaya-kai folder marked with red ink.

It’s frustrating. Iwaizumi isn’t quite a puzzle solver. He knows damn well he’ll make a terrible detective. When it comes to ciphers, he’s only somewhat skilled in modern cryptosystems and software security. Those things involve algorithms and readily designed, automated tools. No need for human deduction. It doesn't help that he isn't very proficient in English, his research turning into a pile of badly machine-translated text.

His green eyes then flick across to the digital note attached on his desktop—

Glaring at the code, Iwaizumi groans in annoyance. Old ciphers usually work by performing a substitution - a shift in the alphabet. Instead of Latin letters, it could be Japanese characters; instead of numbers, it could be ideograms. It’s the most simplistic type of encryption, the most vulnerable, and yet Iwaizumi remains confused.

He’s missing some sort of key. Something essential.

“Did you like it?”

His thinking gets interrupted by a sweet voice. Iwaizumi snaps his head forward, an expectant expression and a tilt of a head gracing his view.

“It’s delicious,” he says with pure honesty.

Another smile, warm and effervescent.

“Thanks,” Oikawa says with a faint blush, walking across the galley to open the fridge. He turns back to Iwaizumi with two bottles of barley tea in his hands. “I totally wasn’t fishing for a compliment.”

Iwaizumi tightens jaw, wishing he can balance with Oikawa’s frame of mind, but too many of his frustrations kept him from doing so - the desire to protect Oikawa and find out what happened to him becoming a violent fist in his gut that he can’t control.

“You look troubled,” Oikawa notes, his voice terribly more delicate, eyebrows downturned with worry. He slides the barley tea to his direction and Iwaizumi gladly accepts. His mood must’ve been less than opaque that Oikawa is able to read him in mere seconds. “Everything okay?”

He clears his throat and leans back from his hunched posture. “I’m just... tired,” Iwaizumi manages to say, although he’s quite sure Oikawa can tell he’s lying. He’s never been good at thinking up excuses.

Oikawa places his chilled bottle on the marble surface and leans on the counter opposite Iwaizumi. “You know what you need?” he starts. The brief pause creates a line of curiosity in Iwaizumi’s face.

“What?”

The other claps his hand once, lips shaping up in an encouraging smile.

“A vacation.”

Iwaizumi’s gaze falls on Oikawa’s declaration and lightly shakes his head. “I don’t need a vacation —”

“Then take me somewhere,” Oikawa cuts off with a revised suggestion. Iwaizumi wonders if Oikawa has already caught on that he can’t say no if it’s for Oikawa’s sake. “Life’s short. Whatever time you get, you should cherish it.”

Iwaizumi frowns deeper as the other man throws soft, pleading eyes at him.

“Please?” Oikawa begs, his voice triggering a nurturing response in Iwaizumi. “For me?”

His attempts to wrench himself free from Oikawa’s enchantment have always been unsuccessful.
Iwaizumi doesn’t even know why he tries when he’s so absurdly spellbound.

Sighing, he folds the laptop down and closes his eyes, bracing his palms against the countertop edges. Oikawa’s persuasion has always been hard to bypass. It’s his own acceptance of it that boggles his fucking mind—

“What do you want to go?”

Oikawa bounces in enthusiasm, his eyes as wide as the moon. “I-I wanna go out of the city…!” he mutters, obviously trying to keep himself from yelling. He raises his hand and points at the television. “I want to see that.”

Looking behind his shoulder, Iwaizumi finds a nebula, dense pillars of gas and dust all forming colorful plasma clouds of blue, purple, and pink. In the center of it is a colossal spacecraft that doesn’t look like it belongs to Earth. He scowls in confusion.

“—Spaceships?”

Oikawa’s heart leaps with excitement before correcting him.

“No, stars!”

☆ ☆ ☆

His car that can shut the whole world out becomes a turbine of wind, Oikawa rolling down the windows to let the summer night’s breath in, prancing to the ecstatic chatter that streams from Oikawa’s mouth. The air is balmy and crisp that Iwaizumi feels his eyes dry if he forgets to blink. It still hints of the erratic rainy weather, earthy notes of the wet ground and dew floating about. With his hands on the steering wheel, Iwaizumi struggles to keep his eyes ahead.

Oikawa is a different entity whenever he’s outside the safe and sound walls of his home. Catching a glimpse of Oikawa on his side-view mirror, the young man stares expectantly at the heavens, watching as the night deepens in anticipation. His chin rests on his folded arms against the chrome windowsill, the evening breeze making the curls of his hair dance.

The sky is barren and somber with black velvet, the incandescent high-mast lighting lining the highway battling against the stars that Oikawa hopes to see. It’s near impossible to see stars in the capital. But as time passes, and as Iwaizumi feels more liberated to speed up, the blinding city lights dissipate like gas fumes behind them, the lush landscape of Chiba replacing the evening scenery.

Little by little, the night sky opens up, slowly unveiling its shy cloak.

It’s becoming colder but Iwaizumi doesn’t want to spoil Oikawa’s sightseeing, letting him lean against the open window for as long as he wants. This is the only time he could do that after all. His hooded sweatshirt is heavy with fleece and yellow threads, a lovely pop of color against his pale skin. The cotton shirt underneath is convenient when he needs to cool down once the car stops and the hot air hits. Within the first hour, Oikawa asks to stop for gas because he needed to go to the bathroom. Iwaizumi makes a stopover a quiet town on the outskirts of Ichihara before riding off again.

The chill gets the best of Oikawa as he lets out a sneeze. Tearing away from the window, Oikawa
opens the glove box in search of forgotten pocket tissues Iwaizumi had been hoarding. Iwaizumi doesn't notice him open it, hazel eyes focused on the road—

“Better to reign in hell, than to serve in heaven…”

The screech of tires disrupts the peaceful air as Iwaizumi stomps on the brake pedal.

Inertia lunges Oikawa forward, the seatbelt keeping him tightly in place. He frantically looks behind them then at Iwaizumi, a splay of surprise painting over his face. "Iwa-chan! We're in the middle of a highway, why did you—!"

He snatches the paper folder sharply from Oikawa's grip, the lines on his face tight with a glare. The corners of his mouth twitch as he resists to display his anger. "I told you before not to touch anything—!"

"Sorry," Oikawa replies a flippant apology. He puffs his cheeks and sniffs in the cold air, the soft whirr of the immobile car supplanting his short pause. "I was just looking for tissues."

The irate wheel in his thoughts relaxes as Oikawa's voice plucks the strings of his temper down, a small trace of guilt welling in his stomach before grabbing a tissue packet from the side pocket of his car door.

With a calmer voice, he offers. "Here."

Oikawa looks at him before lifting a coy hand to take it. He blows his nose then inhales deeply afterwards to check if his nasal airways are clear. Iwaizumi watches him, wanting to mentally punch himself for snapping like that.


Shocked, Iwaizumi raises his eyebrows at him. "How did you know that?"

"How? You have that book." Blinking down, he pulls another tissue from the plastic packet and scrubs his nose with it. "Paradise Lost. I tried reading it but got bored."

Impressed, but highly intrigued, Iwaizumi asks, "You can understand English?"

"I guess I can read it... but I can't say I understood it well enough."

Iwaizumi stares at him with wide eyes, an idea bursting through his thoughts. He’s aware that Oikawa had rifled through every book displayed in his house, but he didn’t expect him to have a sharp memory considering his current mental condition. The paper in his hand makes a sharp, ripping sound as he abruptly tears the cipher of jumbled numbers and letters off and hands it over.

"Can you decode this?" The paper, now jagged on one edge, creases in his hand as the other man takes it. Oikawa stares at the piece of paper for a second before lifting his curious gaze up at Iwaizumi. “It’s supposed to be an address—or something. I can’t figure it out.”

“Uh, I’m not sure if I…” Oikawa trails off, uncertain. His eyes are fixed on the piece of paper when Iwaizumi notices his features twist into a sudden determination that’s itching to help Iwaizumi in any way. Keeping it in his hoodie’s front pockets, he takes a breath, his chest heaving as he turns to Iwaizumi with shining autumn woodland eyes and a grin. “I’ll try when we get back home, though!”

Iwaizumi makes a rough sound of appreciation and dumps the folder back into the compartment
and clamps his hands around the wheel. He shifts gears and steps on the pedal and rides along the empty highway.

Later on, the backdrop of dramatic cliffs and dense forests encloses the road into a narrow lane, pushing the guard rails closer as they go deeper into the countryside. Iwaizumi feels the other’s eagerness as he drives further south until the scent of the timber overwhols the air. Small houses with no lights on would occasionally pop up. People from small villages like this often retire early in the night, he assumes.

Turning into a sharp curve, Iwaizumi slows the vehicle to respect the slow speed limit as they arrive in a slightly more populated area, traditional houses bordering both sides of the road. He reaches an intersection with a couple of rundown signs, pausing for a second before steering to the right. The main road and the town itself is elevated from the shore to ward off tenacious tides. Iwaizumi swivels towards a downward slope, a narrow pathway alongside a long stretch of seawalls leading the car to an empty beachside.

Oikawa perks up from his bored posture, his back straightening he sees the ocean, obscured by the night, yet still serenading a zealous song of crashing waves.

The black vehicle slides into a gentle halt along a seaside trail, and Oikawa is the first to get out. His feet hit the textured cement coated with surplus sand, the bottom of his sneakers brushing against the coarse surface. The shoreline is pitch black, devoid of lights and people, the isolated pathway becoming completely dark once Iwaizumi turns the headlights off. He exits his car right after, noticing the summer wind is a bit milder compared to the city. He cranes his head up to see what Oikawa is looking at—

It’s music for the eyes.

He gains comfort from Oikawa’s unwavering joy as the sky he had promised cascades down on them in dark linen spotted with constellations, like dust and scratches on an old photograph. Specks of tiny, white-hot dots paint the night sky in vibrant energy, rendering Oikawa speechless with awe, his soft gasps escaping from his parted lips, raw umber eyes more open than ever before. His head spins in different directions to absorb the star patterns into his vision all at once.

Having to live in a city all his life, Iwaizumi has never seen stars this abundant, sparkling twice as bright against the pacific canvas.

“Thanks for taking me here.”

Oikawa’s voice unfolds from behind him. He turns and finds Oikawa walking over to sit on the front hood of his car, smiling, legs dangling happily as his eyes are still stuck on the heavenly stars above. The interior lights of his car frame his silhouette with a turquoise glow.

“That’s Vega,” Oikawa tells him, forefinger stretched at the sky as though he can reach it. Iwaizumi mirrors his gaze but doesn’t really know where he’s pointing when there are thousands of them up there. “It’s the most prominent star in the Lyra constellation. Do you see it? It’s the big, blue one.”

He squints his eyes as if it would help. The only constellation he knows is those three stars symmetrically next to each other. He doesn't even know what it's called. Straining his eyes, he soon spots a grand dot that’s distinctly larger and brighter than the rest, a luminous ring surrounding it in electric ultramarine.

“I see it,” Iwaizumi murmurs, crossing his arms. “Is that the brightest?”
The air becomes thick and muggy, the small town now awashed with the waves and the summer heat. Oikawa pulls off his hoodie over his head, a bit of sweat forming on his temples. He rewards himself with fresh air and breathes in deep. “Sirius is the brightest star,” he corrects. “It’s not here right now, sadly.” Oikawa heaves a soft laugh under his breath. “If we’d gone earlier we might’ve seen it.”

“How do you know all that when you can’t even remember your own name?” Iwaizumi asks, his gaze darts back down to Oikawa’s face still brimming over with glee. It’s a pity that Oikawa knows all of the stars in the sky but can’t even name Iwaizumi’s favorite one.

“I don’t know,” he says, shrugging his shoulders before sparing a brief glance at Iwaizumi, a rueful smile gracing his lips. “Maybe I was super smart before I lost my memories.”

He’s right, probably. If it weren’t for those fucking pricks that dragged him into the underworld, Oikawa would still be in university getting his science degree. He would still be living a normal life, hanging around normal people, doing what a normal student does. Iwaizumi tries to imagine Oikawa in that mundane situation, where he’s living peacefully, his skin free from scars, his smile not hiding behind a disguise.

What a sight that would be.

“As if a dumbass like you can be that smart,” Iwaizumi scoffs and fights back a smirk.

“Hey!” Oikawa exclaims with his nose in the air. “I could be an astrophysicist for all we know!”

He feels a little guilty keeping Oikawa in the dark all these months. His breath leaves him in a humid exhale, a smitten pair of hazel falling onto cinnamon.

“It’s pretty hot. You’re not gonna take that off?” Oikawa asks and leans back, his hands now sprawled on the black mica to support his weight. He fans himself with the collar of his cotton shirt to bring a little air in, exposing a bit of his collarbones. “That jacket’s really working for you, by the way. You must really like it.”

Iwaizumi looks down at his bomber jacket. It’s the one Oikawa picked out for him two months ago. The toasty air beckons him to take it off, feeling a bit of sweat accumulating on his back.

“It’s easier to get rid of stains,” he says and succumbs to peer pressure, pulling it off. His slight perspiration makes it hard to slide the sleeves off his arms. The air that’s supposed to carry the weight of summer suddenly feels like ice upon contact as he ties the jacket around his waist.

“Iwa-chan,” Oikawa calls him in a gentle voice.

Iwaizumi sees Oikawa’s expression still adorned with a soft smile.

Oikawa holds his arms out wide.

“Come here.”

He obeys, his steps slow and cautious.

The mislaid sand grinds under his feet as Oikawa tugs him closer the second he’s within arm’s reach. With Oikawa’s arms around his neck, Iwaizumi forfeits without a hitch, bringing himself closer to the enrapturing embrace, his calloused palms snaking around the other torso in an almost automatic reflex. His breath hitches when he feels Oikawa latch his legs around his waistline, his tender sighs brushing against his ear.
It’s a miracle to him that Oikawa can still welcome someone like him into his arms - a soul drenched in blood, weathered and heavy with the weight of all the things he had done that can never be undone. There’s too much madness in the furlongs of his character, too many moral boundaries crossed.

In the distance, the crickets would sing over the pauses between them, signaling the arrival of midnight and the moon’s departure.

Oikawa feels a divine ripple of heat in his body, his stomach churning, heart palpitating in fickle speeds, only to realize that the physical signs of anxiety, without context, reads a lot like falling in love.

“Aren’t you afraid of me?” Iwaizumi asks.

The question corrugates his thoughts for a second. Oikawa shifts the gap between their faces so he can trap Iwaizumi’s head between his palms. He stares deeply into his rainforest eyes and smiles.

“I’m afraid that I trust you a little too much,” he answers, his voice in delicate whispers. Oikawa closes his eyes and presses his forehead against Iwaizumi’s before he continues, “and that I’m just giving you new reasons to leave me.”

“I would never leave you.”

Oikawa purses his lips to bite back the jubilance. His head swims around Iwaizumi’s words, a specific elation squeezing his heart tight. Iwaizumi treated him like a person when he didn’t even feel human. It changed his world. He’s certain now that the stars aligned to bring him to his life, whether he likes it or not, their souls designing their affair long before their eyes could meet for the first time.

Their proximity doesn’t let him breathe as freely.

“Can I?” he hears Iwaizumi ask in a vague murmur, his breath hot against his skin, lips maddeningly close. Oikawa feels the other’s hands tighten around him and grip the fabric of his shirt.

He nods and smiles, eager. “Yeah.”

Oikawa dives into him as Iwaizumi takes his mouth into his - an ardent kiss that seeks his participation. Iwaizumi bites down on his nether lip in an attempt to open his mouth, tipping his head slightly to trace Oikawa’s lips with his tongue before slipping it in, drunk with longing. Oikawa heaves his body up and throws his arms around his neck once more. Along with the whispers and moans rough from the rapture, his heart starts to ache as he memorizes the sensation of Iwaizumi’s mouth on his own, his body flaming up with a hunger he can barely understand.

“I want to touch you,” Oikawa musters up the courage to declare, speaking against Iwaizumi’s lips as the words break free from his chest.

He wheezes out a questioning gasp when Iwaizumi’s hand circles around his gold wristwatch, guiding his hands to an unmapped region until his palm comes in contact with the skin under Iwaizumi’s shirt, the plane of his backside far from flat. Instead, his muscular back is ridged and taut, some old scars here and there. Oikawa takes it as an invitation to caress the nakedness underneath, meekly at first, as if the inked tiger sprawled on his skin would bite him. He slips his other hand in as well, completely locking Iwaizumi in place in his grasp.

Iwaizumi withdraws from his lips, planting noisy kisses along the path until he reaches the pulse in
his neck.

“What do you want me to do?” he asks in a mindful tone.

Oikawa trembles, his words a challenge to his intrinsic timidity. He feels his throat close up and bites his bottom lip hard, wet and sore because of Iwaizumi. A quiet whine vibrates from his windpipe. He doesn’t know what to tell him, doesn’t know how to respond. Heat rolls up his body that hues his skin with bright red—

“D-Do this to me, too…” Oikawa whimpers in nervous huffs, fingers digging into Iwaizumi’s skin with fervor to let the other know what he’s referring to. His eyes clench shut from embarrassment.

Without delay, Iwaizumi complies, a devious breeze tickling his bare sides when his shirt is lifted up. Oikawa’s panting breath shivers into a moan when he feels a warm sensation on his spine. Iwaizumi keeps his hand slow and gentle, chafing his robust palms against the soft skin, above tender flushes, lulling Oikawa in a mellowed state.

Oikawa wonders if Iwaizumi can read the clawing depths of his desire. He closes his eyes shut, submitting himself to the flood of each other’s warmth - willing, loyal and lost in a dizzy spell. His legs that entrap Iwaizumi squeezes harder, ankles crossing behind him like a silent plea.

“I don’t have much of me left, but I want to give it all to you.”

It must’ve pushed some button in Iwaizumi’s brain, his touch replaced with a feral possessiveness.

Oikawa yelps at the teeth biting the side of his neck as Iwaizumi sucks on one patch of skin until it reddens into a faint but lovely bruise, his fading patience visible in the way his hands travel from the small of his back up to his shoulder blades, elbows dragging his shirt up halfway.

“We’re gonna end up bending the hood at this rate,” Iwaizumi tells him in half a growl, feeling like his poor Lexus wouldn’t be able to handle their weight. He kisses him behind the ear. “You done stargazing?”

For a while, Oikawa’s confused whether he’s talking about the actual stars in the sky or the galaxies he sees whenever he closes his eyes and feels Iwaizumi touch kindling the surface of his skin. Even in his dreamy trance, Oikawa’s half-lidded eyes scan the secluded area, which remains abandoned and incapacitated with the midnight darkness, their noises drowned out by the lashing waves far away.

“It’s—it’s hot…” he mumbles and nods as July’s vehemence makes his skin shimmer with sweat. Oikawa licks his lips, checking if it still has a trace of Iwaizumi on them before parting his wet lips to speak in heavy, uneven exhales. “Can we… go back inside?”

Iwaizumi agrees at the prospect of messing up his car a little too quickly.

His car has always been more spacious than a regular sedan, but two tall men only prove that it doesn’t offer much. With Oikawa’s back against the rear seats, Iwaizumi climbs on top and claims his lips with urgent need as the impatient sounds of groans and fabric chafing and limbs tangling heighten, their breaths resounding in double volume inside the intimate space. His mind clouds with an eagerness he doesn’t recognize. Oikawa’s heart speeds up, pushing blood to every part of his body, his skin blooming with a scandalous tint.

Out of breath, Oikawa pulls away for a second, hands cupping Iwaizumi’s face, legs around his hips.
“T-Take your shirt off...” he orders timidly, dazed and winded. He wants to see all of him, his inked skin, his body, wants to make sure it’s Iwaizumi he’s with, wants to make sure he’s real and that this isn’t a crazy hallucination.

Without a word, Iwaizumi props himself up with his arms and obliges, tossing his shirt to the side.

The ridged muscle of Iwaizumi’s chest is outlined by the electric blue-green of the car’s interior lights, the hand-poked ink staining his upper chest and toned arms a reflection of his resistance to physical pain. It’s exhilarating to think that the tattoos painted over his olive skin remain hidden from view to all except Oikawa. Iwaizumi dives back and plants another kiss over his collarbones, tugging on the hem of Oikawa’s shirt to beckon the other to do the same.

“W-Wait! I—I’ll do it,” Oikawa stutters. The sudden change of temperature balms his skin coated with summer and slows his thinking down into a cloud on a windless day.

Iwaizumi retreats obediently and raises his hands like he’s going to be arrested if he does anything else.

Oikawa sits up and practices his breathing exercises to shake some of his nervousness off. He decides to stall. “Can you turn off the lights?”

Iwaizumi stares at him for a second. “Yeah, sure, but it's going to be really dark.”

"That—That's okay."

He squeezes through the two front seats to reach a button on his dashboard. It rings a short chime and stills the car into complete darkness, the source of light reducing to the red button that indicates that the air-conditioning is on, providing a mild crimson flare all over their shadowed portraits whilst supplying their heated encounter with cold air.

Oikawa only then begins to undress, a tremble evident in his hands, shoulders in a tight square. With his fists gripping the edges of his shirt and his eyes squeezed shut, a crippling hesitation impairs his gesture, a streak of paranoia washing over—

“Hey.” Iwaizumi stops his hand from lifting his shirt up. “You’re sure this is okay?” he asks, able to read through him despite the obscurity. There’s a softness in his voice that Oikawa appreciates. “Don’t force yourself to do something you don’t want to do.”

Oikawa shakes his head almost desperately, the apple in his throat bobbing as he swallows hard. “If—If it’s Iwa-chan, I think I’m going to be okay.”

He doesn’t look too convinced. “You ‘think’?”

“Well, I wouldn’t know if I won’t try.”

Iwaizumi rests a hand on the back of Oikawa’s neck, the other on his hip. “I just—” he pauses, concern etched across his features. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Confusion furrows his brows as he asks innocently, “Isn’t it supposed to hurt?”

“What? No—” he breathes out, almost offended. “It’s supposed to feel good.”

Oikawa feels stupid. He really doesn’t have any idea how anything works and it's a wonder Iwaizumi is still able to keep up with him. Heeding Iwaizumi’s words, he keeps his shirt on and instead circles his arms around his neck to let Iwaizumi kiss his pout away.
Even then as his decision sets, he urges Iwaizumi to continue trailing the skin beneath his shirt and allows himself to be pulled closer. Oikawa submerges himself back in the other man’s gentle, quiet, and openly possessive adoration as Iwaizumi’s fingers quickly find their way into his hair, his mouth falling forward onto his.

Iwaizumi tastes like the single spearmint gum left in the pack - minty, sharp, desirable.

His careful hands brush over Oikawa’s skin, leaving a trail of heat as his palms trace over each scar, each cut, each flaw in his skin like they’re something beautiful. It’s like Iwaizumi had memorized them, remembered them, and for the first time Oikawa feels like he’s part of the paramount galaxy.

But it only takes a second before his thoughts start to shake - because suddenly Iwaizumi’s hands don’t feel like his, and in some arbitrary fractions of a second it feels like someone else’s. Oikawa drags in a deep breath through his nose to draw in Iwaizumi’s scent of thyme as a way to fight back the frailties of panic that’s beginning to take hold of his limbs. Something fogs his already blurring vision. He knows his mind is playing tricks on him, making him think that it’s not Iwaizumi. It’s him, it’s him, it’s—

His trauma functions like a merciful but mischievous extinguisher, putting out fires until it decides not to.

The absence of light delivers his thoughts to the closet bunker. It’s dark. Freezing. No light. No air. Just constant footsteps and muffled bass. How could there be so much misery in nothingness? The nights that had turned him into something lower and filthier than animal relapse into his reality, the damaged circuits in his brain reactivating an alarm system that wants to fight off aggressors who he’d forgotten are now merely ghosts.

Oikawa freezes, the wild sweep of his thoughts causing a dysfunction in his body.

“What’s wrong?” he hears Iwaizumi’s voice. It echoes in his ear - lovingly, at first; maliciously on the second. Why doesn’t it sound like him? Why does it sound like one of the many men who broke him down and built him up into a mere object? The ringing in his ears stagers him into paralysis - names, faces, they all came rushing through his brain. Torrents of depreciating words. Mean hands worming around his neck like a noose. He feels the pain of every cigarette pushed into his skin, every little cut, every carve, every single pain that had cheapened his worth.

Oikawa’s hand slips away from Iwaizumi’s skin, now over his chest to push him away.

“Stop, stop—!” he pleads with a loud tremor in his voice. Oikawa shoves the other man away, stronger this time, and scurries back in fear like he’d just encountered a wild beast.

Iwaizumi does just that and breaks off, kneeling into the opposite side of the back seats in urgency. His ears fail to register his frantic voice. “What—What happened? Are you alright?”

Oikawa smoothes his vomit and puts his arms up like a shield, folding himself in half on the farthest corner. Oikawa grits his teeth and he forces himself to think that he’s no longer at the mercy of his aggressors. The back of his eyes hurt as tears pool in his vision. It doesn’t stop and it feels like rain pouring, the self-worth he had so carefully planted withering in seconds.

The lights and the glow strips on the car ceiling are back on when he flutters his eyes open, and he sees Iwaizumi’s face with clarity, shame and worry blending together all over his expression, like he wants to apologize and pull him close but couldn’t bear to set off any more of his nightmares. Oikawa huffs out a sob as he hurries to wipe the tears from his face. The pair of hazel-green
“Iwa-chan...” Oikawa sobs with wide eyes and reaches for him. “I’m sorry...! I’m—” he chokes in between blubbers. He’s welcomed back into an embrace that he feels he doesn’t deserve, strong arms shrouding around him with comfort, the warmth of his bare chest appeasing his sullen spirit.

Oikawa clings to Iwaizumi like a lifeline and presses his tear-stained face into his shoulder. He apologizes again, even though Iwaizumi keeps telling him that there’s really no need for it and that he should be the one apologizing. Oikawa reels back a little to rub the salt burning his eyes. His nose clogs when he tries to steady his breathing, his whimpers subsiding as he can only breathe through his mouth.

Iwaizumi presses a hand along the line of jaw and leans in, planting a kiss on the corner of his eye where a tear still dwells, and all Oikawa can do is wrap his arms around him and hold on punishingly tight.

☆ ☆ ☆

The coastal town of Katsuura doesn’t offer much at this hour.

It’s a miracle that Iwaizumi’s able to find a hotel nearby that accepts walk-ins. Their lodging for the night isn’t too extravagant, but isn’t too inhabitable either. The multistory building sits atop a sea wall, steep steps leading to the shore. It appears like a frankenstein of old wood and cement, the front bearing a teahouse-like entrance with wooden construction and subdued colors, then gradually transforms into a low-rise urban dwelling towards the back. It nestles within a sparse cluster of renovated Edo period houses, the abundance of heavy timbers and cypress an obvious indication of the town’s age.

Oikawa looks at himself in the bathroom mirror. The round edges cut the other parts of his body, his head and bust the only thing he can see. Hands on the sink, his reflection stares back at him, pale and dejected from self-blame, honey-brown hair flat from the warm shower that it’s covering his entire forehead. His skin doesn’t look like his skin when he first met Iwaizumi. Leaning closer, Oikawa stares at the trail of hydrangeas Iwaizumi had left on his neck, a blush rising up to his cheeks. His eyes crane up to check a previous injury on his brow bone, now unnoticeable, his skin growing over the injury the way a young tree grows around its past wounds.

His harrowing memories take away a lot of things, and Oikawa didn’t quite expect them to cripple him in more ways than a physical injury could. He feels like it shouldn’t cut him as deeply as it used to, and it’s ridiculous to think how something as simple as a touch, even months after it happened, can trigger a painful thought. While his night terrors have substantially lessened, his body still resigns itself into a state where escape doesn’t exist, an emotional typhoon destroying the foundations of his recovery.

He inhales the fragrant steam from his shower, a sigh escaping from his lips as his airways clear up. Oikawa covers himself with a bathrobe before brushing his teeth with a disposable toothbrush and blow-drying his hair until it’s only slightly damp. He wishes that he had packed some extra clothes, but he didn’t really expect Iwaizumi to drive him out to a city two hours away from Tokyo.

The room is empty when Oikawa gets out of the bath.
Not surprisingly, the hotel only accepts cash, which Iwaizumi didn’t have on hand, too used to paying with his card back in Roppongi. They’re lucky that the old lady in the counter, awake and bubbly even in the dead of the night, gave them a room while Iwaizumi heads to the single ATM machine near the community center.

Looking around, the suite is nondescript and fits Oikawa’s expectations for a rural lodge. It has an outdated television that would’ve been in fashion a decade ago, an old window-type air-conditioning unit jammed into the wall that’s painted in off-white, complemented by floors of vinyl linoleum imitating hardwood. There’s a balcony that overlooks the ocean, but the absence of street lamps or any light source outside makes it pointless in the night. The queen-size bed that hogs most of the space is comfortable enough, the sheets a little too thin for his taste.

There’s a bell-shaped bedside lamp that spills a washed-out orange glow along the edges of the simplistic furniture, the rest trading its vibrancy for twilight blue. Oikawa checks if there are other light fixtures on the ceiling but finds none. The dusky room gets unsettling the more he’s exposed to it, hoping it would lighten up in the morning.

He sits on the edge of the bed, places his watch on the bedside table, and waits until the door creaks.

Iwaizumi comes in with weary shoulders and tan skin stained with sweat. “Hey, so I don’t see any shops open. I’ll get us some clothes in the morning,” he tells him, taking his jacket off immediately. The lady downstairs might’ve rejected them if she saw his tattoos, so wearing it despite the humidity was a good call. His expression softens when he turns at his freshly showered figure. “Feeling better?”

Oikawa nods and musters up a small smile to pacify Iwaizumi’s worries. “Yeah,” he mutters. “You should shower and cool down.”

“Good idea.”

The calm air is stirred by the spray of Iwaizumi’s shower, still loud despite being stifled by the wooden door. Oikawa stands up to decidedly take his robe off and slip his naked body under the covers. The rustic linen chafes his skin comfortably, although it doesn’t offer much warmth, his body looking for a specific heat supply. His lips part around a nervous breath. He doesn’t know if this would work, but he hasn’t really been able to orchestrate a treatment to get his body and mind working together.

Iwaizumi then emerges from the bathroom, a towel around his waist. He sits on the bedside while he dries his hair with a hand towel. Oikawa stares up to see a wall of muscle, watching the crooks of his back flex and contort every time he moves. He curls up beneath the sheets, clenching the insides with his fist. His damp hair wets the pillow. “I’m sorry,” he says again because he feels like he hasn’t said it enough.

“Didn’t I tell you not to worry about it?” Iwaizumi snaps back, his voice gradually lowering with remorse. “It’s not your fault. I—I should’ve been more careful.”

Oikawa believes him. He believes anything he says. It wasn't his fault, nor was it Iwaizumi’s, but his subconsciousness wouldn't let these positive thoughts linger for too long. It's hard to shake off the feeling that everything that happened to him was his own doing. That he got mixed up with fucked up people who kept him in a cage like an animal that’s beaten and abused until it’s terrified enough to jump through flaming hoops. That he made bad decisions he couldn't remember doing. That he wouldn't end up in a shithole if he didn't blindly walk into it.
“I feel like… I lost a lot of myself,” he confesses, the words springing out naturally. Iwaizumi stops and twists his body around to meet his eyes. “I keep dreaming about the past, and I don’t even know if it happened or not. I can’t even trust the things in my head.” His chest pounds faster, a choked cry threatening to stumble out. “I can only remember other people's names... Cheung, Kozlov, Jirou, Shiraishi, Chou, Izawa, Kang, Hashimoto—”

“Oikawa, you don’t have to—”

“I remember their names and their faces so clearly,” Oikawa repeats. His face twists into desperation and misery, tears falling sideways until it spills onto his pillow. His voice breaks. “But I can’t even remember who I am.” He chokes back another wave of tears with a pitiful laugh. “I must’ve memorized them by accident. I’ve always told myself I’d kill them all if I escape. I never did. I don’t think I ever could.”

Iwaizumi doesn’t drum up a response and gives him space to talk. His dark green eyes soften, mouth pressing tightly into a thin frown. But there isn’t any pity or repulsion in his expression. Instead, he finds a streak of understanding in his features, something Oikawa appreciates.

All of the rage and agony and pain he’d accumulated from those nights when he was crammed together with women who suffered the same fate, some even worse, boils up like acid in his gut. Most of the people whose heavy words brought him down are gone now, but it should’ve meant something to him - should’ve helped get the weight off his shoulders. It disgusts him that so much of his existence is bound to his oppressors, but exposing his fears and his trauma to Iwaizumi, the man he trusts more than anyone, the man who raised him from the dead, is a refreshing feeling.

The chaotic pitter-patter in his chest slows down when he breathes out a shaky sigh.

Iwaizumi shifts from his seat so he can prop a straight arm on the other side of Oikawa’s coiled figure, trapping him under his wing. Oikawa blinks at the shadow that brews over, his tear-laden lashes fluttering up to see a dangerous expression.

“I’ll make you forget all of them.”

Iwaizumi’s deep voice bears a spine-chilling warning, but a promise altogether.

“I’ll line the streets with their bodies if I have to.”

His breath hitches in his throat, brown eyes wide as Iwaizumi lays each word with an inviolable lethality. He swallows a knot in his throat. It isn’t fear that stills him, it’s knowing that if Oikawa would ever demand vengeance, Iwaizumi would not hesitate to paint the streets blood-red.

“Can I?” Iwaizumi asks.

He always asks.

Oikawa fastens his hands on the other’s shoulders and hoists himself up to close the gap between them, sealing his mouth over Iwaizumi’s as his answer. His pale fingers move to trace over his jaw as Iwaizumi closes a rough hand over his nape. It makes his hairs stand on end like electricity. Within the rustle of the sheets and the sound of their wet lips grazing, Iwaizumi takes him like a vitamin, his palm finding itself under the blanket to trace over Oikawa’s skin—

A surprised groan breaks their kiss.

“You—” he stops and leans back, hazel eyes expanding when the thin sheets suggestively slither down the creaminess of Oikawa’s arms. His gaze averts to the bathrobe neglected on the vanity
then back to the younger man. Realization washes over his face. “—don’t have any clothes on.”

Oikawa only blinks back and shrugs. “I don’t have anything else to wear.”

“Wear the bathrobe.”

“No, no,” he says encouragingly. “It’s fine.”

He cups the Iwaizumi’s face, his bony fingers sprawling across his cheeks as Oikawa pulls him down. The back of his head hits the pillow in a soft slop, and Iwaizumi pins his elbows on both sides of Oikawa’s head to keep himself from accidentally bumping their foreheads. Oikawa lets out a soft laugh, a smile laying waste to Iwaizumi’s shields.

“Can we sleep like this?” he asks as garden cosmos bloom against his skin. Oikawa had hoped for a little bit of enthusiasm, but even with his innocent request, Iwaizumi still looks uncertain. “We don’t have to do anything else.”

“Only if you’re okay with it.” Iwaizumi hesitates, brows pinched together with worry. There’s a tiniest hint of a stutter in his voice. “Are you sure you’re—“

“I’m sure,” he cuts off, a glimmer of a smile curving his kiss-swollen lips. “I promise.”

Iwaizumi is only reluctant for a second before complying with immediacy, towel still tied around his waist when he dims the table lamp and slips under the soft fabric, eyes darting everywhere else except at Oikawa’s naked body. The mattress squeaks under their weight. Completely covered, Iwaizumi wraps an arm around his waist, the other acting as a pillow for Oikawa’s head. The skin-to-skin contact is a comforting inferno torching through him. His body and soul vulnerable, his flushed skintone tingle with deep layers of contentment as Iwaizumi embraces him with an almost bruising strength.

Oikawa nestles against his chest until he can hear his heartbeat. It’s pounding fast. He wonders if Iwaizumi is just as nervous as he is. Drawing in another breath, Oikawa inhales the other’s scent, his usual musk of coriander seeds and sage replaced by an overpowering menthol of anti-dandruff hotel shampoo. He feels Iwaizumi bury his nose on top of his head, which probably had the same smell, his embrace tightening.

He smiles, sleepy and warm, hoping his bareness against the only person he willingly surrenders to would recalibrate his mind’s alarm system. Sensing Iwaizumi’s body relaxing next to him, he mirrors his hushed breaths and falls into the summons of sleep.

☆ ☆ ☆

The six o’clock sun is kind and lukewarm. It sunders the rifts between the curtains with chaste coral rays, its hazy patterns painting the room with imperfect streaks. Iwaizumi isn’t awakened by the first light, but rather by the birds singing, something he hasn’t heard in a while. The distant rural bustle outside alerts him. It goes along by the sound of waves breaking as it reaches the shallow coastline.

A few, lazy seconds after, his mind finally registers where he is and dares to crack his eyes open.

His surroundings appear in blotches of pink and orange until his vision refocuses. Iwaizumi wakes
up refreshed, well-rested, which becomes less and less peculiar the more he’s able to increase the hours of his sleep. What’s unusual is the drought of softness next to him, his adjacent space deserted and cold. Iwaizumi’s gaze flicks to where Oikawa should’ve been as wretched panic overwhelms him.

“Oikawa?” He jolts up in fright. The vacuous room induces a sudden spike in his heart rate as his eyes look around in frantic motion, color draining from his face. Iwaizumi stumbles to his feet, the floor below him thundering with steps heavy from terror. He bursts open the bathroom door. Empty. Thousands of scenarios whirl in his brain in a violent maelstrom. His heart hammers in his chest. With a towel still sloppily tied around his hip, Iwaizumi marches back, head spinning at every corner as he rushes to the balcony—

Sweet cinnamon, wild and moon-like, looks back at him.

“Iwa-chan,” the young man clad in a bathrobe chirps, a happy tone nestling in his voice as he twirls away from the cedar-steel railings. “Good mo—"

Iwaizumi lunges forward, tugging Oikawa by the arm and pulls him into a desperate embrace. The other stiffens at first, eyes wide and stunned. The warmth of Oikawa’s breath and the cool early morning dew staggers his senses. His pulse doesn’t match his, and Oikawa calms it hooking his hands and arms across Iwaizumi’s back.

“Were you scared that I left?” Oikawa jokes, a soft laugh ushering after.

He stays silent, because for the first time in years, he felt raw, visceral fear. He was scared. Some bastard could’ve taken him, could’ve plotted to harm him, could’ve arranged his death while he was asleep. He thinks of the things they’d do and things they’ve already done, a fury reigniting inside him as he dreams up ways to torture whoever would dare try to take Oikawa away from him.

The arms around Oikawa girdles tighter.

“I was,” he admits. With his heart in his throat, Iwaizumi forgets about the breath he’s been holding. An air escapes him in a timorous stream. “It fucking terrifies me what I would do for you.”

Oikawa rubs his back in soothing circles. “I’m scared, too,” he echoes, leveling kindly into his spectrum of emotions. “Whenever you leave, I can’t help but think something bad might happen, and that I’d have to live the rest of my life without you.” His voice breaks into a whimper as he nestles into Iwaizumi’s neck. “Next thing I know, you’re gone and it’s too late to do anything about it.”

They stay in each other’s arms for a while, letting the tides of their sentiments soothe the strain in their hearts. Iwaizumi rests his chin on Oikawa’s shoulders, and only then he’s able to notice the scene behind them.

The intense blue of the ocean pervades his vision, the rising and falling of the waves cradling the air with a steadfast song, the tangerine sky bringing in sweetness along the shore as it shines a new day into his eyes. When Oikawa departs from his protector, a peach blush tints his cheeks, the mellow rays of the morning kissing his skin in a delightful sunrise.

Hands, warm with an amber glow, brush away from his back until it chafes across his bare chest, ultimately reaching the sides of Iwaizumi’s face in a delicate touch.

“Can we stay here for one more night?”
Iwaizumi submits to his sovereign and nods.

“By all means.”

Chapter End Notes

god when did this turn into sappy romcom shit sorry to everyone who came here for gratuitous violence (pensive cowboy emoji)
also my writing style is so different now i dont know if thats a good thing or not
1 like = 1 prayer so i can update faster
thanks for amazing super awesome comments last chapter sorry if im not able to reply to all of yalls ;;u;; thanks whoever’s still reading this i know 50% of u are gone but i completely understand lol

LINKS

Playlists:
1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 (new!)

Twitter & Tumblr

Related artwork

my art
thanks to everyone who drew my fic!! please check out their works!!
@olaus_ @artPMVP @aoiaoimm(2)

meta

Works inspired by this: collision course by Anonymous

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!