Heartbreak Cure

Summary

Yuri Nakamura makes a rash decision in trying to mend a broken heart. Just as Rumpelstiltskin warned her, the consequences are extreme. / Meanwhile, Otonashi, Hinata, and Kanade try to reunite the Battlefront.

Battlefront reunion fic. Naoi/Yuri pairing plus others, random and canon, and multiple friendships.

Notes

It really is time I stopped hoarding this thing. I wanted to hold onto it until it was finished -- and it most certainly isn't! It's barely reached the middle! -- but I just organized the whole thing into chapters and gave it preview teasers and now I'm feeling inspired and productive. So here it is! With a happy little prologue to get the ball rolling.
On a mild September evening that was anything but quiet, a young couple strolled down a dirt road underneath the light of a full silver moon.

Well, Yuri strolled. A more appropriate verb for the man beside her would be “trudged.” Or even “sulked.”

The leaves on the trees rustled and fought against the wind, and the cicadas screamed endlessly from within the woods, but they certainly weren’t the main source of noise in these parts tonight.

“I still can’t believe… Of course this had to happen tonight of all nights.”

Yuri laughed. “Could be worse. The car could have gone bust closer to the restaurant. Or it could have died before we even got there. At least we had dinner.”

“And now we have to walk home on full stomachs,” her husband muttered, clutching the leftovers bag in his hand.

“Exactly! Gives me the chance to shed off the calories from that cake,” she said with a grin. “It’s almost serendipitous.”

She heard him chuckle for the first time in thirteen minutes, an amused little harrumph that sounded cool and distant to those who didn’t know better but musical to her. “How can you be so cheerful?” he asked, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye as they kept their steady pace side by side.

He’d been grumbling since the car broke down and they’d started to walk, but not a word of complaint had escaped Yuri’s lips, save for maybe one or two cracks about the car. And even then, those were all in good fun.

It wasn’t like it was cold out. It was one of those pleasant September nights where it might not feel like summer anymore but it was at that temperature where the season had reached a comfortable, sensible middle ground. And maybe the owls hooting in the distance might be kind of eerie, but it wasn’t like she was all alone.

She hadn’t been alone for a long time.

“Are you really asking me that?” She took his hand in hers and gave it a quick, gentle squeeze, but didn’t let go. “I’m cheerful because despite the inevitable demise of your car, I had a good time tonight. I’m cheerful because you took me to the spot where you proposed to me, and then to my favorite restaurant.” Her fingers laced between his, she stopped where she was and had him turn to face her. “I’m cheerful because I’ve been married to you for three years today.”

He dropped the leftovers bag on the side of the road and, using his newly freed hand, cupped her chin and pulled her into a kiss. His lips, having lost any trace of a frown, pressed against the corners of her mouth before claiming it again with vigor. Yuri sighed, resting her hand against the one of his that grazed her cheek while the other tangled its way into her hair.

When he pulled away, his gaze formerly fixated on her lips drifted upwards so that gold met green. “I love you. You unbearable optimist.”
“I love you too,” she said, deciding not to correct him on the optimism thing—it hardly counted as 
optimism if the pros of the day blatantly outweighed the cons, “and no amount of car trouble is going 
to change that. A little walk isn’t the most unromantic thing in the world.”

He picked up the leftover bag and followed his wife as she continued down the road, quietly 
admiring her from behind. Her slim-fitting purple gown flowed down to her feet and had to be 
meshing and mingling with the ground.

“But your dress…” He frowned as gravel and dirt crunched under their shoes. “It’s going to get 
dirty.”

“So maybe when we get home, you take it off me.”

Her comment made him blink, considering her words for a moment, before it turned into an incentive 
for him to walk faster.

“Well,” he said, smirking as he laced his arm around her waist, “now I really wish we had the car.”

She quirked an eyebrow at him, returning the grin. “To get home faster or to do it in?”

A look of surprise again took over his face, but he recovered with a chuckling scoff. “I love the way 
your mind works.”

Under a periwinkle and navy sky, the last trickle of light fading on the horizon, Yuri interlaced their 
fingers and pulled him along down the path, a coy smile tugging at her lips.

“C’mon,” she said, as the path led them around a bend, “we’re almost home anyway.”

Her husband grinned wolfishly. “And then we can celebrate three years of making you Mrs. Yuri 
Naoi properly.”

She unconsciously grazed the gold wedding band around her left ring finger. He ought to give 
himself a little more credit. “Properly” had been brewing coffee for her and making breakfast this 
morning. “Properly” had been exchanging anniversary gifts at the bridge where he’d proposed —an 
improved, engraved version of the watch he’d lost, and a beautiful locket encrusted with the same 
stones as her engagement ring. “Properly” had been eating at the restaurant they’d gone to for their 
first official date (or at least, the first one that his dad hadn’t rudely interrupted by dragging him back 
to the workshop).

Sighing contentedly, she leaned against his shoulder as they walked. Just a little farther, but she 
didn’t mind spending this time with him. She didn’t regret any part of tonight.

“Happy anniversary, Ayato,” she mumbled.

He wrapped his arm more securely around her frame, while every other part of him seemed to finally 
relax. “Happy anniversary, Yuri.”

Their neighborhood was in sight; like Yuri said, they’d been incredibly lucky their car had broken 
down closer to home than the restaurant. In the morning they’d get someone to fetch it and work on 
it. Tonight, their minds would be elsewhere—Yuri would make sure of that. All that mattered tonight 
was him and her.
All that mattered was that seven minutes later, she was laughing in his arms, having been picked up bridal style for old time’s sake, as he kicked the front door shut behind them.

“Just so you know,” Yuri murmured as they headed to the stairs, and he paused on the first step to look at her, “I wouldn’t change this night, or anything else, for the world.”

Shifting her weight in his arms, Ayato pressed a kiss to her temple.

“Neither would I,” he said, and carried her the rest of the way to their room.

That dress had gotten a little dirty, after all.

---

**Preview:**

“*Saint. God. Whatever you want to call me.*”

“Well, I’m not pregnant yet, so…”

“We could try again now.”

“You have work too, you know.”

“Tonight you’re mine, Nakamura.”

“Have you ever heard of Masami Iwasawa?”

“Why don’t you give that extra ticket to Sunohara?”

“I don’t know about that!”

[Chapter 01]: **Invitation.**
Yuri never understood her predilection for Key coffee—where it came from, why it had such a familiar taste—but she never questioned it. And she sure as hell would never question waking up to the smell of it in the morning.

“You are a saint,” she sighed as she sat down at the table and a steaming mug of it was placed in front of her.

“Saint. God. Whatever you want to call me.” Ayato looked pleased as he sat down with his own cup—of tea, actually, he’d never been a coffee person. “I figured you’d need it.”

He knew as well as she did that caffeine was necessary when it came to her work schedule. Or functioning in general at seven in the morning. She’d need that bubbly coffee-induced personality to deal with impatient customers—especially the phone call ones she couldn’t hang up on.

“Besides,” he said with a light smile, warming his hands around the tea mug, “you should enjoy it while you can.”

Yuri harrumphed. “Hey—you know, I’ve looked into it, and it would be okay for me to have coffee in moderation.” She took a hearty sip for good measure.

It’d been a little over two weeks since their anniversary, and despite what they’d told each other that night, there had been talk since then. Talk of change. Except, more like growth.

“Is that true for everyone?” Ayato asked, pensive concern creasing his forehead. “It would be your first, so we don’t want to take any chances…”

“Well, I’m not pregnant yet, so…” Another gulp, this time maintaining dominant eye contact.

Ayato merely laughed into his mug and tilted his head at her. “You sure about that?”

His smugness made her snort, but she’d found his eagerness as of late kind of adorable. She suspected it stemmed from a deep-seated desire to excel at a field his father never could. Earlier on in their marriage, he’d shied away from the subject since he worried his dad’s parenting skills might have rubbed off on him. His sudden change of heart suggested that something must have given him a new confidence.

“I’ll take a test later tonight,” she promised, getting to her feet and lifting his chin with a finger to plant a kiss on his lips. He stood up as well to continue the contact. “And if it’s negative… well, that just means we’ll have to try again.”

“Or we could try again now.”

Yuri laughed; he hadn’t even missed a beat. “Tempting, but I’m going to be late.”

“Yes, that is the goal.” Ayato nipped playfully at her jawline, then her throat.

“Aren’t you the clever one this morning?” The affectionate one too, not that she was complaining. “You have work too, you know.” He started to grumble in protest, but she silenced him with her lips. “I’ll see you tonight.”

Fortunately for him, he’d quit working with his father in the pottery business not long after they
started dating. Just before they got engaged, he’d distanced himself even more from his father by moving to Mizuzaka. His job here was more enjoyable, and his boss was appreciably less abusive, so it didn’t pain him as much to give in and let go.

Besides, they’d had the same problem yesterday—and Yuri had had to remind him that if he got himself fired then they wouldn’t be able to afford a kid.

“Fine,” he said, toying with the locket around her neck. The smirk on his face matched the predatory gleam in his eye. “But tonight you’re mine, Nakamura.”

On any other day she might’ve playfully corrected him with her married name—but she was running late so she gave him a coy little grin to rival his. “Looking forward to it.”

And then she was out the door, the promise of a date and an unspoken “I love you” still on her lips.

It couldn’t wait until later tonight. Turned out she was admittedly just as eager as Ayato when it came to this.

She had the test with her in her purse. It was her lunch break, so she figured what the hell. Taking a deep breath, she fished it out and made her way towards the restroom.

“Yuri!”

A flash of lavender intercepted her in the breakroom, and Yuri had to hide a wince as well as her test. Ryou Fujibayashi was a sweet girl, but as an introvert, if you had one long conversation with her and made her feel welcome, she’d trust you with everything forever.

“Yeah, Ryou—?” Yuri started, hiding both hands behind her back.

“Um, have you ever heard of Masami Iwasawa?” Ryou burst out, wide-eyed and wringing her hands as if sharing a deep secret of the universe.

The name rang a few bells, no doubt about it. Maybe Ryou had brought it up before in one of her fangirlish ramblings. “The name sounds familiar,” Yuri admitted. “Is she famous or something?”

“She’s on her way!” said Ryou, beaming with pride. “My friend Nagisa knows her from the restaurant they both used to work at. She’s a singer, songwriter, and guitar-player. She’s so talented —!”

“Cool, so should I look up one of her songs…” Yuri asked, scratching her head with her free hand.

“That’s just it!” Ryou cried, and Yuri made a mental note to ask her what brand of coffee she was drinking, because somehow it contained twelve times more caffeine than Key coffee. “She’s finally doing a big concert tonight; if you want to go see her, I’ve got an extra ticket!”

This girl spoke fluently in exclamation marks but Yuri couldn’t help but feel a rush of appreciation for her generous little heart.

“I’d really love to, Ryou,” she said honestly, “but I have plans with Ayato tonight.”

“Oh, I under—” The other girl paused, giving her that infamous doe-eyed head-tilt. “Wait, Yuri, what are you hiding behind your back?”

In a moment of boldness, she grasped Yuri’s arms and brought them to the front. Her already
abnormally-sized eyes bulged in realization when she recognized the object in her coworker’s hand.

“Oh!” Ryou gasped. “Oh my gosh, congratula--”

Yuri quickly grabbed Ryou, pulling her in by her elbows, and clamped a hand over her mouth. “Shh!” she hissed, while Ryou squeaked feebly through her hand. “I haven’t taken it yet. There’s nothing to congratulate. Keep it down, okay? Just between us.”

When Ryou nodded, Yuri released her, and both girls relaxed.

“Well, like I was saying, I understand,” Ryou said with a warm smile. “I understand even better now. You have fun with Ayato—” Yuri wasn’t sure if the girl realized the innuendo there, “—and you can still catch Iwasawa on TV tonight if you want.”

“Thanks, Ryou.” In truth, she kind of reminded Yuri of her little sister. There was just something sweet and childlike about her. Even the bubbly excitement wasn’t so bad once she got used to it. Yuri grinned as a thought occurred to her. “Hey, why don’t you give that extra ticket to Sunohara? Have you tried asking him yet?”

“Youhei…?” For a moment, Yuri thought Ryou was actually going to go silent as she processed this, but then the girl turned full-on crimson and squeaked again. “I—I don’t know! I don’t know about that!” Yuri tapped her foot expectantly, which made Ryou tense up and flush again. “But what if it sounds too much like a date?”

“Then if Sunohara is the same guy who came here on Valentine’s Day to see you, I’m sure he’ll be thrilled,” Yuri said dryly.

Ryou yelped and covered her face in her hands. Rolling her eyes, Yuri covered up an amused snort. Her coworker was twenty-something and still acted like a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl.

“Hey,” Yuri said, in an attempt to distract her in a moment of mercy, “Ryou, you want to go to lunch?”

Ryou looked surprised at her—and then elated.

“Sure!” she said. Then her royal blue eyes flicked to Yuri’s hands again. “But what about the--”

“I’ll take it when I get home,” Yuri assured her. Besides, that way, Ayato would be the first to know.

They linked arms and headed out the door into an overcast afternoon, Ryou chattering excitedly about her plans for the concert tonight all the way to the sushi place down the block.

In all fairness, this Iwasawa girl sounded pretty cool.

---

**Preview:**

“THANK YOU! Thankyouthankyouthankyou!”

“Have you taken the test yet?”

“Hey, our first kiss was in the rain.”

“You’re worth waiting for.”

“Looks like we caught her between songs.”
“Are we really going to stop in the middle of this for—?”

[Chapter 02]: **Memories.**
Their discussion of Masami Iwasawa, music, rain, and even the infamous Youhei Sunohara had managed to keep Yuri's mind occupied for a couple of hours. She was tempted to look up some of the girl's songs on YouTube, but she didn't want to make a habit of leisurely using the Internet on the clock—lest her boss come to the wrong place at the wrong time.

Maybe she would watch the concert tonight. She'd heard Ryou's taste in music before and it wasn't bad, plus Iwasawa had an interesting backstory. Might as well root for the underdog.

Traffic sucked, so she was distracted by that for a while. Ayato hated to be in the same car with her when they were stuck in traffic—apparently her road rage was "monstrous." As it was, it took her half an hour longer to get home.

It was only when she was heading up the front walkway, digging through her purse for her house keys, that she remembered the pregnancy test. She fingered the stick thoughtfully, then released a breath and unlocked the front door. No sign of Ayato—he must have gotten stuck in traffic himself. She'd make dinner and take the test in the meantime, so she'd have something to surprise him with either way.

She started dinner, but on the way to the bathroom, the phone rang. Intercepted again.

"Hello-?"

"THANK YOU!" Yuri had to rip her ear away from the receiver before it blew her eardrums out. "Thankyouthankyouthankyou-!"

She stared at the phone in bewilderment. "Who the hell is this?! And why are you thanking me?" It sounded a little like Ayato on helium.

"Because you're trying to get knocked up," said the male voice, and she could practically hear the shit-eating grin on the other end, "I'm at a concert on a date with a really cute girl! Thanks for taking one for the team!"

"Youhei!" squealed a voice in the background. "It's not like that! Please give me back my phone!"

Yuri rolled her eyes, but grinned. "No problem, Sunohara. Just behave yourself, alright? I have to work with this girl. I don't want to get in trouble for being the one to suggest she take you."

"Hey, I'm extremely well-behaved!"

"Really? Because from what I remember of you on Valentine's Day—"

Sunohara gasped indignantly. "That was an accident! The balloon got attached to her skirt on its own; I had nothing to do with it!"
Geez, this guy yelped just like Ryou. Yuri hummed in vague acknowledgment.

"Anymore..." Sunohara cleared his throat. "I totally owe you one. Thanks for being too busy trying to get busy—"

"Youhei!" There was scuffling in the background, the sound of the cell phone being wrestled out of Sunohara's hands, and snickering as Ryou huffed and put the phone to her ear. "Sorry about that, Yuri," she said sheepishly. Then, in a quieter voice, "have you taken the test yet?"

"Not yet," Yuri answered. "I was just about to."

Ryou let out a sharp breath. "Oh my gosh, sorry to interrupt then!" she said, as if she'd committed some sort of crime. "You go right ahead. The concert's going to start soon anyway."

Yuri smiled. "You and Youhei have fun, then. I'll tell you the results when we get back to work on Monday, okay?"

"Okay!"

"And who knows, maybe tonight we'll both get laid," Yuri threw in lightly before hanging up.

"What?! Yuri-!"

She was going to pay for that little crack next week. Or not; Ryou tended to be a forgiving if not forgetful girl (by Monday she'd be chattering to Yuri about fortunes and magic again, no harm done). If only Sunohara had heard that one!

With nothing else to distract her now, Yuri's gaze returned to the stick in her hand. No more putting it off. She huffed at it, then slipped into the bathroom.

It was the type that took five minutes. Five whole minutes. As if she even had the patience for five seconds. She set a timer on her phone and sat down on the sink counter.

"Five minutes is a long time when you're waiting," she muttered, then frowned to herself. 

Not that déjá vu was entirely uncommon in her life; on the contrary, she kind of learned to expect it at this point. But that was a whole other story.

She drummed her fingers on the counter, the wall, the mirror. She could literally hear the analog clock in the kitchen ticking along, marking each slow second.

The concert was over. Humans had gone extinct. If she was pregnant she would have had the baby by now.

Two minutes had passed. Time was a fucking illusion.

She breathed in and out, trying to calm down. Why should she be so anxious? Not only was their baby going to be planned, but it was going to be born out of love, right? Not a lot of people were so lucky.

Yuri managed a smile at the thought, and her fingers traced the jewels on the locket around her neck. Emerald and amethyst. A winning combination, if she did say so herself. Ayato had always had good taste (he'd married her, hadn't he?).

Everything about them had always been a winning combination—save for when they first met, when
his pottery vase shards combined with her fingers and equaled blood everywhere. But at least when he saw the blood he'd been kind enough to stop yelling at her for being clumsy and wrap her hand in gauze. From then on, they'd clicked. It wasn't just the familiar feel of him (her mom had once joked that maybe they'd met "once upon a dream"), it was the crackling chemistry mixed with comfort. As if being with him was like being wrapped in an electric blanket… ugh, her sister Ajisai had always been better at analogies.

She just… couldn't imagine having a family with anyone else.

Briiiiiiiiiiiii-

"Shit!"

Yuri launched herself off the counter, holding a hand to her heart. The phone alarm. Right. For the test.

She picked up the plastic stick, bracing herself for the worst and the best, then squinted down at the little window. At the colored mark staring right back up at her.

Negative. It was negative.

How anticlimactic.

Yuri shook the stick, for no other reason than that it made her feel better. It wasn't like it was a damn Etch-A-Sketch, the negative wouldn't change or go away. And how accurate were these things, anyway?

Shrugging, she tossed the test into the trash. She hadn't really expected results two weeks after they started trying. It was just that, after all the hype, she was getting fonder of the idea of having a physical reminder of their love.

But maybe that sounded a little cheesy…

She wasn't sure how long she'd been in there, but from inside the bathroom, she heard the shuffle of footsteps outside the front door, and a pause before the click of a doorknob turning. And then she remembered the plus side of a negative. A grin trickling across her face, she slipped out the door and into the hall.

Ayato opened the front door and stepped inside. He eased out of his shoes, and would have shrugged off his coat—if Yuri hadn't gotten to him first. He supposed he should have recognized that determined gleam in her eye in the split second he'd seen her standing at the other end of the entry hall, but then she'd rushed at him before the first syllable of her name could roll off his tongue. The second syllable was swallowed up, fading like a distant memory because now his lips only knew Yuri's. Her hands grazed his cheeks before sliding down to his shoulders and pushing off his coat. Once they both heard it fall lifelessly to the floor, Yuri pressed closer against his chest, clutching onto his arms as she nipped more purposefully at his mouth.

Ayato pulled away for breath, and something else—a question twinkling in his eye. "Are you…?"

"No." She laid her lips on his cheek, the corner of his mouth, his jawline. "No. That's where you come in."

"Well, as glad as I am to be of service," he murmured against her neck, nibbling at her skin and enjoying the contented noises she made, "you're making dinner—"
"Let it burn—"

"—and in the meantime I'm going to check the weather," he finished.

Yuri whined when he pulled away one last time, and rolled her eyes. The food was almost done, anyway, and the weather should be on in a couple of minutes, so it shouldn't take too long. But still. "Storm addict."

"Hey, our first kiss was in the rain," Ayato defended himself, leaning down to turn on the television. "Imagine if our first child was conceived during a storm."

Yuri mulled over the possible storm innuendos in her head, before deciding there were too many and waving it off. "Fine, whatever." He arched an eyebrow at her, but she gave him a reassuring smile. "You're worth waiting for."

She knew he was watching her from behind as she sashayed into the kitchen. That was the goal.

The TV room was just outside the kitchen, with a window right above the television so that a person on the couch could have a clear view of the chef, just as the chef could hear the TV while they cooked. As Yuri finished up on the dumplings and rice, the weatherperson was raving about a good thunderstorm that had been brewing all day. No wonder the clouds in the overcast sky hadn't rained on her and Ryou's heads when they went out to lunch. They were lying in wait.

Well, lucky for Ayato. Storms meant a lot to him. He hadn't mentioned it, but it didn't just rain the first time they kissed. It had stormed the first time they almost did. She remembered it vividly. Lightning had cracked and rippled over their heads, providing an eerily perfect ambiance as Yuri snarled at Megumi Naoi for putting his hands on his son. She'd threatened to convince her vase-loving parents to stop buying from his business, and she was sure that it wasn't just the downpour of rain that was making the man shake in his boots. That and the roar of wind and thunder must have given Ayato the confidence to stand up to his father alongside her. To give him credit, she would never forget how the lightning captured the fierceness in his gold eyes, or how later by her car when he was leaning in to tell her how much her solidarity meant to him, a magnificent crack of thunder had startled them apart.

Okay, okay. Storms were incredible. And though she'd been lucky enough to never see one, for some reason she'd always had an interest in tornadoes.

After setting the plates and bowls out on the counter, Yuri wandered into the TV room and pressed her face against the glass of the window. Nothing yet, but the clouds were cooking up something good.

Briefly, a flicker of concern entered her mind as she thought of Ryou. But then… no, the concert was somewhere in the Shibuya area. That was why she'd left an hour early (apparently Ryou's sister was the boss's son's teacher, so Ichiki tended to be lenient with her). Yuri glanced over her shoulder at the radar on the screen, worrying her lip until she saw to her satisfaction that the concert was far enough from the stretch of the storm to be safe. Content, she turned back to the window. There was something hypnotizing about the deep blue-gray of the clouds, a promising navy that swirled around their neighborhood. She hummed a sigh of soft bliss when the first raindrop smacked against the glass.

A tap on her shoulder made her turn around.

"Anything good?" Smirking at her jumpiness, Ayato handed her an already-served bowl and some chopsticks. His bowl was waiting for him on the coffee table.
Yuri returned his smirk and kissed him. "Soon," she said. "It's picking up."

They ate on the couch together, huddled close, occasionally feeding each other bites (and Yuri sometimes beating him to the food with her lips, but Ayato wasn't complaining). Waiting for the spark to turn into a flame, for the drizzle to turn into a downpour. Autumn rain didn't have the same warmth as it did in summer, but it still had its aesthetic charm, and the thunder could still make a name for itself.

With much reluctance, Ayato left the warmth of her arms to put away the dishes, and Yuri returned to the window. A pleasant surge of excitement rose up in her chest at how much the navy blue had darkened in the last few minutes. Ryou was lucky to have escaped, she mused silently. Last time it had gotten this thick and dark, they'd been at work, and Ryou had fretted and hemmed and hawed and tried to get ahold of her sister to tell her she loved her, just in case. And she'd fretted some more, chewing her lip raw, when the line had gone dead. Poor thing was like a nervous little kitten.

The last time a storm had darkened the sky this much when she was with Ayato, well… things had turned out a bit different.

"What're you smirking about?" Ayato's teasing tone grazed her ear as his arms wrapped around her middle.

Yuri turned to him, tracing her hands up his arms to his shoulders and then to his face. Her fingers brushed against the apple of his cheek as she hummed thoughtfully, pretending to dwell on her answer.

"Memories," she said. And then her lips were on his.

He instinctively clutched at her sides, pulling her closer to him, and made calculated steps to turn them around so that he was guiding them both back to the sofa. If she didn't know the layout of this house by heart, she wouldn't have been able to tell that the sofa would be there to catch her fall, so blinded by what the passion in his kiss did to her. Three years of marriage and her legs still turned to jelly. She tumbled backwards onto the couch with a squeal, bringing him down with her.

The news was still going but she didn't care. She didn't really give a shit where the remote was, either. It was hard to think about such things when Ayato was peppering kisses along her jawline, neck, and collarbone. Or when she was too busy trying to undo his belt, while musing as his hands ran along her sides before gripping at her waist if the bed was comfy enough to be worth pausing for.

Comfort was ideal, but she'd be damned if she put a stop to this. She adjusted her hips, shifting determinedly on the couch to get the best spot while giving him room to settle—plus there was something underneath her, and she felt like the damned princess and the pea here. She shifted again, whining against his mouth, and crushed whatever it was beneath her. Which resulted in loud screaming.

Luckily, it was coming from the television. But the ear-splitting shout made them jolt and snap their heads toward the screen.

A girl with chin-length fuchsia hair was sitting on a chair onstage, surrounded by a flood of screaming fans and lights. Large pink signs read "WE LOVE YOU IWASAWA" in darker pink glitter.

"Oh, right. The concert…" Yuri eyed the screen thoughtfully, and shifted her hips upward to free the mystery object—the remote, of course—from under her.
"Concert?" Ayato repeated, curiosity etching his features.

"Ryou from work said she was going to see this concert tonight... I hear Iwasawa's kind of a rising star."

"Iwasawa?" He scrunched up his face in thought, like he'd heard the name before. "Hm. Looks like we caught her between songs."

"Are we really going to stop in the middle of this to-" Yuri started to say, but sure enough, Iwasawa gave a soft hum, and the strum of her guitar signaled the start of a gentle new ballad.

Wait. This was pretty.

"Iradachi o doko ni butsukeru ka sagashiteru aida ni owaru hi..."

The singer cooed the lyrics like they meant a lot to her, like she was singing quietly but from the deepest part of her heart.

"Sora wa haiiro o shite sono saki wa nani mo mienai..."

Wait. Wait.

This song seemed... familiar.

God, not that she didn't use that word every damn day of her life, but déjà vu was nothing compared to this feeling. Something welling up inside of her. A strange rush of a desperate reminder, like a snooze alarm that had long been muffled.

What was this feeling?

"Joushiki butteru yatsu ga waratteru tsugi wa donna uso o iu..."

It wasn't just in her brain, but in her heart, which was pounding in her chest because it felt like Iwasawa was using this song to tell her something. To pass along some kind of message, something Yuri was supposed to know about the world. About herself. About Iwasawa too.

"...sore de erareta mono daiji ni kazatte okeru no..."

She knew sometimes songs made people connect with the singers, but this was ridiculous. This wasn't like that. It was as if Yuri actually knew her, even though it was impossible. She hadn't had this feeling since – since she met Ayato.

But it was almost like every moment she listened to this song, a mystery was being solved.

"Demo asu e to susumanakya naranai..."

She couldn't look away. She couldn't turn off the concert now. She let the remote fall out of her hand onto the coffee table, entranced, because she couldn't miss a second of this.

"dakara kou utau yo..."

Because Iwasawa was building up to something intense, something incredible she put her whole heart into, and this... this was where the dam burst.

"Naiteru kimi koso... kodoku na... kimi koso..."
Iwasawa wasn’t just singing to the world now, she was begging. Crying out a passionate message through the screen – and her voice broke through some sort of barrier in Yuri’s head, shattering it like glass and freeing everything it was keeping back.

"…tadishii yo… ningenrashii yo…"

She knew this song – Iwasawa – a white-haired girl humming it on the way to graduation – Kanade – Angel – fighting against God – her brothers and sisters, murdered –

"Otoshita namida ga kou iu yo, konna ni mo, utsukushii…"

That was real. That wasn’t a dream. But it was a dream, it was just of a memory. And there were so many. Flickering and swirling like the shadows in the classroom – God, it was like someone had dumped a box of puzzle pieces and they were just gushing around inside her head and she was about to short-circuit.

"Uso jo nai…"

It wasn’t a lie. They were memories, not just dreams – memories she was still trying to make sense of, and Iwasawa was still singing like she was calling out to the audience, pleading with them, soothing them. But Yuri’s heart pounded in her chest as each memory fell into place, and things were only just beginning to make sense, and she felt just a little less crazy about her whole life and déjà vu, but she was far from soothed. She was stunned.

"Hontou no... bokura wo…"

A whole lifetime and an afterlife was seeping back into her mind, people she hadn’t thought of in twenty-four years, a whole other world she lingered in for decades, a Guild she blew up, a concert with speakers blaring this very song.

"Arigatou."

It was like she had been woken up from a long, elaborate dream by a bucket of ice cold October rainwater and remembering the most outrageous party she went to last night. And she still felt hungover. She couldn’t bear to listen to another moment of this concert, lest Iwasawa break into a different Girls Dead Monster song that brought back her memories of her life before that one.

She was losing her damn mind, letting all these memories of the Afterlife and her previous life back into her head. She didn’t have the capacity to listen any longer. The song had opened a door and let a second life back into her head, and right now her mind was struggling to make room.

It was all Iwasawa’s fault. What the hell kind of sorcery was this? How could a song have a power to do this to someone? Damn it, how did she even remember the exact words?

Ugh, she couldn’t linger on that. Her head was a bit preoccupied at the moment. The noise had to go. Groggy and grumpy, Yuri reached for the remote on the coffee table, grumbling inwardly to herself.

Was this how Otonashi had felt that day, when…

The thought hadn’t entirely finished, but it collided with two other panicked ones when another arm reached out, snatched up the remote, and clicked a button that sent the room into semi-darkness.

When Yuri cautiously turned her head, she came face-to-face with Ayato Naoi.

Only now the name meant two different things entirely.
Preview:

"You…"

"You're the one acting like I just confessed to a murder."

"What did you think we were going to do after this?"

"What exactly are you saying?"

"We wouldn't want a child born out of false love."

"I didn't realize you hated me that much."

"Nakamura, you crazy wench, don’t—"

[Chapter 03]: Of Two Minds.

Chapter End Notes

Iwasawa's "My Song" being magic and memory-giving is a headcanon I will never let go of. Also, as you can tell from the preview bits, angst is just ahead.
And the momentum builds...

When Yuri cautiously turned her head, she came face-to-face with Ayato Naoi.

Only now the name meant two different things entirely.

He studied her, a mix of emotions on his face she wasn't sure she could read, save for confusion. Maybe he was processing what he remembered of her, letting those little Afterlife memories sink in and attach themselves to her face, like she was doing right now.

Those golden eyes – firm and swimming with questions – the ones she fell for because they were so warm and mysterious and captivating – were more hypnotic than she once thought. Considering the time she spent with him in the Afterlife, if anyone told her she would one day like lying underneath Naoi, she would've hit them. But this… this was just… he was looking at her so intensely, she didn't know what to think.

"You..." he muttered in an unbearably husky voice, but nothing trailed after it. His eyes were studying her under knitted brows, still taking her in, as if recognizing her and simultaneously seeing her for the first time.

"You," she breathed, and almost smacked herself for sounding so breathless and blushing, like someone out of a damn romance novel. She wasn't a schoolgirl with a crush, she was his wife.

It was in that moment that he seemed to recognize the position they were still in—him on top of her, their limbs entangled with the foreshadowing of what they were about to do before they were rudely interrupted. Licking her lips nervously, she stared up at him, trying to predict his next move. His searching eyes fell on her neck, and she sucked in a breath. His lips curved into a deep frown that matched the strange look he was giving her. Then he leaned down...

...and a flash of lightning illuminated the entire room, so close that a ground-shaking boom of thunder followed a millisecond later, making Ayato jump and reel back. He scrambled off of her, into a sitting position on the other end of the couch. But apparently that wasn't enough space for him, because he leapt to his feet, heart pounding, and backed himself up a few steps toward the wall.

She stood up too, uneasiness rising in her chest as she took her turn at observing him. He was Naoi and exactly how she remembered him, but she could also tell how different this life had been for him, how it had taken its toll. He was older and missing the cap and uniform, but even without it he stood taller, with – usually – a happier glint in his eye since he'd cut off ties with his father. Usually.

Instead, she could see him across the room, and maybe it was the way he was shrouded in darkness, but the teasing, happy glint she was used to was currently unrecognizable, clouded by scrutiny and suspicion. He looked almost angry in a wary sort of way. Why was he glowering in the shadows like that?

"What," he demanded, still narrowing his eyes at her.

A twinge of annoyance bit at her heart that he'd been the one to break the silence, especially since he had started it in the first place.
"What do you mean 'what'?' she said, folding her arms across her chest. "You're the one acting like I just confessed to a murder."

"Do you remember who I am?" he asked, approaching her a couple of steps.

She snorted. "Of course I do. You're Ayato Naoi."

"No, I mean—"

"I know exactly what you mean." She took a small step of her own, maintaining eye contact. "You meant, do I remember you from the Afterlife?" Another step. "You got your memories back from the song too, didn't you?"

He nodded. "I remember everything."

"Hence the part where you scrambled off of me."

Another lightning strike lit up the room, giving her a good look at the crimson that streaked across his face. His hands clenched into fists. "Let's not speak of it."

So that's what it was. He'd switched to a Naoi mindset, and the very mention of intimacy with her was unspeakable. He didn't want her. He was disgusted by her. It made her heart clench and her blood boil with restrained anger. He didn't have to be such an ass about it!

Wasn't there any part of him that was still fond of her? Since when was she so terrible in his eyes? What the hell was his deal? It didn't have to be this way.

"Are you seriously going to be like this now?" she said, managing to steady her voice.

"Like what?" he snarled defensively.

His hostility took her aback. This wasn't something she was used to from him at all, not even from Naoi. She wasn't prepared for this pain, wasn't accustomed to it, but she swallowed hard and attempted to continue. "Like this. Like… like you're-"

He closed the distance between them, only to get in her face.

"Like I finally came to my senses?" he hissed. "What did you think we were going to do after this? Now that we know who we're dealing with here."

Came to his senses, was that it? Her heart clenched painfully. That was what it felt like for him, to wake up married to Yuri Nakamura. His disgust was him "coming to his senses." He wasn't going back to the Husband mindset. He wasn't going to be Ayato tonight.

But he was Ayato, wasn't he? And she was Yuri. She was always Yuri, they'd just gotten to know each other better.

*I'm the same woman you married* was on the tip of her tongue, but that would be too sappy and dangerous at a time like this, so she swallowed that down too. She wasn't going to beg. Yuri Nakamura never begged. Not like that.

But why… why was caring for her such a horrible thing? Even if he was dwelling on his Afterlife memories and feelings, she thought… she thought he cared for her at the end, even just a little. She thought they were friends, friends who graduated together, who said goodbye and hoped to meet again. Now they had, and just because they happened to be married, he was throwing a fit?
He was pushing her away, when... when she would have embraced him.

This wasn't like many other marital spats. This one left a bitter taste in her mouth. He was really starting to piss her off, the way he was treating her in this ridiculous situation, when she already had a bit of a headache.

"We really dodged a bullet, didn't we?" His snide tone snapped her attention back to him. When she gave him a questioning, thin-lipped look, he went on. "With that negative pregnancy test."

Her heart sunk, the way he said it. It was a reminder...

Earlier this evening, she'd wanted to have his kid so badly. She'd wanted to for a while. Hearing and thinking about that reminded her of how much she'd loved him. Now, it was like he was mocking her.

"What..." She tried to be detached yet direct, but failed, cursing herself as she choked on the word. She composed herself with a deep breath. "What exactly are you saying?"

He scoffed at her. He was definitely mocking her now, like he expected her to understand. At least that meant he'd considered her intelligent.

"This," he gestured to the room, the house, the two of them, "means nothing, now that we have our memories back. It's a lie."

The room fell silent, but thankfully the gushing rain outside their window was louder than her ragged intake of breath. This life... their relationship... was he saying...?

He turned away from her, avoiding her eyes by going to the window and watching the downpour.

"It's lucky you aren't pregnant. We wouldn't want a child to be born out of false love."

Yuri felt her throat close up. False love... False love, he called it. The seven years of happiness she had in this life weren't real.

He was saying that... that he didn't...

Her vision blurred with tears. Lightning rippled outside their window, shining light on the twitch of his mouth as he gripped the window sill with his eyes on the storm.

And he added lowly, just loud enough for her to hear, "Wouldn't want to put a child through the trouble of a divorce either."

She hoped the roar of thunder that followed had adequately muffled the sound of her heart breaking. Because to her it sounded almost exactly like the armful of his pottery vases shattering into pieces on the floor all those years ago.

At the same time, she could also hear about a thousand of her old walls being rebuilt, shooting up around her like a fortress even though the damage had already been done. The only thing she needed protecting was destroyed.

She'd trusted him with her heart for seven years, and she let him hold it for too long after they'd gotten their memories back, and now he decided he didn't want it because of who she really was to him.

And – and maybe they were different, because Afterlife Yuri would never have let someone in like...
this, would she? She would have kept her walls up, pushed everyone away if they got as close as he did. She would have been unable to love anyone as much as she loved and grieved for her siblings… until she did. She did end up caring for everyone as much as she loved her family. And that had included Naoi, but… but God, he really didn't ever care, did he?

As fearless leader, she couldn't let him see her break in front of him. She'd be damned if she looked like the weak one here.

Instead, she forced a passive, neutral expression, kept a level head. "You want a divorce?"

"I believe that's what I just implied."

If he wanted a divorce, she'd give it to him. She wouldn't stay married to someone who didn't care about her, who remembered her and suddenly wanted to get rid of her.

"Fine." Yuri yanked the wedding ring off her finger. "I didn't realize you hated me that much. I'll get the papers in the morning. In the meantime, take this worthless thing." She tossed the ring onto the coffee table. It hit the surface with a sharp *ting* and a clatter that made Ayato turn around in surprise, then rolled off onto the floor.

She stared at it lying there on the carpet, a small golden band that had been on her finger for the majority of three years, a ring she remembered being slipped on her hand by the man who told her father she'd love her forever.

*It's a lie.*

She glanced up at met his eyes. He was staring back at her, and the way he looked at her — the difference — made her feel like she was drowning, suffocating in this house. She needed to get out now. If he hated her, then damn it, she hated him too, and she couldn't look at him anymore. When she looked at him, she just saw… Shit, she had to get out of here. Yuri broke the connection, turned on her heel, and stormed down the hallway towards the foyer.

"Where are you going?" Ayato's voice called from the TV room. "I thought you said you'd—"

"Just out. None of your business," she fired back, picking her purse up off the end table. It was none of his business where she went anymore. She bit down hard on her lip when she thought of where she wanted to be right now, the only place she could think of.

She heard his footsteps approaching as she reached the front door. "You can't drive in this weather! It's a mess out there!" He went to close the door, but she held it open because he couldn't stop her.

"Well, look at it this way," she said lightly. "If anything happens to me, you'll be rid of me without the hassle of a divorce."

He glared at her wide-eyed like she'd just slapped him. "Nakamura, you crazy wench, don't—"

She slammed the door shut behind her, stepping off the front porch, and a powerful gust of rain hit her square in the face. As she rushed to her car and slid into the front seat, all she could think of was that she was *Nakamura* to him. This morning he had said it so affectionately, but just now it had sounded so cold.

Her heart was still pounding and her vision kept blurring. Her eyes stung as she drove away with shaking hands. The road was slick and the windshield wipers barely helped in the torrential rain and darkness, but she couldn't get there fast enough.
Three minutes later, she pulled over near the park and shuffled through the rain on autopilot, feeling damp and numb and cold as soon as she noticed the walking bridge. She didn't know why she needed to be here. It wasn't covered, it wasn't dry, and seeing it only made things worse. They were standing right here on this bridge, leaning against the railing, when he asked her to marry him. And he could have his fucking engagement ring back.

She was cold and wet already, so she didn't give a shit when she sat down in a shallow puddle on the bridge bench that soaked her skirt. The rain stained her hair a deep plum color and matted it to her cheek, and the wind made her shirt stick uncomfortably to her skin, and she was a mess, she felt like a mess, but she didn't care because it was an escape and she needed it. She already felt whipped around and messed up and unable to breathe, so she might as well come here. Here, where nobody in their right mind would come in this weather.

Here, where she'd always felt loved and comforted and... and one, complete, content person.

Now, she was stuck between two people, two minds, suffering because God help her she couldn't tell which mind was the right one. As hard as she tried, she couldn't escape one of them, the one Ayato believed was very, very wrong.

Ayato... he was still Ayato to her. And he was Naoi. He was Ayato Naoi and she was Yuri and that hadn't changed. It never did. So how could their memories destroy what they had so suddenly? How can he...? Why does he...?

It was raining harder now, thunder was roaring and so was the wind, whipping her hair around and matting more of it against her cheeks. She couldn't breathe, but it wasn't just because of the weather. Her heart hurt, it was beating fast and it hurt because she felt dizzy and she might throw up. Her throat closed up again, and she was trying so hard to hold it back but she choked on a sob.

And that was it for her. She was sobbing, gasping for breath between pitiful cries until her chest ached. She let herself cry even though she hated it, hated what it meant, hated the tears coursing down her cheeks without end and mixing and camouflaging with the raindrops. Hated that she couldn't quiet herself, and how her mind flashed to him tipping his hat and declaring that he didn't want to see any womanly tears. Hated how her heart tumbled in her chest as she remembered seeing him cry at graduation and fighting back a smile at his sensitive side.

What sensitive side? Ayato had a sensitive side. Ayato loved her. Naoi hated her. She still heard his words in her head, his cold comments about their hypothetical child, their false love...

Why did it hurt so much? Ayato's false love, Naoi's hate... Somehow learning of his hate pained her just as much as losing Ayato's love. She thought... she thought...

He'd joined the Battlefront, he'd joined them fishing, fought alongside her, given them tips, come to find her in the Guild, even stayed behind to graduate with her. She never hated him. He pissed her off sometimes, but he made her laugh when he teased Hinata, and... and he was really helpful, and smart, and a bit of a wiseass in an endearing way... but he hated her? Apparently enough to want a divorce even after all they'd been through. All the love they'd shared. But Ayato loved her. Ayato said so himself two weeks ago, back when everything was perfect and he gave her the locket to prove it.

Thinking about that night, and their anniversary, when he gave her the locket, the night he told her he loved her and wanted to have a family with her, made her instinctively reach up with trembling fingers and grasp the pendant for comfort. A heart-shaped emerald and amethyst locket, a symbol of their love, of what a good combination they were, of starting a family with someone she trusted... it was whole and beautiful and happy, so unlike her heart, all because the one who gave this to her
decide to break her real one.

A flood of grief and anger seized her, and she tightened her grip on the locket, overcome with an urge to rip it right from her neck and throw it into the river below because then maybe she would stop hurting so much. Maybe she'd be free of this headache and this hold he had on her. Maybe it would show how much she didn't care, how much she didn't want to care.

She tugged, but she resisted, she hesitated, and she just… she couldn't do it, she couldn't let go.

And what that meant… oh God, what that meant…

She gave up and buried into her hands, sobbing harder than ever.

She couldn't let go, because she was still in love with him. Because even if he had fallen out of love with her, even if he didn't want to be her husband and he wouldn't have her as his wife, no matter what he said, he was still Ayato to her. Even if he was Naoi, she… she might very well be in love with him too. She loved every side of him, and that was the worst part. She never stopped, and she probably never would.

And it wasn't fair, her sitting out here bawling her eyes out over this painful love epiphany while he'd gone and dropped all his feelings for her, if they even existed. She loved him so much it was breaking her, and he didn't care at all.

Part of her wished he'd know she was here, and come after her. Even if it was just to see if at the very least she hadn't crashed the damn car or something.

He didn't come after her. And that was that.

---

**Preview:**

"You're babying her, Ryou!"

"Will you at least eat something?"

"Maybe if there was actual magic that could get him out of my head…"

"The most painful of afflictions."

"I just… don't want to love him anymore."

"It'll be like he never even existed."

"You know I can't stay here."

[Chapter 04]: A Magic Cure.
04: A Magic Cure

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains the second half of the origins for this fic. Ever since I was an early NaYuri shipper, I've played with headcanons where they date in their next life and break up as soon as they remember each other. However, the "you fell out of love and I didn't" AU came along later and is unique to this fic. Here, we see what happens when we combine that with me re-watching OUAT in the summer of 2015.

Disclaimer again: Clannad and Angel Beats characters belong to Jun Maeda, the Rumpelstiltskin I used comes from Once Upon A Time, and a particular scene in this fic draws inspiration from OUAT episode 1x10 ("7:15 A.M.").

Enjoy! Or, as Yuri would say: Operation - START.

She was having trouble adjusting to becoming Yuri Nakamura again.

The papers had been signed and sorted out, and she'd already moved in with Ryou for the time being. That girl was ridiculously nice (her sister was another story).

Because she was an uncommonly generous and understanding person herself, she'd let Naoi have the damn house, even though she'd paid for most of it when they moved in two months prior to their engagement (a lot of it had been her family's money anyway). He didn't have close work friends of his own who would take him in, and moving back in with his dad was out of the question. She didn't even make him consider that, which had surprised him.

But when it came down to it, she didn't want to see him at all. She couldn't even wait for him to finish signing. She'd packed a bag and slipped out on Sunday night after he'd gone to bed, barely lasting two seconds on Ryou's doorstep before she fell into her friend's open arms in a fit of sobs. Ryou and Sunohara went and moved the rest of her things out of the house for her, while Ryou's sister Kyou clucked her tongue at Yuri for lying in bed the whole time. Although Kyou agreed to be sympathetic of the circumstances, she wasn't pleased with Yuri for hooking her sister up with "that slimeball" (apparently the concert thing had worked out too well).

In the week that had passed since it had been finalized, Naoi had called her cell phone twice, but she'd ignored it both times. It couldn't be for divorce-related issues, anyway. Kyou assured her it was what she liked to call "Rebound Ex," the condition where a person, or in this case Naoi, doesn't know what to do with himself without her and tries stubbornly to at least get her attention.

As much as she wanted to, she didn't believe that for a second. For one thing, he only called twice. Maybe he missed her a little bit, maybe he twice briefly considered that Afterlife graduates who found each other ought to stick together. But only twice. And if this was the Ayato Naoi she knew from the Battlefront, no way would he come crawling back. He would never lower himself like that.

And that was just fine with her. If anything, he was waiting for her to come crawling back now. Hell, she was finding it hard to even crawl out of bed for work at this point. In which case, she was extremely lucky to have a hostess like Ryou.
Speak of the devil—or angel, rather. The door to the guest bedroom creaked open, and the girl in question tiptoed in with a tray of soup, tea, and chocolate.

"You're babying her, Ryou!" called Kyou from the hallway in a misleadingly dulcet tone.

"It's barely even been two weeks!" Ryou shot back, kicking the door closed behind her. Despite the tears drying on her cheeks, Yuri managed a half-smile. Ryou was just trying to take care of her. She'd expressed interest in becoming a nurse—boy, if that wasn't the understatement of the week—and had gone to school for it. Until she had the job, she was happy to practice by caring for her friends.

"Whatever I can do to help!" Or so she'd said every day since Yuri got here.

Ryou set the tray down on an end table near Yuri and sat down on the edge of the bed. She picked up another object Yuri hadn't noticed on the tray, which she drowsily recognized as a deck of cards.

"Yuri? Do you want me to read your fortune?" Ryou asked, jostling her a bit even though she was fully aware she was awake.

With a groan, Yuri hid her face in a pillow. "No thanks, I don't want to depress you."

"But what if the cards say someone new will sweep you off your feet?" the girl pressed with a hopeful look.

"She needs someone who can sweep her out of bed!" Kyou shouted in from the hallway, pounding on the wood of the door.

"SIS!"

"Kyou, I'm flattered but uninterested," Yuri said loud enough for the girl to hear, then thumped her head back down on the pillow.

Ryou ignored her sister's exasperated sigh and turned back to Yuri with the cards. It seemed she was going to get her fortune read no matter what.

Out of a sliver of curiosity if nothing else, Yuri turned her head and peeked at her hostess. A range of expressions flickered across the younger girl's face as she studied each one. "Oh my goodness," she whispered.

Yuri let a bitter chuckle go. "Let me guess, you're reading the romance part."

When Ryou opened her mouth to sputter something reassuring, Yuri rolled over again and tightened the blanket around her.

"Don't bother, okay?" she mumbled from under the covers. "I know you mean well, but... I don't need to hear what a bunch of cards say about my future. I'm hurting now."

Ryou stroked her hair. "Will you at least eat something?" she asked softly, pleadingly. "Even Youhei's worried about you, and he barely ever cares about broken-hearted girls he isn't trying to date."

With a sigh, Yuri slowly sat up, which brought relief and delight to Ryou's face. She beamed even when Yuri reached for the chocolate. "There, that's it," the nurse-to-be said gently. "Are you sure you don't want me to read your cards?"
Yuri gave a soft shake of her head. "Thanks, but no thanks. Your magic tricks can't really help me right now." Looking down at the chocolate in her lap, she fiddled with the locket around her neck. "Maybe if there was actual magic that could get him out of my head…"

A tell-tale squeak escaped Ryou's lips, making Yuri look up from her chocolate in interest. Particularly when the girl tried to muffle it and furtively avert her eyes.

"Ryou, what is it?" Yuri coaxed, grabbing the hand that covered Ryou's mouth. "Is there?"

Ryou pursed her lips and shook her head frantically.

"Tell me, Ryou. I can handle it." For good measure, she sniffled a little. "All I want is to get over this. Please."

"It-it's just…" Ryou looked hesitant. "Magic always comes with a price."

"Whatever it is, it's worth it."

The girl gave her a long, appraising stare, which turned into an "okay, but only because you're my friend" look. She folded her hands over Yuri's and sighed in defeat.

"My friend Yukine, who knows all sorts of magical charms… once told me about this man," Ryou said carefully. "A man who knows more magic than Yukine and I put together. But it's dark." She squeezed Yuri's hands. "He… he grants favors. And makes deals. If you're willing to pay the price… I think Yukine and I can help you find him."

At first Yuri wondered if Ryou might be pulling her leg, but the sincerity in her big blue eyes told her otherwise. At once a chill of nervous excitement crept up her spine. She'd been to an Afterlife with demons and the ability to make weapons out of dirt, so why shouldn't she believe in this?

"Who is this guy?" she asked, in the same quiet and careful tone as Ryou's.

Ryou bit her lip. "I don't think I should speak his name. He can help you, though. He can grant any request," she said, wringing her hands. "But you've got to mean it, Yuri. And you've got to consider the risks! His magic can be tricky."

"I understand, Ryou." She sort of did, anyway. She'd at least try to understand anyone who could potentially make the pain go away. "Thank you."

Ryou patted her hand. "Then Yukine and I will take you to him tomorrow," she promised. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Taking the soup bowl in her hands, Yuri looked miserably at the dark green mug of hot tea on the end table. "Could you bring me Key coffee instead?"

Of all places to wait for this guy, Yuri couldn't believe it had to be here.

Ryou had gotten ahold of Yukine Miyazawa that very evening. The girl had arrived two hours later, and they spoke in hushed tones in the Fujibayashi study room next to the guest room. Pressing her ear against the wall hadn't done Yuri much good in terms of eavesdropping. Yukine left that night and came back the next morning with an armful of books, and then there was more hushed speaking for who knows how long.

Finally, Yukine and Ryou had let Yuri in on what they were talking about.
When it came to tracking this guy down, they said, it was tricky and also simple. Which to Yuri made no sense at all, but she passively accepted it.

Sometimes he showed up when he was called. And sometimes he showed up wherever he was unknowingly needed. The two went hand in hand sometimes, but not always. Apparently this mystery magic guy was some sort of riddle.

The best thing to do, Yukine suggested, was to go at night to the place that meant the most to her, or the first place that popped into her head when she said that, and hope for the best.

If all else failed, she was to call his name, which Ryou had written down on a piece of paper.

She hadn't peeked at it yet; she was a little too busy leaning resentfully against the bottom of the bridge while watching the water run by and trying not to bring back any old memories.

If this guy had real magic and had deliberately put this bridge in her head, he was honestly a piece of shit.

Yuri glared up at the moon embedded in the black sky. Had it really been a month since she was last here with him? Not Magic Guy, but… well, him.

"Just so you know, I wouldn't change this night, or anything else, for the world."

"Neither would I."

A bitter growl rising up in her throat, she punted a rock into the river with a splash and a thunk. "Lying bastard!"

"Easy there, dearie," purred a mischievous male voice. "What did that water ever do to you?"

Yuri spun around on her heel, almost instinctively going for the place on her skirt where her holster should be. Nothing there. Excuse her if she just recently got decades of Afterlife memories back into her head!

Sitting, legs crossed, on a boulder under the bridge (a spot she knew had been empty just a minute before), was a man with crocodile skin and a Cheshire cat smile. He giggled like a child when he caught her disbelieving stare.

"Toto, I've a feeling we're not in the Afterlife anymore!" he singsonged, his grin stretching even wider across his face.

Yuri's eyes widened. "Hey, how do you know about the—"

"You'll find there aren't a lot of things I don't know."

"So then you're the magic guy," she said, placing her hands on her hips.

"How did you guess…?" the man said dryly. He hopped off the boulder and took a few steps toward her.

Although a little unnerved out by his bold movements and his glistening moonlit skin, she stood her ground. He seemed to appreciate that.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said, and bowed with a grand flourish. "Rumpelstiltskin. And you must be Yuri Nakamura. Although last I heard, it was Yuri Naoi."
She winced, but tried not to show it. "It's back to Nakamura now."

His mouth opened in a small "o" of silent sympathy. "Well, Yuri Nakamura does still have a nice ring to it. And I should know, I've a penchant for names." Another giggle. Approaching her with a smile, he ran his crooked fingers through her purple locks. "I hardly recognized you without the green bow headband. Don't tell me that's what you're here for—"

"No," she cut him off. "I'm here for… a cure."

His smile vanished. "And what ails the fearless leader of the Afterlife Battlefront?"

Swallowing back the grief, Yuri attempted to channel the stubborn fearlessness she'd once had as leader. "A broken heart."

Damn. There was no way of saying that without feeling and sounding weak.

Rumpelstiltskin clucked his tongue in understanding. "The most painful of afflictions." He brushed past her and stood at the edge of the river. "It's not like I can make him love you again, dearie. That's out of the question."

"I never expected you to do that!" Yuri quickly rose to her own defense. She blushed then, looking around. That had been entirely too loud, and she couldn't be sure anyone else but her could see him.

"I just," she lowered her voice, "don't want to love him anymore."

Joyfully, the man snapped his fingers and turned to shoot her a playful grin. "There! That is something I can help you with."

Being so happy to help a person stop loving another… Yuri frowned to herself. Someone must have hurt this guy deeply.

Nevertheless, she watched as he made a great show of fishing something out of his coat pocket. It was a shiny glass vial, almost like diamond under the light of the moon. Giggling, he held the empty vial up for display, then bent down by the river. Uncapping the vial, he dipped it into the water until it was halfway full with the clear liquid, then stood up and held it out for her to see.

As Yuri watched, transfixed, the water glowed and then transformed into a murky silver color. Just like a cloud.

She gave him an incredulous look. "You're telling me all I have to do to stop loving him is drink river water."

"No no no, you lovesick young fool." He turned back to her fully, smirking as he took a step closer. "First of all, it's magic. Second of all, no two loves are alike. You have to make it… personal!" Like a rocket, his hand shot out and plucked a single purple hair from her head. The yelp she made sounded embarrassingly similar to Ryou's.

She couldn't help but glare at him, rubbing her head, as he giggled triumphantly and dipped the hair in the vial before capping it. As it was, her pain and dour looks only served to amuse him more.

But the vial gave another magical glow, and she felt her resentment ease up a tad. He was, after all, doing her a big favor. Something no one else could do.

"So if I drink this thing, I'll no longer love him?" Yuri asked, hope seeping into her tone.
"It's more than that, my dear. A teensy little side effect you ought to know about," said Rumpelstiltskin with a wry grin, leaning in and seemingly relishing in the suspicious glance she gave him as a result. "The next time you see the object of your grief, you'll have no idea who he is."

Yuri recoiled, backing up a few steps.

"I… what?" A lump formed in her throat. "I won't remember him?"

"It'll be like he never even existed," the man said. How could he smile while saying something like that?

A nervous voice in the back of her head chattered a warning, a reminder. "But that would—"

"Destroy him? Break his heart?" Rumpelstiltskin gave her a blank, unfeeling look, and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, he started it."

Yuri opened her mouth, then closed it. She honestly didn't know how to respond to that.

From the glimmer in his dark eyes, he could tell he'd caught her. "You know as well as I do that love is the most powerful magic. The cure must be extreme."

"Extreme sounds like an understatement," she muttered, unconsciously fingering her anniversary locket.

"If your heart could be fixed with anything else, you wouldn't have come to me," he purred. "It hurts you even now just to be here. Doesn't it, dearie? Love makes us sick. Haunts our dreams. Destroys our days. Love…" he paused, arching forward with a sneer that showed all his yellowed teeth, "has killed more than any disease."

He took her hand and folded it over the glowing vial that he'd placed in her palm.

"This cure… is a gift."

Yuri stared down at the so-called "gift." Though it held the pulsing white light of magic, the glass felt cold, where she'd always imagined magic held warmth. Then again, the cure for love would be cold as ice.

If she drank this, he'd be out of her head. And her heart. Thinking of him wouldn't hurt anymore—because she just wouldn't. Her heart wouldn't feel like it was eroding piece by piece whenever she heard his name—because it wouldn't mean anything to her.

She heaved a sigh and closed her eyes for a minute, then opened them.

"What's your price?"

He arched an eyebrow at her, curiosity flickering across his face. "Hmm?"

"My friend told me that with you, magic always comes with a price," Yuri said firmly, putting the vial in her purse and crossing her arms.

"Your friend has been doing her research," Rumple said, looking rather pleased. "I do love to say that. All magic comes with a price!" He did another little dramatic flourish of his hands.

Yuri blinked. "So what's yours?"

"Mmm… Let's see, let's see, let's see…" He moved closer to her, too close for comfort actually, but
Yuri didn't flinch until his finger hooked the chain around her neck. His eyes glowed with interest. "My, my, my. What a lovely locket. Who may I ask gave it to you, dearie?"

Her brow furrowed at the question. "I have a feeling that's one of the many things you do know."

His trademark smirk stretched the corners of his lips. "Then you won't mind if I take it off your hands. That is my price."

"What do you want with a locket?" Yuri asked, an edge of suspicion in her voice.

He stared at her as if he didn't understand the question. "It's pretty," he said coolly. "Now, do we have a deal?"

Another defeated sigh escaped her. She reached up and unhooked the clasp of the locket chain, wincing slightly when it caught on her hair. As the jewelry dangled from her fingers, she hesitated, admiring the combination of emerald and amethyst.

But like the engagement ring it was based on, it was a symbol of his love for her.

"This... means nothing, now that we have our memories back. It's a lie."

His love had been a lie. Therefore, so was this locket.

Yuri placed the trinket gingerly in Rumpelstiltskin's open, wrinkled palm, which he closed over it immediately. "I thought so," he said with that mysterious purr of his. Smiling, he drew away from her and pocketed the jewelry.

Some price. She'd had a slight suspicion when she first heard of him that his services might literally cost an arm and a leg.

Rumpelstiltskin laughed suddenly, as if reading her mind.

"Drink it in good health... Yuri Nakamura."

With that final farewell, he turned on his heel and tromped down the riverbank, throwing a careless wave behind him.

And then he quite literally disappeared into the night.

Yuri had a decision to make.

The vial was in her hands, still capped, and pulsing with an inviting glow. She had literal magic in her hands, magic that could make the pain go away. That would stop her from shedding any more tears over Naoi.

But it could only do that by making her forget.

A knock sounded at her bedroom door. "Yuri, it's me!" Ryou called from the hallway. "Can I come in?"

"Sure, go ahead." It was her guest room, after all. That girl was too polite for her own good.

The door creaked open and in seconds Ryou was at her side, plopping down next to her on the bed. She gasped at the sight of the glass vial with the shimmering silver water inside. "Is that what he gave you? What kind of magical properties does it have?" Despite her curiosity, she was careful not
to touch it without permission.

"It's going to obliterate all of my feelings for him." Yuri stroked the vial with her thumb, her nerves chewing her up inside. "If I drink this, I'll forget him completely."

"You'll lose all your memories of him?" Ryō asked, gazing at the bottle incredulously. Rumpelstiltskin's type of magic seemed to stun her. "That's amazing!"

The corner of Yuri's mouth twitched into a wry half-smile. "It won't be amazing if I bump into him one day and act like an amnesiac. If he tries to talk to me and I don't know who he is, not only will that confuse the hell out of both of us, but…" She trailed off, frowning.

"…it would hurt him," Ryō finished for her. She smiled at her sadly, sympathetic, and patted her free hand on the bedspread. "If you drink it, it would save your heart, but inevitably affect him."

"Unless I make absolutely certain I never bump into him."

Confusion creased Ryō's features. "Huh? How would you do that?" she asked, tilting her head at Yuri. Then she took out her cell phone and scanned the screen. "I guess maybe Yukine might have a charm for that kind of thing. I could ask her—"

"That's not what I meant," Yuri said, closing the flip phone in Ryō's hands. The girl glanced back up at her, a look of understanding crossing her face. "Ryō, you've been a wonderful hostess, but you know I can't stay here. Not just in your house, but in this town. Not if I'm going to forget him, and make a fresh start."

"But…!" Ryō squeaked, tears springing to her eyes. Yuri kept one eye on the door, inwardly worrying that Kyou's sister tenses might be tingling. "But you only stayed here because you divorced him—"

"I'll simply remember that you took me in when I needed a place to stay." Dropping the potion on the bedspread, Yuri took both her friend's hands and squeezed them reassuringly. "I won't forget you, Ryō."

With another loud squeak, the girl threw herself into Yuri's arms and engulfed her in a tight hug, dampening Yuri's top with her tears. "I won't forget you either, Yuri!"

Yuri laughed. "Of course you won't. You're not drinking any potion." She straightened up, putting her hands on Ryō's shoulders and pushing her back gently to give her a teasing look of concern. "Or are you? Sunohara hasn't broken your heart yet, has he?"

The very suggestion startled Ryō. "Of course not! He's been a perfect gentleman to me!"

Good, so Sunohara had taken her advice on behaving himself. Yuri beamed, feeling mildly proud of herself. Even if her own love life had crashed and burned, at least she'd helped another couple find happiness.

Ryō hugged her again, with impressive strength for someone of her stature. "Thank you for everything," she mumbled. Maybe the girl had mind-reading skills as well as fortune-telling.

Smiling faintly, Yuri put her arms around her friend and returned the embrace. "Isn't that my line?"

Kyou was extraordinarily helpful once she realized Yuri's primary goal was to move out of her sister's guest room. She even granted her access to her fancy laptop and helped her search for
affordable houses in other areas. After making some calls, Ryou and Kyou found her a place in a city that was a two hour's drive away from here. It was cozy, cheap, and just as nice as the one she'd shared with Naoi (only smaller).

They'd even gotten ahold of Yuri's parents, who had made time out of their busy schedules to pull some strings and make the whole new house process go quicker.

Kyou's colleague could also contact her brother to get Yuri a decent job there at a small business. Apparently Kyou sensed a take-charge attitude in her when she actually crawled out of bed.

It was a start. A fresh start, in a little less than a month. She was grateful to them.

After promising to keep in touch, Yuri took off. Ready to leave behind her the town she'd known and loved for three years. Over three years ago, she came here with Ayato because he needed a fresh start, and now she was leaving because she needed hers.

Funny, they both left to get away from a Naoi.

Passing the walking bridge was unavoidable if she wanted to get out of here. She swallowed the quiver of emotion in her throat and coasted down the road, swearing to herself she would not sneak a glance at it.

Not even a goodbye glance. She would not be sentimental about this.

It was drifting closer into view. Closer. Closer. She gripped the steering wheel and kept her eyes firmly on the road in front of her.

Closer. Closer.

A flash of dark green on the bridge appeared in her peripheral vision. And damn her, she snapped her head over and looked.

Nothing.

No one there.

It'd just been her stupid imagination. She snarled at herself in exasperation, turned her eyes back to the road, and put the pedal to the metal until she passed that godforsaken bridge.

Her heart was pounding against her rib cage. Even if it wasn't him, even a pine tree or a shadow of him in her imagination made her feel like this.

That was why she had to get out of this town. That was why she couldn't ever see him again.

That was why, in the safety of her new TV room, she uncapped the potion.

And she drank it all down until when the vial clattered to the floor, not a drop was left to be spilled.

---

**Preview:**

"This is the idiot I was telling you about."

"I thought I made it perfectly clear that I don't love Yuri."
"I've been through 'complicated!'"

"Geez, you haven't changed a bit!"

"Just wondering, do you have any Key coffee?"

"Where's the bathroom?"

"Things are a bit tense between us."

"So... you have seen her then."

[Chapter 05]: Crossing Paths.
Six months had passed since Iwasawa's concert brought back old memories, and Ayato Naoi still didn't really know what to do with them. They were actually kind of a hassle, having an extra lifetime and an afterlife in his mind.

On the positive side, they were helping him re-learn hypnotism. That would go on the "pros" side, to be sure.

On the other hand, they'd cost him his marriage. And he was finally coming to grips with the fact that, deep down, he'd begrudgingly put that with the "cons."

He'd hidden the pictures that Ryou and Sunohara had "accidentally" left behind in a box, and he'd stored it in the hall closet, but the damage had already been done.

There was no point in admitting to himself that her absence unsettled him. When he'd mustered enough courage to call her, twice she'd ignored him, so he found out pretty early on where she stood in their post-divorce relationship. Then, back in late December, when he made the attempt to find out where Ryou lived and dared to go see Yuri for himself, Ryou had sealed the final nail in the coffin for him.

Yuri had moved. Not only that, but she'd instructed Ryou not to tell him where she'd gone.

And that was that.

Not one to willingly linger over pissed off, estranged ex-wives, he'd thrown himself into work and learning hypnotism. Now, he was finally getting somewhere with the latter.

Closing the last book on hypnotism, Ayato pushed his chair away from his desk and stood up, peering out the study room window. His boss had once again given him a few days off to "take a goddamn break, son," and he wanted to continue to use his time wisely. All he needed to do was test it out on someone in a way that wasn't too unethical—or at least in a sneaky way that wouldn't land him in jail. Using it at work would likely get him fired, and besides, he didn't want to have to wait until Monday. Since it was a warm April afternoon, he might as well try his chances at the park.

Except…

Ayato frowned to himself, rapping his fingers restlessly against the windowpane.

If he went that way, he'd pass the walking bridge. And that would just bring up some entirely unnecessary and unwanted memories. He'd been avoiding it for months; last time he'd crossed that bridge, it had only brought him trouble.
Best to skip out on the park, then.

Pulling on a light jacket—as sunny as it had been lately, April could still surprise him—Ayato fetched his shoes at the front door, passed his car on the driveway, and started heading towards town. A little walk never hurt anyone. Besides, he'd have an excuse to use his hypnotism if someone dared to step on his heel.

Downtown Mizuzaka was filled with more hustle and bustle this month, and Ayato attributed that to the fact that it was finally spring. Winters in this city had always been rough, but it seemed the one they'd just escaped last month had been longer, sadder, and more exhausting to everyone, not just him.

Today, children were scrambling all over the place, and it was like Mizuzaka had come out of hibernation. Ayato had to step aside as Mrs. Yonomori burst out of the Yonomori bakery in tears while her husband chased after her with bread in his mouth. Just another day of hijinks from the old married couple, though he wasn't sure why anyone would want to chase after a crying woman like that.

Shaking his head, Ayato passed the bakery and continued down the sidewalk for a few minutes. The coffee shop didn't interest him; it might have tea but he knew for a fact that the tea he brewed at home tasted far superior. The bookstore, jewelry store, butcher's shop, sandwich shop, and museum would be too quiet, perhaps too noticeable to stop by and pick out a victim for his hypnotism. Maybe the arcade?

Or he could try the grocery store up ahead. It was right next to the arts and crafts store, and he needed to pick up a few things at both places anyway. He'd been toying with the idea of starting up pottery again.

Ayato was crossing the street and making his way up the next block, his destination in sight, when he noticed two guys exiting the arts and crafts store. One he couldn't identify too well from the huge dango plush dolls obstructing his upper body. The other he recognized by the baby face underneath his dark hair—and the whiny grunts of effort as he lifted two heavy bags on his arms.

By the abrupt halt to his grunts and the way his mouth turned upwards into a smirk of scornful distaste, he recognized him too.

"Well look who it is!" Sunohara hollered, though it was unnecessary as the distance between them was shrinking. "Hey, Okazaki, check it out. This is the idiot I was telling you about."

"I can't look at anything right now," Okazaki said impatiently, though he stopped in his tracks when Sunohara did. The only thing Ayato could see of him was his temple throbbing. Sunohara lazily batted the top green dango out of Okazaki's hands and let it plop to the ground, giving Ayato a full view of Okazaki's face as it twisted into an even more irritated grimace. "Hey! You'll get it dirty!"

Ayato sighed, already tired of this exchange, and made a point of blatantly checking his wristwatch. "And here I'd hoped I'd seen the last of you." He felt an old urge in the back of his mind. "Are we going to have a problem?"

"No problem. We're just passing through!" Sunohara said in a false cheerful tone, making Ayato narrow his eyes in distrust. He shook one of the bags on his arms. "We were just buying gifts for my girlfriend and Okazaki's wife. You know, 'cause we don't throw away what we have with the women we love."

Okazaki turned his head to give Sunohara a flabbergasted look. "You're in love with Ryou?"
Sunohara glared at him. "That's right. It's been six months, don't act so surprised!"

"I thought I made it perfectly clear," Ayato said, loudly interrupting their time-wasting conversation, "that I don't love Yuri. And our divorce is none of your business, or his."

This earned him a perplexed, almost angry stare from Okazaki, who set the rest of his dangos on the ground before approaching Ayato with a frown. He nonchalantly swatted away the finger Ayato was pointing in his face. "Wait a minute. Sunohara told me you two were married for three years. He and Ryou said that one night you two were trying to have a kid, and the next night you were in the process of a divorce."

When Ayato opened his mouth to cut him off, Okazaki only spoke louder.

"And I thought that alone was weird, but now you're telling me you don't even love her," he said, crossing his arms. "How can you say that about someone you stayed with for three years? Someone you were going to start a family with?"

"To think she skipped out on a concert with Ryou just to stay home and be with you," Sunohara scoffed. In spite of it all, he managed a grin. "I mean, I benefited from it in the end, but I can't imagine for her it was worth it."

This was exactly what he didn't need right now. He'd spent months telling the voice in the back of his head to shut up about her; he didn't have that kind of time for these two clowns. They didn't know what they were talking about. Nobody did.

The guys at work had taken ages to stop pulling that sympathetic crap. And they thought he couldn't hear the obnoxious "ever since Naoi's wife left him" comments still muttered in the breakroom. Couldn't this town give it a rest already? He just wanted to stop thinking about it!

Okazaki was still giving him that deadpan, scrutinizing look. As if he were some sort of psychologist, with a specialty in snark and feigned apathy. Somehow it was even more infuriating than any jab from Sunohara.

"Were you just stringing her along?" Okazaki demanded, raising his voice. "Because it doesn't make any sense. If you didn't love her at all, you wouldn't have stayed with her for three years. Unless you just wanted a kid. But even then you divorced her out of the blue right when you were trying."

"And don't say it's because you found out one of you was infertile!" Sunohara chimed in. "Because I already asked her about that."

Ayato clenched his jaw tightly. If these imbeciles didn't stop trying to make sense of all this, when even at times admittedly he couldn't, he would have two prime candidates for the brunt of his wrath.

His hands, balled into fists, trembled at his sides. He could feel his fingernails digging painfully into his palms. "It's complicated—"

"Don't give me that!" Okazaki looked even more furious, as if he had any right to be. "I've been through 'complicated!' And you know what I did? I stayed with Nagisa through it all! I never regretted a single moment of it!"

A painful concoction of anger and indignation festered inside Ayato. Whatever this Okazaki scum went through, it was different! It was completely and utterly different! He couldn't even pretend to understand. Why the hell was he still letting these idiots talk? Why was he even listening?

"And you know what that got me?" Okazaki said. "A wife and kid in the end. But you have no one."

You're alone because *you* chickened out. Because you're trying to protect yourself by saying you don't love her." At this, he stepped back and shrugged. "And maybe you don't! Because if you loved her, you wouldn't have hurt her like you did."

Ayato wanted to spit out that the divorce was mutual, but instead he held his tongue behind gritted teeth. There was no need to defend himself to this idiot. But still, who the hell decided to make a human embodiment of the annoying voice in his head? If Okazaki didn't shut his mouth soon, he was going to drive his fist through it.

The scum didn't shut his mouth.

"You know, I met your ex-wife a few months back," Okazaki continued. "And despite the state she was in, I think she's better off without you."

"Yeah, maybe you did her a favor," said Sunohara with a snicker, shifting the weight of one of his bags on a different part of his arm.

Ayato narrowed his eyes into slits, mentally calculating how fast he'd have to move to use that bag to suffocate him.

"You don't deserve a woman like her." Okazaki gave an unbearably condescending shake of his head, then met Ayato's eyes with a pitying glare. "If you turned into this much of a coward, it's no wonder she left town just to get away from you—"

Something inside Ayato's brain popped. With a snarl, he lunged forward and grabbed fistfuls of Okazaki's shirt, pulling the man closer to him. He felt the old familiar heat behind his eyes as the fury inside him allowed him to concentrate on nothing but Okazaki's stunned blue ones. He could see fear and a red glow reflected in them, and satisfaction briefly warmed him before rage took over again.

"Look into my eyes. You're a dango," he hissed, clutching the fabric of his victim's shirt even more tightly. Okazaki stood frozen, fearful but obedient. Just the way he liked them. "Roll back home to your big dango family, you overgrown dumpling—"

"Geez, you haven't changed a bit!"

Ayato released Okazaki from his grip, allowing the man to subsequently wither to the ground and start rolling away ("Okazaki! Not into the street!" Sunohara yelled fearfully in the background), and spun around in surprise.

"You!" he said, too shocked to say anything else.

"Me!" Hinata echoed, grinning. Resting his hand on Ayato's shoulder, he turned back around and yelled, "Hey, Otonashi! Kanade! Guess who I found hypnotizing some poor sap." Then, to himself, he added, "You know, it's funnier when it's not me."

Further down the sidewalk, Otonashi and Kanade picked up the pace as they spotted the other two waiting for them. Kanade looked a lot less frail in this life, with brighter eyes and a healthier bounce in her step. Beside her, his hand linked with hers, Otonashi looked the same—if not a little taller and happier. Somehow, Ayato knew those two would find each other again no matter what. He was just a bit irked that Hinata had been the one to find Otonashi next. But he would not dwell on such petty things!

"Otonashi!" he greeted with a smile, and then a nod to Kanade. "Tachibana. Long time no see."

"Kanade's an Otonashi now too," Otonashi said proudly as they came up to join the other two, and
displayed Kanade's ring finger as proof as she hummed her confirmation. "Really great to see you again, Naoi. Did I hear you still have your hypnosis powers?"

"I relearned them." Smirking, he gestured behind him to the tumbling human dango in the distance. "Clearly they're still in working order."

"Good," said Hinata, rubbing the back of his head as he watched Okazaki roll away with Sunohara chasing after him. "Because odds are, we might kind of need them."

Ayato squinted at his old hypnosis punching bag. That was the second time Hinata said something in support of his powers. And now he could see that Otonashi and Kanade were staring at him expectantly as well.

"...What for?"

After about half an hour, sitting with three-fifths of the graduation group at his kitchen table, Ayato received his answer.

"Hinata, Yuzuru, and I all got our memories back from seeing the concert somehow," Kanade said as Hinata refilled her tea. Ayato nodded; he'd already confirmed seeing the concert himself. "And it may have done the same for a few others. But we can't be sure everyone managed to see it and hear the song. So, for those who haven't..."

"...you would like me to assist you in jogging their memories." Ayato rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "If my hypnotic abilities are up to par, I would love to help you and Otonashi with this operation."

Hinata frowned. "I'm part of this too, you know."

"Sure you are," Ayato said, sipping his tea.

Of course, although he preferred not to say it out loud, he was pleased to see Hinata again, along with Otonashi and Kanade. And Otonashi had already assured him that they were happy to find him as well; the fact that he could indeed offer help via hypnotism was just an added bonus.

Their idea to bring the Battlefront back together was fairly clever. He would unquestioningly make time out of his schedule for that. In all honesty it was a relief just to have the three of them there now; he'd become reacquainted with solitude over the past six months and was glad to see it go. Even picking on Hinata gave him a brief, heartening sensation of nostalgic joy.

Just as it occurred to him that the spot between Hinata and Kanade was empty, Otonashi's cheery voice came from behind him.

"Hey, Naoi? Just wondering, do you have any Key coffee-?"

Ayato whipped around in his seat and gave him such a look that Otonashi froze on the spot, paused his search through the pantry, and quickly held up both his hands as if to signal his surrender.

"Oh, okay, sorry," he said, surprised. "Tea's great."

Visible embarrassment burned Ayato's cheeks. "Um. Sorry, Otonashi. I just... don't drink coffee, so..."

"So why didn't you just tell him that, instead of staring at him like he'd shot you?" a smirking Hinata asked, to which his host shrugged weakly.
What in the world was that? Ayato mentally chided himself for his odd behavior. It was just that nobody had needed Key coffee in this house in a long time. Much less asked for it. He'd forgotten how much of a Key coffee fanatic Otonashi had been in the Afterlife—he only associated that brand with one person.

Otonashi didn't make a big deal of it, though, and sat down next to Hinata to accept a refill of tea. Kanade, however, was just getting up from her seat.

"Where's the bathroom?" she asked softly, a peculiar look in her eye.

Ayato gestured over his shoulder. "Down the hall, first door on your left."

Nodding, Kanade padded briskly out of the kitchen. Otonashi looked amused, and Ayato suspected it was for the same reason as him. That woman had the bladder of a squirrel.

But presently he rethought the directions he gave her. Was it the first door or the second?

Well, no matter. She'd find her way.

"Anyways, now that we've crossed you off the list," Otonashi said, clearing his throat, and he and Hinata nodded at each other before continuing, "the three of us already agreed on who we want to find next."

Ayato considered his words thoughtfully as he lifted his mug to his lips. "Yeah? And who would that be?"

"Yurippe."

Hot tea flooded down the wrong pipe, as Hinata had chosen the exact wrong time to take Ayato by surprise. He choked rather unattractively and started coughing, earning him a few whacks on the back from Hinata. As he attempted to compose himself, both his companions gave him yet another bewildered look.

"Who else?" Otonashi laughed once he'd exchanged his furrowed eyebrows for a fond smile. "Kanade had the bright idea that if we found you next, the four of us could show up and surprise Yuri together. You know, like we did when she woke up in the Guild and in the infirmary."

Ayato stared morosely into his drink. It was highly unlikely that his presence would be a pleasant surprise to her this time around.

"Geez, Naoi!" Hinata jeered, elbowing him roughly in the side and startling him out of his thoughts. "I didn't realize you hated her that much."

"I don't hate her!" Ayato snapped, glaring at him.

"Then what's the big deal?" Otonashi was staring him down now. There was humor in his tone and a warm smile on his face, but Ayato could tell he'd puzzled him with his reaction.

After a moment's silence, Ayato sighed. "Do you even have any idea where she is?"

"We were hoping you knew," Hinata said, crossing his arms and leaning back. "When we went looking for you, we found out you guys both grew up in Akuma, only half an hour away from my hometown. We ran into your dad first, by the way." He wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Pleasant guy. Turns out you're the lesser of two evils. I asked him if he knew Yurippe and he called her a whore."
Ayato clenched his fists under the table. "I hope you knocked him out with his own vase."

"I wish we'd thought of that," Otonashi admitted. He stood up and brought his mug over to the sink, then shook his head. "The Nakamuras were out of town on business, so we tried to ask him where Yuri was, but after the 'whore' remark, he just refused to talk about her."

No surprise there. If there was one person Kimito Naoi despised more than his own son, it was his son's girlfriend (later turned daughter-in-law and then ex-daughter-in-law, but he didn't know that). He hated anyone who defied him, especially a woman who "didn't know her own place." And his son leaving town with his girlfriend to live together out of wedlock had to have been particularly scandalous to the Naoi name. Ayato scoffed to himself.

Stubborn, disgusting, awful excuse for a human being. He'd treated Ayato's mother like dirt too. What kind of man could be that cold to a woman who'd promised to be at his side forever? Although he had trouble respecting anyone who didn't want to leave a husband like Kimito Naoi. She should have followed him to Mizuzaka…

"Wait." Ayato jerked his head around to look at Otonashi. "How did you know to look for me here?"

"Your dad told us."

Ayato stood up abruptly, knocking his knee into the table and sloshing his drink. Ignoring the pain in his kneecap, he turned to Otonashi with wild eyes. "That bastard knows where I am?!"

"Just the city!" Otonashi reassured him quickly, putting both hands on his shoulders.

Ayato settled, but clenched his fists and jaw while trying to regulate his breathing. If Kimito tracked him down, he'd be right back where he started. Hell, he was lucky he'd lasted this long. Yuri could have easily claimed the house and told him he could move back in with that abusive bastard for all she cared.

But she didn't. And that still baffled him.

Hinata and Otonashi were peering at him hopefully, silently asking him a question he couldn't answer without telling them everything. But if they were so dead-set on finding Yuri, then it was unavoidable. It wasn't like this was something he could keep pushing behind him, not after the Battlefront had come back into his life.

He released a slow, exhausted breath.

"There's something you should know," Ayato said, gripping the kitchen counter with one hand for support. "Yuri and I… things are a bit tense between us—"

Out in the hall, something bulky fumbled and crashed to the floor.

Ayato stopped in mid-explanation and glanced sharply towards the hallway, while Hinata jumped to his feet. Ayato was the first to hurry out the door, followed quickly by Otonashi and Hinata.

The second door on the left was ajar with the light on, so obviously Kanade had found and used the restroom. But currently she was standing in front of the first door—the door to the hall closet.

At her feet was an open box, its contents spilling out onto the carpet. And Kanade was just staring down at it, unblinking.
"What are you—" Ayato started to say, but then he recognized the innards.

A gold wedding band.

An emerald-and-amethyst-encrusted engagement ring.

And photo after photo with Yuri Nakamura's face emblazoned on it. Some alone, some with her posing comfortably next to him. One in particular stood out among the others as if blatantly mocking him. The one he knew everyone in the room was currently staring at.

The one with Yuri in a slender, simple white wedding dress, wrapped in the arms of one tuxedo-clad Ayato Naoi.

Kanade knelt down next to the pile, picked up the frame gingerly, and continued to stare at it in silent wonder. Looming over her, Hinata and Otonashi gazed down at it too, before exchanging wordless glances.

"So…” said Hinata, eyeing Ayato after a long pause, "you have seen her, then."

---

**Preview:**

"Hey, I divorced her!"

"You've gotta at least let me kick his ass a little."

"Some of us still want to find her!"

"Do you miss her?"

"She's a tough nut to crack."

"You leave me with no other option."

"Wait! You can't go there!"

[Chapter 06]: **The Truth Comes Out.**
Chapter 6: The Truth Comes Out

Chapter Notes

Warning for Naoi doing... a Naoi thing.

Ayato got to his knees and started placing the incriminating evidence back into the box, including the framed wedding photo that he ripped out of Kanade's hands. She made a startled sound of protest, but seconds later distracted herself with the engagement ring. He took that away too.

"As you can see," he muttered, not looking at any of them, "Yuri and I have a bit of a history in this life."

"History, meaning past tense?" Otonashi asked.

Kanade fingered the wedding ring before dutifully dropping it into the box. "I don't think he would have this if they were still together, Yuzuru," she said, watching Ayato like an owl as he stored the box back on the top shelf of the hall closet where it belonged. "Not hidden away like that."

He eyed her resentfully as he shut the door, but restrained the words on his tongue he wouldn't dare speak in front of Otonashi. Sure, he may have given her the wrong door, but she'd clearly found the restroom on her own. She didn't have to go back to it afterwards and snoop through his things. If a can of worms was to be opened, he would have much preferred to do it himself on his own time.

"Earlier in the kitchen, you were starting to say that things were tense between the two of you," said Hinata, leaning against the opposite wall of the hallway. "Just how tense are we talking about?"

"And what I want to know," Otonashi said before Ayato could answer, "is if she has all her memories back too. Did she see the concert with you?"

"If she did, that would explain a lot." Hinata smirked at him. "I bet she divorced you as soon as she remembered you."

What that got him was two cries of indignation at the exact same time.

"Hinata! Yuri wouldn't do that-!"

"Hey, I divorced her!"

Otonashi and Ayato exchanged flustered glances, before the former's expression turned to one of disapproval. Ayato suddenly felt very small under his gaze, like he was a little kid again about to be scolded for screwing up on a pottery project.

"But she agreed to it," he said defensively. "As a matter of fact, she seemed pretty quick to be rid of me. She got the Kyogi Rikon papers the next day, moved out before we were even finished signing, gave me the house, and I haven't seen or heard from her since. She didn't even tell me she was leaving town."

"If you asked for a divorce as soon as you remembered her, it sounds like you were quick to be rid of her first," said Otonashi, frowning.
"What was I supposed to do, Otonashi?" Ayato creased his forehead in frustration. Snapping at Otonashi was usually out of the question, but he should have expected that he'd take her side. "Act like nothing had changed? Pretend we actually loved each other?"

"What do you mean 'actually loved each other'?" Hinata demanded, looking cross and suddenly very protective. "Are you saying you were married to Yurippe for, what—"

"Three years," Ayato muttered.

"—three years, and she meant nothing to you?" He took a threatening step forward, getting in Ayato's face.

Ayato met him head-on, growling. "It wasn't us! It wasn't real!"

"What does that even mean?! Of course it was you!"

"Hinata, stop." Otonashi tried to step in and intervene, firmly grasping Hinata's shoulder to pull him back. "This isn't helping."

"But he's even more of an idiot now than he was in the Afterlife!" Hinata complained. "I mean, not that I think they're meant for each other or something ridiculous like that, but we can't just let him off the hook for dumping Yurippe! She's like my sister. You've gotta at least let me kick his ass a little."

"You can try," Ayato said, his eyes glowing.

"Hey now!" Otonashi warned, pushing them away from each other. "Enough of that! Both of you!" This time he turned to Ayato, who flinched under his scrutinizing gaze. "Now, Naoi, he really does have a point. I confronted you when you tried to obliterate her and I think I have to confront you now."

He winced at the way Otonashi gripped his arm. It was just like the first time, strong and unyielding. He'd been grabbed like this by his father many times before, in this life and the one before it, but Otonashi's hold was thankfully less threatening. Just like it had always been. Secure and relentless, forcing him to face all the things he refused to. And he really wasn't ready for this.

"Why exactly did you divorce Yuri?" he asked, his voice misleadingly calm.

"Because our memories make us who we are," Ayato answered firmly, "and we made entirely different memories in this life. The Naoi and Yuri who fell for each other in this life disappeared when we got our former life and Afterlife memories back, when we became who we were then and are now."

Otonashi thought for a moment, loosening his grip but not letting go as he mulled over Ayato's words with a frown.

Hinata, on the other hand, just stared at him.

"...That is the worst load of crap I've ever heard," he said.

"Nobody asked you!"

"I'm going to have to side with Hinata on this one," Otonashi conceded, and Ayato held his tongue to keep from making a bitter remark. He gestured to Kanade—who was STILL peering at Ayato with those big golden owl eyes of hers!—and said, "Kanade and I fell in love with each other in this life. Memories or no memories, my feelings for her aren't any different."
"Obviously that's because you loved each other in the Afterlife," Ayato replied. "Yuri and I didn't have anything between us then. And now that our Afterlife mindsets are the prominent ones, what we had before doesn't matter."

Hinata made a sound of disgust. "I wish we'd found Shiina first, just so she could be here to say what we're all thinking: this is so stupid."

Ayato snarled. "You're just lucky Otonashi is here, you little—"

"Stop!" Otonashi clutched his head in agony. "You're acting like children! Fine, Naoi. We get it. You don't love Yuri. But some of us here still want to find her, so when was the last time you saw her here in Mizuzaka?"

"Six months ago," Ayato said without hesitation. "When the divorce was finalized." He closed his eyes and scoffed upon remembering how immaturely she'd gone about it. "She cut off contact, and her friend said she moved a month later."

Honestly, what if he'd been calling about a mistake in the divorce papers? Or some things of hers that Ryou and Sunohara had left behind (which, incidentally, they had)? Not that he wanted her to answer his calls, but she should have. The silent treatment had been so aggravating. Just thinking about it now revived his irritation—

"Do you miss her?"

The question was so sudden, so light and quietly but boldly ventured, that although Ayato had spun around in bewilderment to face the source, he barely registered it in his mind. His heart certainly did, kicking his fight-or-flight response into gear as it started beating rapidly in alarm.

"What?" he sputtered, cursing silently when Hinata perked up in interest at his reaction. Kanade merely blinked at him, knowing he'd heard and understood what she just said. Flustered, he broke their eye contact and turned to look at Otonashi. "First she goes through my closet, now she's asking a weird question like this. Otonashi, with all due respect, does she ever mind her own business?"

Oddly enough, Hinata looked more pissed at the remark than Otonashi, whose frown had transformed into a strange little smile.

"Answer her question, Naoi," he said, draping an arm around Kanade's shoulders. "Now I'm curious."

Ayato barely held back a grimace. No offense at all meant to Otonashi, but this question could go straight to hell.

"Be honest. Do you miss her?"

Before Hinata, Otonashi, and Kanade had come along, he barely acknowledged this question when he asked it of himself, let alone answered it. There was no point; she was gone and there was no comprehensible reason to go look for her. No reason he'd be able to back himself up with when she asked him what he was doing there, at least. So why should he bother even thinking about her?

But now these imbeciles—minus Otonashi, of course—were making him think of her. Making him remember the smell of Key coffee in the morning and the comfort of having someone else in this house. Making him look at those photographs after all these months and think back to the moments when they were taken, when they'd laughed and posed next to each other at their high school graduation in this life and thought nothing of an Afterlife one. Back when they'd only had one lifetime to worry about, and the loneliness they'd both grown up with was all in the past.
Damn it.

"Yes," he said at last, his answer barely intelligible through a grumble.

Yes, of course he missed her. How could he not miss the one person who'd, for seven whole years, actually been there for him when he needed her? Who'd saved him not once, not twice, but—counting when she gave him the house—three times from the wrath of his father?

Even in this life, she'd been determined to protect the people she cared about. Though that last one had come from her post-memories self.

He hadn't expected to be, as Hinata would put it, "bosom buddies" after they'd separated. He'd known from the moment she drove off into the thunderstorm that she wasn't pleased with his treatment of her once they'd recognized each other. And that was putting it lightly. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," he'd found, had a heavy load of truth to it. So he stopped calling her and left her alone to get over her little hissy fit. Turned out he'd severely underestimated how little she wanted to see him until it was too late.

"Sorry, what was that?" Hinata asked, cupping his hand over his ear. It was a bit frightening how much the gesture reminded him of her.

Ayato forcefully breathed out his irritation.

"Yes," he said, a little louder so the simpleton could get it through his thick head. "I miss her."

A proud smile played across Otonashi's face. "Enough to help us find her, and put aside whatever friction the two of you have right now?"

"Enough to seek closure, I suppose," Ayato said with a confirming nod.

"Good enough," said Hinata, clapping him on the shoulder. Ayato glowered suspiciously at his hand until Hinata removed it with fearless nonchalance. He was lucky he still had it. That oaf was getting too comfortable around him.

Next to Otonashi, Kanade stepped forward, her hands clasped in front of her. "Then it's settled," she said in that wispy voice of hers, one that still raised Ayato's suspicions of her angel status. "Now, is there anything you can tell us that could lead us to Yuri?"

Ayato frowned thoughtfully.

"I can't," he said, narrowing his eyes, "but I know someone who can."

One good thing about April was that each day was getting longer and lighter, but the reunion between four-fifths of the graduating group must have taken more time than Ayato thought, because the sun was inching lower in the sky and bringing a trail of blue and gold with it when he finally brought the group to their destination. It peeked out from behind the roof as Ayato stepped up onto the front porch, giving the quaint little two-story a warm glow.

Otonashi, Kanade, and Hinata waited on the walkway a few feet behind him. Kanade's attention had been captured by the buttercup-yellow flowers in the flowerbed, but beside her Hinata tapped his foot impatiently on the stone path.

"Why didn't you just call her? Wouldn't that have been easier?"
"I remember her address but not her phone number," Ayato returned, pressing the doorbell until he heard a satisfying jingle coming from inside. "Besides, I was hoping she'd be more sympathetic if we all did this in person."

Seconds after Hinata grunted a "touché," the front door opened, and the person greeting them gave a sharp gasp.

"Naoi…?"

"Ryou," Ayato acknowledged the woman with a cordial nod.

She was less squeaky and panicked than he remembered her, but there were still traces of suspicion all over her face. "What are you doing here?" she asked, looking as if she wanted to shut the door in his face as soon as her manners allowed it.

"Listen, I—"

"Wait," she said, waving both her hands wildly in protest. "I do know why you're here. The cards predicted this—"

Ayato resisted the urge to roll his eyes, but groaned anyway.

"—and no, I already told you, I promised Yuri I wouldn't tell you where she went!"

"But this is important!" Ayato insisted, catching the door before she could close it on him. Her reluctance to hear him out was overpowered by her politeness, something he jumped on. "Please, Ryou? This isn't just for me, this is for them." He gestured to the trio behind him; Otonashi and Hinata waved. "They're old friends of ours. I know she'd be happy to see them. It's been years." A gross understatement, but Ryou didn't have to know the details.

Ryou crinkled her brows and started chewing her bottom lip in distress. "Even if I just told them, I know they'd tell you. I can't chance that. I'm sorry, but I just can't!"

"Ryou—"

"I made her a promise, Naoi!" Ryou said, sounding surprisingly even less squeaky and more adamant. She shot him a highly reproachful look. "And why would I do you any favors after what you did to Tomoya today?!"

Ayato cocked his head. "Tomoya…?"

"Youhei told me you did something strange to our friend Tomoya Okazaki," Ryou said sternly. "That you used some sort of hypnosis that made him think he was a dango, and he rolled out into the road!"

"You heard about that, huh?" Ayato said nervously, rubbing the back of his head. Behind him, Hinata snickered.

"Don't laugh! He could have been killed!"

"I… apologize for putting him in danger," said Ayato, choosing his words carefully. "Sorry" was a word he'd overused in his childhood to the point of hatred of the term, so these things were hard to choke out when it came to people he felt didn't deserve it. "He was attacking my character. I assure you it won't happen again."
Ryou hesitated, scanning his face for sincerity. Though she looked satisfied with what she found, her brief half-smile faded. "I appreciate the apology. But it won't give you Yuri's new address!"

Hinata looked aggrieved. "Not even the city?"

"Sorry."

He'd been right about the in-person thing; Ryou's face showed genuine sympathy. But she wasn't caving for them. Ayato turned to the other three, shrugging helplessly.

Hinata hummed. "She's a tough nut to crack."

"Maybe she just doesn't like him," said Kanade, which made Hinata grin (and Otonashi too, despite himself).

Of course Ryou heard them and made the trademark squeaks of protest Ayato was not unfamiliar with, but he brushed her background noises aside. There was one thing left he could try, a last-ditch effort he felt a little guilty even considering.

"Can I…?" Ayato asked, looking to the group as he gestured subtly to the woman behind him.

"Eh…" Otonashi showed the same hesitation, glancing over Ayato's shoulder. Uncertainty plagued his features for a moment, but then he let his arms fall to his sides. "Just be nice about it."

Nice? The only thing that came to mind was when he helped Otonashi with his memories. But what the heck, he'd try "nice." Whatever that was.

Ayato turned back around, guilt flashing across his face.

"Sorry about this, Ryou," he said, taking a secure hold of her upper arms. "But you leave me with no other option."

"What? Wh-what are you d—"

She froze, her round blue eyes latched with a pair of gold ones that were swiftly changing to ruby red right in front of her.

There was a surprising stubbornness to her, but all minds eventually lost the fight, no matter how strong. The most tenacious could hold on for a few seconds, just as Yuri had, and the more submissive of minds were out like a light upon eye contact. Ryou ranged somewhere in the middle.

"Now…" The old keening buzz in his head and heat behind his eyes were becoming less noticeable on his second try. "Tell me where we can find Yuri Nakamura. Where has she gone?"

Just like Okazaki, Ryou could not disobey.

"She's at 9319 Mahou Complex Drive," she revealed breathlessly. "In a city called Noroi."

"Noroi." Ayato immediately released her from his hold, mentally and physically. "Thank you for your assistance."

Shaking off the trance, Ryou backed away in disbelief. "You are NOT welcome!" she exclaimed. She had a troubled look on her face, as if she wanted to ask him how in the world he'd done that but was too afraid to.

"Noroi is only two hours away," Kanade announced, observing the directions on her phone. "We
Ryou's eyes, bugging and fearful, were still fixated on Ayato. If that girl chewed on her lip a moment longer it was going to bleed all over her yellow-green sundress. But that wasn't what bothered him.

"And why not?" He studied her features, frowning. What could possibly trouble Ryou this much about him taking Yuri's *friends* to pay her a visit? "Ryou, it's just a friendly reunion. And I'm going with because I genuinely want to make things right with Yuri. I promise I won't do anything to upset her."

"I..." Ryou looked ready to burst into tears. "I know, but I-I can't let you do this..."

This was going nowhere. It would either end in tears, Ryou spoiling Yuri about the visit, or both. Unless... maybe he could try speaking her language.

"What do the cards say, Ryou?"

She glanced up sharply at his words. "H-huh?"

Seeing his tactic flourish instead of flounder, Ayato jumped on it and went with it. "Check the cards. Or whatever else it is that you do. Just read Yuri's fortune," he pressed. "And if you like what the future has in store for her, or want it to pan out, then let us go visit her. Don't call to let her know ahead of time. Otherwise, you can—"

"Go."

Now it was his turn to be surprised. "What?"

Ryou simply nodded at him. "Go to Noroi if you feel like you really have to. I'll read Yuri's fortune and decide for myself. I guess that's better than getting hypnotized again."

"And I wouldn't want to have to do that," Ayato said, chuckling warmly.

She gave him a sad sort of smile in return.

"Good luck, Naoi," she said, then disappeared into the house and closed the door behind her.

Ayato squinted at the door in his face. She said that like he was some kind of fairy tale prince going off to save his princess from a dragon. Honestly, Yuri had always been more of the dragon type. If Ryou thought he was going to try to win Yuri back, she had another thing coming.

Shrugging it off, he spun around and marched off of the front porch towards the gate, where his car was waiting. Hinata, Otonashi, and Kanade followed leisurely behind him.

"You know," Otonashi said as they were walking, "we probably could have just found a phonebook or something. Or tried the Nakamuras again if they were home. Instead of just hypnotizing her friend."

Hinata turned to look at him, exasperated. "But we were literally right here."

They ultimately decided to stay overnight at Ayato's, then pack up whatever they wanted to bring and drive to Noroi in the morning. Nobody wanted to chance arriving at her place later than expected and catching her at a time when she was cranky and tired, least of all Ayato. Once they agreed on
this, Hinata crashed on the couch, while Kanade and Otonashi took to the guest bedroom.

He certainly hoped the four of them—yes, even Yuri all the way in Noroi—were enjoying their sleep, because he couldn't catch up on a bit of it.

Admitting everything today came with more cons than pros. He unconsciously touched the right side of the bed, then realized what he was doing and recoiled. That was an impulse of his "pre-memories" self. He knew those impulses didn't mean anything, but they were still embarrassing. What was more embarrassing was the feeling of emptiness that often followed.

He'd always attributed it to loneliness, but it was more than that. It was like he'd finally said—he missed her.

And now, thanks to his friends and a little bit of hypnotism, he was going to see her again. The thought alone terrified him into a fit of insomnia.

But why should he feel like this? Why should he be scared of Yuri? Six months had passed. By now, it was possible she'd forgotten all about their tension. That she'd gotten over it. Over him. But then, if things were okay between them, she would have gotten ahold of him. Ryou wouldn't be so insistent upon keeping her word, or freaked out at the prospect of him going to see her.

The Yuri he knew was once the type to hold grudges—not just for six months, but for decades—until she overcame the burdens holding her down. Her pre-memories self was no stranger to the silent treatment, but usually they'd been able to just argue things out and let them unfold instead.

He wasn't certain about post-memories Yuri. But as much as he hated to even think it, Okazaki was right. The fact that she'd ignored his calls and left town without telling him anything wasn't looking good for him.

Though he supposed she didn't consider it any of his business.

It didn't matter now. He was going to get his chance to talk to her amicably about it and sort things out tomorrow. If he would just stop thinking about it and go to sleep already.

Willing himself to silence his mind lasted all of ten seconds. For some reason, his brain could focus only on one thing.

Before he knew what he was doing, his feet had touched the ground and he was slipping out of his bedroom, into the hallway. He walked past the guest room and the bathroom, to the closet at the end of the hall, and quietly opened the door. It was the box's new hiding place, since Hinata was sleeping on the TV room couch and Ayato didn't trust him to avoid being a Pandora like Kanade.

Clutching the box in his arms, he returned to his room and set it on the right side of the bed. He carefully lifted the lid and set it aside, then shifted through the contents until he fished out a familiar jewel-encrusted band.

Why he never pawned her engagement ring off, he'd never know. It just seemed like if it was meant to be sold, it should be sold with the locket he'd given her. And that... well, she'd never given it back. For a fleeting moment, he wondered if she still wore it.

Maybe she did. So what if she did? It was just a necklace. Why should it matter to him if she had it? If she was holding it right now, and thinking of—

The ring fell out of his hands and landed back in the box soundlessly, resting on top of a few old pictures. This was not the time for his pre-memories self to come out of hiding and grow sickeningly
sentimental. He shouldn't have even fetched the box in the first place. It was wrong.

Something was wrong.

He put the lid back on the box and shoved it under the bed. Whatever it was, he'd much rather worry about it in the morning. The Yuri he'd given the ring and the locket to wasn't the Yuri he was meeting tomorrow.

He spent the rest of the night ignoring the old pain-in-the-ass voice in his head that kept trying to tell him otherwise.

---

**Preview:**

"Don't touch the driver."

"I asked Yui to marry me as soon as I remembered her."

"I'm making things weird?!"

"How can you remember us and not him?"

"Yurippe wouldn't be this petty."

"They'll get to the bottom of this."

"...I never existed to her."

[Chapter 07]: Meeting Anew.
"Hey Naoi," Hinata said, nudging him in the side. "What's it feel like knowing you're gonna see Yurippe in less than two hours?"

He was sitting in the passenger seat of Ayato's car, much to the latter's displeasure, while Otonashi and Kanade were snuggled up all cozy in the backseat with their bags. Hinata certainly wasn't his first choice for passenger seat, but the dolt seemed to be making the most out of it.

"Don't touch the driver," said Ayato, his eyes on the road ahead and his hands planted firmly on the steering wheel. At the moment, his fingers twitched with the urge to swat at him.

"I'm just wondering." Hinata leaned back in his seat, while Ayato used his peripheral vision to suspiciously keep a close watch on his companion's feet, lest they end up on the dashboard. "Most guys go out of their way to avoid their ex-wives."

Ayato just grunted. Through the rearview mirror, he caught a glimpse of Otonashi smiling in the backseat.

"Did you mean what you said yesterday?" Hinata asked. Although he was getting himself comfortable for a nap, he opened one eye. "About trying to make things right with her?"

"It's like I said." Ayato slowed to a stop at a red light, but still didn't look away from the road as he fell back in his seat. "I'd like a little closure."

Hinata began to grin. "Closure," he echoed with a scoff. "Try 'you miss her and can't stand any more of her not speaking to you.'"

Rolling his eyes, Ayato gunned it as soon as the traffic light allowed. "I swear. I'm sure you've all missed her too. Why are you three so obsessed with getting me to admit that I miss her?"

"Because it means that it mattered."

If rule number one in this car was "don't touch the driver," then rule number two should be "don't shock or confuse him either." Ayato shot a quick glance at Kanade through the rearview mirror, quiring an eyebrow and hoping his bewilderment could carry through the reflection. "That what mattered?"

"The life you had here with Yuri," she said. "The memories you made with her in this life."

Ayato harrumphed. "How do you know it's not the Battlefront Yuri I miss?"

Otonashi looked up from his book in interest. "Do you?"

"Of course I do," said Ayato, scoffing. "I'm with all of you now because I want to go find the girl I graduated with too. I wasted my last reunion with Yuri divorcing her. If you don't mind, I'd rather replace those memories."

"Aww!" Hinata reached over and mussed Ayato's hair. "Listen to this guy! He does care!"

"I will unbuckle you and hit the brakes!"

Hinata threw his hands up in surrender and backed off, but made no effort to hide his smirk as he turned to face the window. Ayato heard the unmistakable sounds of texting, shortly followed by
Otonashi's phone buzzing. He rolled his eyes. How childish. But whatever made him shut up. He was slightly cheered when whatever the text said made Otonashi roll his eyes as well.

They drove out of Mizuzaka in silence for the most part, and silence followed as they passed through Mikage. The other three were either reading or lost in thought, which left Ayato to listen to his own. He tried to keep them strictly on driving, but his nerves were getting to him.

He gripped the steering wheel tightly. The distance between him and Noroi was rapidly decreasing, and more and more he wondered what exactly he was getting himself into. The "leaving town" gesture had been a big fat "leave me alone" sign and he was blatantly defying it. This was a risky move. He tensed up as soon as he read the sign ahead of him: Noroi, 50 km.

"Naoi," Otonashi said. He flashed him a reassuring grin when Ayato glanced in the rearview mirror at him. "I think she's going to be glad to see you."

Ayato chuckled softly. "She'll take one look at me and slam the door in our faces."

"Oh, she will not." Otonashi turned the page in his book. "For all you know, she's missed you just as much as you've missed her."

"Then why haven't I heard from her?" Ayato retorted.

"Because like you, Yurippe's way too proud for her own good," Hinata quipped, still staring out the window.

Kanade nodded. "Obstinate too."

"Chances are, just the fact that you've come to see her is going to at least impress her," said Otonashi, shrugging.

"And if that's not enough," Hinata piped up, turning to join the conversation, "you've helped us find her. Reuniting her with her best friends should score you a few brownie points."

In absolutely no possible lifetime would Ayato ever say "you're right" to Hinata out loud, but his and Otonashi's words made a respectable amount of sense. Ayato lightened his hold on the steering wheel.

Maybe what he was feeling wasn't as much anxiety as it was hope.

Noroi, 40 km.

Noroi, 25 km.

Noroi, 10 km.

Kanade had fallen asleep against Otonashi's shoulder by the thirty kilometer mark, and Otonashi was stroking her hair.

Those two… They had it so easy.

"Did you ever find Yui?" The words slipped out before he could stop them. Hinata turned to look at him, mildly floored by the question.

"Oh, right. I did tell you about that, didn't I? When we were setting up for graduation." He laughed lightly, then his eyes got a faraway look in them. "Yeah. Just like Otonashi and Kanade, and you and Yurippe, it happened before we got our memories back. We met in high school. My baseball didn't
go through her window, but it did narrowly miss hitting her in the face."

"Bravo," Ayato said, snickering.

Hinata smirked sheepishly. "Yeah, I was just lucky some girl dove in and caught it before it could do any damage. Don't remember who she was or what she looked like, but her killer reflexes made our first meeting very memorable where it could've been tragic. I could've shattered Yui's nose."

"When I met Yuri, she shattered my pottery." Ayato shook his head at the memory. All those vases in pieces on the floor of his father's shop... He thought he'd seen his life flash before his eyes. "It was an accident, of course. I yelled at her for five minutes and she cut her finger on one of the shards trying to pick them up even after I told her not to bother. Bled all over the floor."

"I guess a great way to meet women is by almost or indirectly injuring them," Hinata mused.

Otonashi made a face. "I don't like the sound of that."

"I'm only kidding, Otonashi," Hinata said with a chuckle, cutting himself off when he caught Ayato's similarly disapproving glare. "Even though when you and Kanade met, she stabbed you right through the heart, and you shot her in the stomach." Cue Otonashi protesting that that was in the Afterlife. "But anyways, I didn't hit Yui in the face, and after she yelled at me for a minute we actually had a laugh about it. We hung out a lot after that, became friends without trying to kill each other..."

A scoff in the backseat from Otonashi.

"Okay, there may have been a few locks," Hinata conceded, grinning and rubbing the back of his head.

"90% of them done by Yui," Otonashi chimed in.

"So she tells you!" Hinata shot back defensively, wriggling against his seatbelt to turn around and glower at Otonashi. With an exasperated huff, he settled back in his seat. "As I was saying, Yui was as big a music and tv fan as ever. She became an Iwasawa groupie all over again, and took me to see the concert with her, since she actually came to play in our city." Fondness smoothed his features as he examined his ring finger. "I asked Yui to marry me as soon as I remembered her."

The smirk that had followed Otonashi's accusations slowly vanished from Ayato's face. "I see. So, why isn't she with you now?"

Hinata shrugged softly. "This is a graduation reunion. Yui understands. We had our people we wanted to find, and she had hers." He glanced down at his phone. "We haven't been apart for that long, anyway. And we've called and texted each other since I left. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, y'know?"

"I suppose it does." He creased his brow in thought. "Who does Yui want to find?"

"GlDeMo, mostly," Hinata said dismissively. He laughed then, shaking his head. "She bets she can find them before we do."

Otonashi laughed too. "I wouldn't put it past her."

It was at this point that Kanade raised her head from Otonashi's shoulder, emerging from her slumber as quickly as she had fallen into it. After yawning and rubbing her eyes, she leaned over Otonashi's lap and gazed out the window.
"Oh," she said, faint traces of sleep still in her voice, "we're here."

Sure enough, the Noroi sign welcomed them just ahead. Ayato coasted past it, trying to ignore the sudden ruckus that had started up in the car. Seeing the sign had suddenly made things very real.

"Okay, okay, how are we going to do this?" Hinata said eagerly, wriggling around in his seat again like a little kid and twisting up his seatbelt. "Maybe we should freak her out, like bang on the door and pretend it's an abduction."

"Even I can tell you why that's a bad idea," Ayato drawled.

"Oh, right. Memories." Hinata smacked himself in the forehead, something Ayato briefly wished he'd gotten the honor to do. "Alright, fine. What about this? We could ring her doorbell and leave a bag of—"

"Hinata!" Otonashi scolded. "No pranks!"

"Lighten up, Otonashi! This is our chance to have some fun!" When Otonashi wouldn't budge, Hinata switched his attention to the former Angel. "Kanade, you agree with me, don't you?"

Kanade merely blinked at him. "Hinata, I was student body president in the Afterlife. Do you remember how I felt about pranks?"

Making a dismissive growling noise, Hinata waved them both away and turned back to the front. "Bah… I miss Yui." He made a few grumbled comments under his breath about "Mr. and Mrs. Stick in the Mud" and "the hell with you two."

"It's still going to be fun!" said Otonashi, grinning. "Come on, Hinata. Can't you get excited to see Yuri without scarring her for life?"

"I guess," Hinata muttered.

They continued this discussion for the next ten minutes, Ayato half-listening while he followed Kanade's printed out directions through the twists and turns of the streets. And then he cut into their conversation with an "okay, Mahou Complex Drive, now all of you shut up and help me look."

9319 Mahou Complex Drive was an attractive, cozy buttercup-colored two-story at the far end of the road. Without too many trees to shade it, the shine of the sun and the contrast against the vivid blue of the sky made the house look almost golden. This was it. This was where Ryou told them she'd gone.

Hinata pointed to the garage. "That her car?"

"Unless someone else moved in with one just like it," Ayato confirmed.

Otonashi, Hinata, and Kanade burst out of their respective car doors the second he parked. Even Kanade was sprinting full-force to the front door. Ayato scoffed, smirking as he got out of the car and trailed after them. It was like babysitting a trio of excited little children. At least they knew she was home.

Hinata got to the door first; he ignored the doorbell, and by the time Ayato wandered up next to Otonashi, he was pounding his fist against the wood of the door. As aggressively as if he were a police officer doing a raid.

"Don't break it down," Kanade warned, a bit startled by his force.
"That's rich, coming from you," Ayato said.

That was when they heard the footsteps. Light footsteps, a couple of seconds' worth. What followed was a voice, distant and muffled as if coming from the middle of a staircase.

"Geez, I'm coming! Who the hell is it?"

Otonashi snickered, while Ayato suppressed a smirk. They had to be all thinking the same thing—now didn't that dulcet tone sound familiar?

Hinata accentuated his presence with one last rapid POUND-POUND-POUND.

"Open the door, Yurippe!" he said. He and the other three backed up off the porch onto the walkway.

The footsteps resumed, swifter and heavier than before (a familiar thud told Ayato that she'd leaped over the last two stairs). If Hinata hadn't knocked the door loose, it might as well have been almost yanked off its hinges when it swung open to reveal the fifth and final member of the Afterlife Graduation group, who cried out in joyful disbelief.

"Oh my God, you guys!"

"Yuri!"

From the flurry of magenta as she flew out to greet them, and the bright smile that matched the euphoric sparkle in her emerald eyes, Ayato was beginning to take back any fears or regrets he had about coming here. Her delight upon seeing them all standing outside her door was contagious; he himself felt a grin on his face, and wasn't sure how long it had been there.

Yuri even hugged Kanade with such enthusiasm that she lifted the girl off her feet—not too hard to do, considering Kanade's size, but still touching.

She was happy. He hadn't seen her like this since… well, since they got their memories back.

He didn't expect her to hug him. She'd flung herself into Otonashi's and Hinata's arms, and he felt an annoying twinge of envy and wanting in his own, but the polite smile she'd sent his way afterward was more than he'd asked for.

So she was being civil. Things were off to a good start.

"What are you all doing here?" Yuri asked breathlessly, amused and more than a little pleased. "How'd you find me?"

"Your friend R—" Hinata started, but then Ayato elbowed him in the side. If Ryou had been nice enough to keep from calling Yuri in advance, he didn't want to snitch on her for telling him where she was. "Um. Anonymous tip," he finished, and Ayato and Otonashi simultaneously rolled their eyes. Phonebook. Family. Anything else could have worked.

Otonashi stepped in for him next. "We wanted to bring the whole Battlefront back together, now that we have our memories of each other," he explained, then gestured to the rest of them. "So we figured we'd start by reuniting the graduation group."

"And now that we've found you, we've got all five," Kanade said with a smile.

Yuri returned the smile at first, but then it faded into a questioning frown.
"Um, five?"

"Don't be offended that you're the fifth." Hinata clapped her on the shoulder with a supportive grin. "I ran into Otonashi and Kanade, and then we just happened to track down Naoi first."

Yuri stared blankly at him. "Who's Naoi?"

Ayato's eyebrows shot all the way up his forehead. So much for civility and maturity! Next to him, Otonashi and Hinata exchanged glances and sweated nervously.

"Come on, Yurippe. Don't be like that," said Hinata, rolling his eyes. He gestured to Ayato. "He already told us what happened between the two of you—"

"Nothing happened."

She said it so coolly that it took him aback. It was like listening to himself the night he'd ended things. Nothing happened. It meant nothing. Hearing it from her made it sound emotionless and matter-of-fact, to a staggering degree.

"Here we go," Otonashi said with a sigh.

"Yuri—" said Kanade.

"I don't know what's going on or what the hell this guy told you," Yuri said, crossing her arms, "but I've never seen him before in my life."

Ayato's mouth fell open in pure indignation. Now that was just taking it too far. How could she say that with such a straight face?! How could she even pretend—?

"We were married for three years!" he shouted, clenching his fists.

Yuri finally had the decency to stop staring right through him, and instead gave him a confounded look. "Are you insane?! I think I'd remember getting married to someone! Let alone spending three years of my life with them!

Seven, Ayato mentally corrected her, and if he could inwardly smack himself he would've.

Hinata scoffed. "Yeah, and you'd think you'd remember fighting in the Battlefront with him too." He placed his hands on Yuri's shoulders and looked her in the eye. "Yurippe, are you being serious right now? Because otherwise this is really uncool. I don't care if it's Naoi. He came to make things right and you're just making things weird."

"I'm making things weird?" Yuri echoed, raising her voice as she shoved him away. "Is this some kind of joke? You guys are the ones throwing some random guy at me and insisting he's my—"

"But he isn't some random guy!" Now Otonashi was scratching his head, looking appropriately dumbfounded at the path this reunion had gone down. "Yuri, how can you remember us and not him?"

Yuri faltered at the genuine concern in Otonashi's voice, but the coolness lingered on her face. She pursed her lips before looking Ayato dead in the eye.

"Am I… supposed to know him?"

He averted his gaze, fuming silently to himself. If this was some sort of sick, petty revenge six months in the making, he had two things to say about it. One, Yuri Nakamura was an incredible
actress. Two, whatever it was, it was working.

"Yuri," Kanade said, grasping her sleeve, "Naoi was at the graduation ceremony with us. He joined forces with the Battlefront just before I did."

Shocked, Yuri searched her eyes for answers, but it was needless. Everyone in the graduation group knew that Yuri could trust Kanade with her very life.

"I don't… He…” She looked genuinely lost. "What?"

Damn it, if she didn't stop staring him like he was an alien he was going to lose his mind. Every empty stare, every denial twisted his insides with rage and something painful but unidentifiable. Just because he'd said what they'd had together was a lie, it wasn't real, didn't mean she could act like this. Even he would acknowledge that it happened.

Hinata stepped in, resting a hand on Ayato's shoulder.

"Something's wrong." His pensive frown deepened as he scrutinized the supposed amnesiac in front of them. "Yurippe wouldn't be this petty."

"Let me try something," said Otonashi. "Yuri. After we overthrew Kanade, who was the substitute president?"

Pure bewilderment took over her face, and she stared at him for a second before she looked to Kanade for help. "We had a substitute president?"

Otonashi smacked himself in the forehead, groaning in exasperation.

"I've got one." Hinata held up his hand to volunteer, as if this was some fun game they were all playing. "Who locked us up in the Introspection room?"

"A bunch of NPCs…” Yuri said, squinting. She said it like it was obvious, but the way she trailed off gave her away. She was mentally questioning her own answer, reconsidering and reevaluating it.

"Why would we listen to a bunch of NPCs?" Hinata deadpanned.

Yuri bristled at him. "It's not like we could shoot them!" Confusion and self-doubt cracked her voice.

Then Kanade took her turn to venture one. "Who was it you enlisted to help Yuzuru regain his lost memories?"

"He…” Yuri narrowed her eyes, thinking hard. "I didn't enlist anybody. I brought him to an empty room…and he thought for a while, and he remembered."

Otonashi gave her a skeptical stare. "Do you even buy that…?"

"I don't know!" Yuri snapped, placing her hands firmly on her hips. "I'm just telling you what I remember!"

"Who—"

"ALRIGHT, THAT'S ENOUGH!"

Hinata, Otonashi, and Kanade didn't know who to stare at in surprise first; the frustrated roar had come from both Ayato and Yuri simultaneously. Yuri threw him an appraising glance before focusing her attention back on the other three.
"Stop trying to get me to remember him," she said, her voice low and stern. "I'm going to say this one more time, so all of you should try opening your ears."

Her lips in a grim line, she turned cold green eyes to him, eyes that were missing the joyful luster they'd had moments before.

"I honest to God have no fucking clue who you are."

Ayato opened his mouth to reply, but his very breath froze in his throat. There were no words, no oxygen—just a sharp, throbbing ache in his chest. When the numbness ebbed, he swallowed hard, past the lump in his throat, trying to get rid of the vile taste it had left in its wake.

He could feel Otonashi's and Hinata's eyes on him—and the pure, unadulterated pity on the latter's face only exacerbated his nausea. He wanted to curse, to scream, to tell her to stop playing him for a fool because this game wasn't funny by any means, but the words still wouldn't come.

All the sleepless hours he'd spent working himself up about seeing her again had been pathetic and needless. No, she didn't hate him.

She didn't even know him.

Not just the Ayato who had married her, the "him" who he'd already told her was gone, but the Naoi who had come for her in the Guild and had come again for her now. The words "I'm here too" used here and now would only earn him another blank stare. It didn't matter who he was in this life.

The harrowing truth was, he meant nothing to her.

The ground beneath him seemed to rise and tremble; Ayato gripped Otonashi's arm for support. Beside him, he felt a comforting pat on his hand from Kanade.

"Come on," said Hinata, breaking the silence. "I think we should discuss this further inside."

If it were possible, Ayato could almost swear that the clock in Yuri's house ticked ten times louder than the one on the wall in his kitchen.

Sitting—waiting—in a cushy armchair in the TV room, he tried to drum his fingers louder on the wood of the end table. It didn't seem to be bothering Kanade, who he suspected had been told to watch him. After all, Yuri wouldn't want to leave a stranger in her house unattended.

He checked his own watch. Seventeen minutes and counting. It felt like he'd been waiting longer, much longer.

But he would wait as long as it took if it gained him answers. There had to be some kind of logical explanation for this—

"Do you ever stop humming?!" Ayato demanded, throwing Kanade a dirty look.

Honestly, humming! At a time like this!

She was propped up against the wall, her phone in her hand. Perhaps awaiting a text from Otonashi. Maybe she wanted answers as much as he did… but unlike her, he was in no mood to hum unfamiliar pop songs in the meantime (no matter how aggravatingly catchy they sounded).

"I know you're upset." She even hummed while she spoke. How had she possibly become this mellow since they'd been student body president and vice president together? Perhaps it was
Otonashi's doing. "It will be alright. They'll get to the bottom of this."

Ayato grunted. If that was supposed to be soothing…

A door opened at the end of the hall, and Otonashi and Hinata stepped out of Yuri's study room. Ayato got to his feet immediately, advancing down the hallway to meet them both in the middle.

"Well?" he said, crossing his arms and giving them both expectant stares.

"We talked to her—"

"Really! I was wondering what you were doing in there for almost twenty minutes!" Ayato said, his eyes wide.

"Will you let me finish?" Hinata shot back, frowning. "You aren't going to learn anything if you keep cutting in with sarcasm."

Otonashi gave them both a disapproving look, and Ayato piped down. Hinata begrudgingly did as well. His demeanor softened and became apologetic—surprisingly enough not towards Otonashi, but Ayato.

After a silence, Ayato massaged his temples. "Just tell me what's going on with her."

Hinata and Otonashi exchanged a furtive glance. When Kanade wandered up to the trio, Otonashi seemed to pluck up his courage.

"Listen, she's not just pretending," he said. That much was evident. He rubbed the back of his neck, looking rueful. "I know it seems weird, but…"

Weird wasn't the word for it. Weird didn't even begin to describe this.

"It's like someone went in and plucked every single memory of you from her head." Hinata mimed a plucking motion with his hands. A deep crease formed across his forehead. "Like, as far as she's concerned…"

"…I never existed to her," Ayato finished for him. The words felt wrong on his tongue and heavy in his chest.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. Even the Yuri he'd known from the Battlefront had acknowledged his existence. Time and time again, no matter how insolently he treated her. Even she had… had valued him.

Hinata put his hand on his shoulder. "You alright, man? You look crushed."

He shrugged Hinata's hand away, turning his gaze to the floor as he began to pace restlessly in the hallway. "How could this have happened?"

"That's what we've been asking ourselves," Hinata muttered, glancing back toward the entrance to the study. "It doesn't make any sense! It's like a really specific amnesia."

"Or something she's trying to suppress," said Kanade.

"If you're suggesting that I did something to traumatize her—"

"Kanade isn't saying that," Otonashi assured him.
Ayato stopped pacing and abruptly whirled around, pointing a finger in each of their faces. "Then what are you saying?!!" he demanded. When the cry echoed through the hallway, he winced and lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. "A suppressed memory comes from a traumatic incident. I didn't hurt her like that. I would never, I—"

"We know you wouldn't."

"Then why would a traumatic incident that had nothing to do with me be the cause of this?!!" Ayato clenched his fists so tight he was almost positive he'd drawn blood from hooking his fingernails in his palms. "And who the hell ever heard of, "really specific amnesia"?!

"Naoi—" Hinata started.

"She's got to be playing games with the two of you, because this is just ridiculous," Ayato growled, finding it harder and harder to keep from choking on his own rage. Except… it felt less like anger and more like agony.

"Naoi—"

"Don't start. I know she isn't, but there's no other explanation for this!" His voice was rising again, but his mind was racing as fast as his blood, and at this point he simply couldn't bring himself to shut up. "Why else would I be the only one she can't remember?"

They were looking at him strangely now—he was already so sick of seeing pity on Hinata's face—and something inside him snapped.

It wasn't anger, not just that. He felt small. Insignificant.

Nonexistent.

"How could she just," Ayato paused, unable to meet their eyes any longer, "forget me?"

"If you're always this loud, I could ask myself the same thing."

When he turned to face the voice, Yuri was standing directly behind him, an eyebrow arched and arms crossed as she stared at him appraisingly.

"You'd think it'd be hard to forget someone who's always screaming his head off," she said, a twitch in the corner of her mouth threatening the beginnings of a scornful half-smirk.

Ayato frowned. If he recalled correctly, there were a certain few experiences he could think of where she was the one doing the screaming. He decided it was safer not to voice that thought out loud.

Wiping the sneer off her face, Yuri replaced it with a pensive frown of her own.

"You know, you're not the only one who feels like someone's playing a trick on you," she said, briefly side-eyeing Otonashi and Hinata. "Just how long did you say we were together?"

"Three years," he answered instinctively. "Five if you count the time we were dating."

"Prove it."

Ayato blinked. "What?"

"You heard me," Yuri said, stepping closer so that her face was inches from his. "For now, I'll buy
that you were part of the Battlefront. Since that's what Kanade says, and since these guys seem to
know you." Her lips parted into a rich red smirk. "But you and me? They tell me they weren't there
for that. It's hearsay. I don't have even one picture of you, and I've never heard my friends—or my
parents—make one mention of you."

She hummed a mischievous little laugh.

"So prove it."

Her mouth was close enough for him to do something she might remember him by. He nearly reeled
back at the thought. The little minx was teasing him! He should have expected the dangers that
would come with seeing her again. The part of his pre-memories self that lingered could still be
tempted by her.

That night, the night of the concert and their memories, he'd waited up for an hour after she walked
out. He'd finally gotten tired of angrily pacing and muttering, so he'd gone upstairs to bed. Five
minutes later, as he was changing, he heard the front door swing open, followed by heavy footsteps
on the stairs. He opened the bedroom door and Yuri was standing there in the hallway, dripping wet
and soaked to the bone. Remnants of raindrops still on her face.

All he could say was thank goodness she'd gone into the bathroom without a word and opted to
sleep in the guestroom, or things would have gotten very complicated very quickly.

And "proving it" in the way that had crossed his mind could cause some problems between them as
well.

But how else could… what else would…

"The necklace," he said finally.

"Huh?" Yuri felt around her neck, but nothing was there. "What necklace?"

"A locket," Ayato pressed. Maybe she just wasn't wearing it anymore; it could be in an old jewelry
box, or caught between her dresser or desk and her wall like she used to lose so many pieces of
jewelry. "Gold. Heart-shaped. With emeralds and amethysts on it. Do you still have that around
somewhere?"

Yuri thought for a second, then frowned. "I might've had something like that, but it's gone now."

_Gone?_ He still had the… and she just…

_Gone?!_

What, had it vanished along with her memories?! She had no pictures, no memories, no _locket! _No
sign of his existence in her life anywhere. It was almost as if they really _were_ never together. Like he
had imagined all of it, and it really was a lie.

But it _was_ real. And it…

"Was that your only proof?" Yuri asked, a humorous edge to her tone. "Come on, _Naoi_. Convince
me."

He gave her a long, hard look, then spun around and stormed down the hallway to the foyer with his
jaw set.
"Where are you going?" he heard Otonashi call from behind him.

"Home."

"Hey—Naoi, you're our ride!" said Hinata.

"I'll be back later."

"Thanks for the warning!" That one definitely came from Yuri.

Clouds had begun to drift overhead, but the sun was reemerging as Ayato stepped out onto the front porch and yanked the door shut behind him. Hands shaking with frustration, he finally managed to get into the car and start the engine. With a squeal of tires, he tore down Mahou Complex Drive, out of Noroi, and back in the direction of Mizuzaka.

Because Kanade was right.

It had mattered.

---

**Preview:**

"*I can't believe she has the beret.*"

"*We should decide who we're going to look for next.*"

"*You are so strange.*"

"*I can't just trust a guy I don't know to pull some sort of hypnosis crap on me.*"

"*I think this may be our best operation yet.*"

"*I need that ring back, and you're going to give it to me.*"

"*That… is not going to work.*"

[Chapter 08]: **Chaos and Contemplation.**
Since Naoi's dramatic exit, Yuri had taken to getting her remaining three guests back on track. They'd converged in her TV room, Hinata sprawled out lazily across one couch and Otonashi and Kanade sitting close together on the other. Yuri left for a minute but returned with a smirk and an extra accessory.

"So," she said, plopping down in her armchair, "let's get back to that operation you mentioned earlier."

"I can't believe she has the beret," Hinata muttered.

"I saw it at the first department store I went to when I moved here and I just couldn't resist." She shrugged, leaning back comfortably and crossing her arms. "I figured it would come in handy someday… Anyway, now that we have the graduating group of four back together—"

"Five," said Kanade.

Yuri frowned, but Otonashi and even Hinata were giving her the same matter-of-fact stare-down.

"Fine. Whatever. Five. But… Naoi," she said, and she honestly wasn't totally being sarcastic as much as she was trying the name out on her tongue, "isn't here right now, so it's just the four of us. And as I was saying, now that we've had our little reunion…"

"…we should decide who we're going to look for next," Otonashi finished for her. "Honestly we hadn't even considered it yet. Any ideas?"

Yuri mulled over their choices for a moment. "Dunno… Noda?"

Hinata and Otonashi made razzing noises and thumbs down gestures in unison.

"Not that idiot," said Hinata. "I think I want to find Shiina."

"Seconded," Yuri said with a nod.

"Thirded," said Otonashi, and he grinned at Hinata, "but I'm telling Yui."

"We'll find Shiina then, if that's what you all want." Kanade smiled softly. "And Yuzuru, I'm sure Yui won't mind."

"The question is, just how do we go about doing this?" asked Hinata. "With Naoi and Yuri and, we knew where to look. And we really didn't have to look too far. But with Shiina, she's pretty good at staying hidden unless she wants to be found."

Otonashi rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Yeah, but I'm getting the feeling that, all along, fate's been leading us to the people we're meant to meet." Looking toward Kanade, he gave her hand an affectionate squeeze. "Let's do what we did when we wanted to find Naoi and Yuri. Remember what we know of their past lives, check in our hometowns and the cities around them, and work our way out from there."

"Not very professional," Yuri tsked, raising an eyebrow. "This sounds less like an operation and more like randomly tracking down old friends."
"Yeah, but collectively it's an operation."

Yuri scoffed, but Otonashi vouched for him. "Hinata's right. Besides, it's no more amateur than going on a picnic and killing everyone in the hopes that we might get possessed by a demon."

"And it worked, didn't it?!"

"Too well," Hinata grunted, putting a hand to his mouth at the gruesome memory.

"Though seeing as you guys are all here, I guess your operation worked too," Yuri mused. She waved a hand dismissively. "I'm still taking over it."

Kanade's eyes twinkled with mirth. "I knew you would."

"And as leader, since I can tell this operation might take a while, I say in the meantime we should catch up. You know, hang out a little. Just as the graduation group," Yuri said, fondly looking over the lovable bunch of misfits who were taking up her TV room. "You guys can stay here for a little while if you want. I've only lived here for a few months, and it kind of sucks because my only visitors are a couple of work friends sometimes and my best friend from my old town."

When Kanade straightened up and gave her a surprised look, Yuri corrected herself.

"Best friend in this life, Kanade. Not in general."

This seemed to appease Kanade, who fell back against Otonashi's shoulder with a contented hum.

"Aww, Yurippe's lonely!" Hinata cooed. Ignoring her growls and adamant snarls of the contrary, he continued, "Well, we were going to crash on your couch and eat all your food anyway—"

"I expected as such." Smirking, she threw her hat at him, then got up from her seat and started towards the kitchen. "I'm starving. And I'm gonna make some coffee. You guys want anything?"

Hinata stood up too, sending the hat tumbling to the floor in his haste. "I will literally eat anything you make. I haven't eaten since this morning, all because Naoi refused to make any stops."

Kanade glanced up at him, bemused. "It's like he said, it was only a two hour drive. You could have packed something or eaten before we left."

"But getting fast food is part of the road trip experience!" Hinata argued, stomping his foot.

"...You are so strange."

Hinata attempted to maintain a look of indignation, but the faint traces of a grin tugged even more stubbornly at his lips. "Fair enough."

By this time, Otonashi had wandered into the kitchen toward Yuri, who was currently attending to a coffee pot. "Hey," he said hopefully, earning a curious glance from her, "any chance that's Key coffee you're making?"

Yuri held up the bag with the telltale logo, quirking a brow. "Of course. Is there any other kind?"

"Uh oh, don't tell Naoi," said Hinata, still grinning as he and Kanade entered the kitchen. "Any mention of Key coffee and he looks like he's seen a ghost."

"Okay, are you in love with this guy or something?" Yuri asked, squinting at him as she turned her back to the counter.
Hinata reddened furiously, a cherry tomato shade that Yuri interpreted to her amusement as a crush blush rather than irritation—even though he was showing his telltale temple throb.

"Hell no!" he snapped, jabbing a finger in her face. "Look who's talking!"

"May I remind you, that comeback means nothing to me," Yuri said coolly, before making her way to the fridge. "All I can say is I'm not the one going like 'Naoi this, Naoi that' every five seconds."

"Because you don't remember him." Coming up behind her, Kanade put a hand on her shoulder, and Yuri spun around at the touch. "Does that bother you?"

Kanade had a certain way of looking at people that made them wonder if she could read the truth in their eyes before they even tried to form a lie on their lips. Most people, Otonashi in particular, always caved.

Yuri was no exception, so she didn't even try to fight it for longer than a two-second hesitation. Even though she realized after a moment that the chill she was feeling had come from the fridge door she'd left open.

"Honestly, yeah," she said with a small, frustrated sigh. "You guys keep bringing him up like it's no big deal, and it just keeps reminding me that something's wrong with me. Not only that I'm out of the loop, but that somewhere along the line my brain screwed up." She nodded toward the one person here who could possibly understand even a little. "Otonashi, you remember how fun it is to have amnesia."

"So then why don't we just cure you the way Naoi cured Otonashi?" Hinata asked.

When Yuri gave the boys a blank look, Otonashi cleared his throat.

"Um. Hypnosis."

Yuri tensed, clenching her jaw and shaking her head vehemently. "Oh no. Absolutely not." She whirled back around and grabbed some ingredients out of the fridge, then slammed the door shut for emphasis.

Otonashi tilted his head in confusion, which eerily reminded Yuri of Kanade. "Why not? It worked on me then. We saw him hypnotize some guy into thinking he was a dango so we know at least one trick works in this life. We were going to try using it on the other members of Battlefront anyway."

"Then why don't you just save his powers for them?" Yuri turned her focus and her aggression to chopping food instead of body parts. "Sorry, but I can't just trust a guy I don't know to pull some sort of hypnosis crap on me. These are my memories we're talking about. I don't want to be his test run."

Hinata scratched his hair. "I don't get it—do you want to remember Naoi or not?"

"I don't know, okay?" Yuri slammed another door—the pots and pans cabinet this time. "Can we just drop it?"

"Alright. Geez." Holding up his hands in surrender, Hinata backed away until he could use Kanade as a barrier between him and Yuri. "Anyway, I guess a lot of people would kill to forget their exes entirely."

"Lucky me. Change the subject."

After lunch, while Hinata was in the TV room eagerly doing online research and Kanade was
skimming through a phonebook, Otonashi joined Yuri in the kitchen to help her clean up and put away the dishes. His sudden presence made her smile to herself. It was almost like they were up on the roof of the administration building again and nothing had changed, save for their coming to grips with their lives.

She'd had only two siblings in this life and she'd lost them too, in a car crash that killed their grandparents as well. There was nothing she could have done, and she'd accepted that. Granted, it had taken a while, but one day she didn't feel so alone anymore. Maybe the same thing had happened to Otonashi.

"Is there anything interesting going on out there, or are you just completely out of it?"

Yuri snapped her gaze to Otonashi, who was regarding her with a look of amused interest. She'd been zoning out, staring straight ahead through the kitchen window above the sink but seeing nothing, only thinking.

"Completely out of it," she admitted, resuming her dish scrubbing. "Thinking about this life, what I've gone through... Did the universe screw you over again too?"

By the understanding glint in his eyes, he knew who she was indirectly asking about. "Yeah. It sure did." He flicked his stare over her shoulder in the direction of the TV room, then it returned to her. "But it gave me something back."

It was physically impossible for her to hold back a smile. "It's really good to see you guys again."

"Same here," Otonashi said warmly, over the clink of clean dishes he was stacking in the cupboard above his head. "I think this may be our best operation yet."

Well, that wasn't saying much, considering their past operations often involved gore and death. But still, she had to agree with him. It was nice that it wasn't about war anymore. It was about being together with everyone. Everyone who had mattered so much to her, who she'd fought to protect.

She still couldn't believe they'd really come for her. Hinata, Otonashi, Kanade... and...

"You know..." Otonashi faltered, looking as if he was silently chewing a thought as she handed him another dish. Arching an eyebrow, Yuri coaxed him on. Otonashi put the dish away, then turned to face her, rubbing the back of his head. "He didn't say much because he was too busy trying to convince you that you know each other, but..."

As if not naming any names wasn't breaking the "let's not talk about it" rule. Yuri tried not to huff in his face impatiently, but she did make sure to blatantly return her attention to the sink.

"He missed you, Yuri." She opened her mouth to speak, but Otonashi shook his head. "I know that doesn't mean anything to you. And believe me, he knows too. Just... keep that in mind, will you?"

In the TV room, Hinata was yelling something about a city called Kyuuuya. Elsewhere, a door clicked shut—to the bathroom, maybe. So much going on. So much to think about. Yuri turned on the faucet and let the lukewarm water flow steadily down the drain.

If only the water would take all the chaos with it.

He'd been here. He'd been right here when he did it. On this bridge, in this exact spot.

Under any other circumstances, he would feel like an idiot. A week before, he wouldn't have even
set foot on this bridge if Otonashi paid him a million yen to do it (well, perhaps he would, but he was trying to prove a point with this thought).

And now here he was, at the exact same time of night, leaning against the same side of the bridge and resting his arm in the same way as he had nearly four years ago. He even had the engagement ring pinched between his fingers for crying out loud! The déjà vu was undeniable. It had happened. Exactly like this.

When he'd come home and opened the box to see the photos and rings again, the relief had been overwhelming. So he wasn't losing his mind. But for some awful reason, almost as if being under his own hypnotism, he'd driven to the bridge later that evening with the engagement ring in his jacket pocket.

There was a reason he'd never wanted to come back here, and it was for that same reason he was standing here now. The fear that being here would make all the things he'd denied about them feel real. For the second time in six months, that fear had been validated.

The first time he'd gone, it was to prove to himself that the place held no sentimental value, and that he was capable of crossing the bridge without his mind wandering and yearning. Ultimately he failed that test; halfway across the bridge, he saw a familiar dark blue car out of the corner of his eye and whipped around sharply to see if it was hers.

Scolding himself viciously—he wasn't supposed to care about something like that!—he'd abruptly turned back to the path and forced himself to cross more quickly. And that had been the end of his solo trips to the bridge.

Until tonight.

Tonight, he needed that sentimental value. For the sake of his own sanity, he needed to feel it.

And God, did he feel it.

The anxiety, the way he'd licked his lips and wondered how even after a few drinks at the restaurant his throat was desert dry. The nerves, how he'd gripped the ring so tightly after taking it out of his pocket when she was looking the other way that he worried it would sink into his skin. And the love...

God, how he'd loved...

There was a sudden difference of texture, flesh meeting flesh where there was once metal separating them, and Ayato felt his heart leap just as the ring did. Out from between his pinched fingertips and into the air.

"Shit—NO!"

He lunged for it, reaching his hand out over the edge, but missed the golden band by mere inches just as the tiny trinket plunged into the river below. It didn't even make a splash, or a small plunk. The only sound he heard was the gentle flow of the water beneath the bridge, mixed with his own rapid breaths as he tried to make sense of everything that had just happened.

Her ring. Over their bridge.

Unbelievable.

But he hadn't heard a splash. Maybe it had dropped onto a spot of land below. And even if it had
silently landed in the water, he would scour the river for it if he had to. The only thing on his mind, the only thing that mattered at the moment was *there's no way I'm losing that fucking ring.*

At the end of the bridge was a small staircase that led down under the bridge. More often than not, he and Yuri spent precious moments on top of that bridge. But it was underneath another, seeking shelter from the rain that had already drenched them anyway, that they'd...

Ayato absentmindedly grazed his lower lip at the memory, with the fingers that had recently betrayed him. It took him a few seconds to notice what he was doing.

He really wasn't trying anymore, was he…?

Sighing, he flicked open his cell phone to use the screen as a light, and scrutinized every inch of land for a green or purple twinkle. When nothing turned up but a yellow twist-tie, he moved his search to the water, not really giving a damn that his pant legs were getting soaked.

Ugh, he really should have checked the water first. Who knew how far it would have floated downstream by now?

"Looking for this?"

Ayato whipped around in the middle of the river with a sharp intake of breath, the water sloshing at his knees. At the edge of the river, a small leather-vested man with an obvious skin condition was grinning broadly at him and holding out his hand as if beckoning him back to land. He held out the object in his palm at just the right spot that the moonlight made the gold sparkle brighter than his skin.

Relief rested his heart for all of two seconds as he trudged out of the water, breathing a barely audible "thank you." If not to this strange man, then to whatever power in this twisted universe that had finally made one thing go his way. And then that vanished when he reached for it and the man instantly retracted his hand.

"Ah-ah-ah!" the man said, and waggled a finger at him with his free hand. When Ayato stopped in his tracks, the older man examined the jewelry in his grasp. "What were you doing throwing away such a lovely ring?"

"I didn't mean to," Ayato shot back in defense, more harshly than he'd intended. "I was clumsy with it and it slipped through my fingers."

The man grinned again, showing all his yellowed teeth. "You ought to be more careful. You might end up losing it again." He held out the ring for him to take, but as Ayato reached for it again, he changed his mind and recoiled once more. "That is… if you earn it back."

What little gratitude he had left for this man evaporated with a sharp hiss of anger, burned up by indignation. "Earn it back? How dare you take it away from me!"

"I," the man said coolly, leaning in close enough that Ayato could smell his foul breath, "saved it."

"Good for you. Now return it to its rightful owner."

The man burst into hoots and cackles, his raised eyebrows suggesting an amused sense of astonishment at Ayato's gall. "Rightful owner! Do my ears deceive me? I hardly think you deserve the ring back after you treated it so poorly, tossing it away like that."

Ayato growled, clenching and unclenching his fists. "I told you, I didn't mean to. It was an accident."
"Was it…?" the man sneered. "Or maybe you just didn't want it anymore."

"That's not it at all!" This man was absolutely ridiculous, and Ayato was steadily growing more and more impatient with him. "If I didn't want it anymore, why would I be fighting so hard to get it back?"

The man smiled coldly, considering his words for a moment. "Well, then someone so clumsy with a ring shouldn't be handling it in the first place. I think it would be safer with me."

Ayato was one "last straw" away from calling the police or punching this man's face in, though he really did not want to make this more complicated than it needed to be. As it was, this man was almost as bad as his father, or at least a version of him with a weird sense of humor.

His fingers twitched in his fists. Punching him might feel like punching his father. And as of late, he'd deeply wanted to hit or kick things.

"Why are you being so difficult?" he rasped, rage singeing his throat.

The man chuckled. "Why should I give it back to you?"

"Because it's mine!"

"Mine!" the man echoed dubiously. "My, my, my, what an incredibly childish response. Absolutely juvenile, like a toddler. I almost believe you only want it back because it's in my possession."

Ayato had had about enough of this man's assumptions. He was acting like this was a game of finders-keepers. They weren't children fighting over an interesting rock or a coin they found on the street. "This isn't just some trinket you can steal away from me," he muttered. "It's not just a possession."

Interest flickered on the man's discolored face.

"Is that so?" He glanced at Ayato, then at the ring he was twisting between his fingers. His sneer returned as quickly as it had gone. "Does it mean anything to you?"

Frowning and cutting his eyes to the side, Ayato nodded slightly. "It's an engagement ring."

The man made a small "ah" of understanding. "And you're planning to ask someone special to marry you with it."

"I already did," Ayato said dryly. "We're divorced."

"You're asking her to remarry you, then," the man amended with a grin.

Ayato's mouth fell open in surprise, and disgruntled embarrassment burned his cheeks. Ridiculous, and utterly impossible. He couldn't even if he wanted to. As if Yuri would accept the proposal of a complete stranger.

"I want it back," he said lowly, meeting the man's beady stare, "because it's a symbol of our relationship."

"I beg your pardon?"

"What I mean is," Ayato twisted restlessly at his wristwatch until it nipped at his skin, "it's evidence of what we had together."
An odd sort of smile twitched at the man's mouth. "Oh, but aren't your memories enough?"

Ayato scoffed.

"Memories," he said. "She doesn't have hers. She doesn't have anything of me."

He eyed the ring in the man's hand.

"And I admit, I spent a long time hiding that ring away, along with so much else. But I can't do that anymore." His arms falling to his sides, he clenched his fingernails in his quaking palms. "I can't forget like she did. I never fully could."

He met the man's mischievous gaze firmly, squaring his shoulders. It didn't matter what this ring-napper thought of him anymore. He was just another obstacle in the way, and there was one surefire way of getting rid of obstacles.

"I need that ring back," Ayato said, taking a step forward, "and you're going to give it to me."

The strange man's eyes glittered, almost like a shark's, but his resulting grin was more like a crocodile's. So the thief wasn't afraid of him?

Ayato harrumphed, narrowing his eyes in preparation.

_He should be._

Heat and concentration pooled at the back of his head, along with an all-too-familiar keening sound that seared through his brain. The red was there, reflected in the man's swamp-colored eyes. He had him now.

"Look into my eyes," he said sharply. The man stiffened like a board, which almost startled Ayato out of focus. Strange. His mind was surprisingly less stubborn than Yuri's, or even Ryou's. "Now, give the engagement ring to me."

The hand that held the ring began to twitch and tremble, as if it was fighting much harder than the mind. One by one, the fingers began to unfold…

And then Ayato inhaled sharply as the man's free hand grasped his collar, his breath cut off when his hand wrapped around his throat. As his antagonist's eyes darkened dangerously, his grip tightened. Squeezing mercilessly, cutting off every gasp for air.

"That," he snarled in Ayato's ear, "is not going to work."

He released him without warning, throwing him roughly to the ground. Ayato felt the back of his head smash against something hard, and then everything around him began to blur together as if it were all one big hallucination.

In fact, he could have sworn he saw the man vanish into thin air—before the April night disappeared into darkness.

**Preview:**

"What... are you... doing here?"

"Do you think you're well enough to tell us who did this to you?"
"Well, today's just full of surprises, isn't it?"

"Did you turn into an entirely different person?"

"Yuri wouldn't have had anything to do with me."

"Please don't give up on her the way she gave up on you."

"It's not like Yuri would have come along and woken you up with true love's kiss."

"I'll see what I can do."

[Chapter 09]: **Ayame's Advice.**
When he came to, things were a bit brighter. And despite the cold washcloth draped across his forehead, the ache in his skull was killing him.

He cracked open one eye, and then the other just a sliver, enough to recognize his own sitting room in his own house. More lights were on than usual, though, which was odd. He didn't even remember coming home. And he certainly didn't remember any of his pillows being this… comforting.

Or warm…

He shifted his head upwards an inch, and that was a big mistake. Groaning in pain, he returned to his original spot, then sighed blissfully when gentle and slender fingers stroked his hair in a steady rhythm.

"Ryou, dear, I think he's awake."

If he wasn't then, he certainly was now. His breath caught in his throat. That voice… it couldn't be.

He cautiously opened his eyes again, only to see the same shade of gold glittering down at him.

"Mother?" he asked quietly, then winced at the awful strain on his throat.

She hushed him, leaning and tilting her head down to kiss the top of his hair. Strands of black hair mixed with grey tickled his nose, and he waivered between a smile and a frown. His father was aging her too quickly.

"Yes, Ayato," she said, resuming her maternal ministrations to his hair. "It's me."

His mother. Ayame Naoi. Here in Mizuzaka. How was this even possible?

"What… are you… doing here?" He rubbed his throat, wincing again. There was some swelling, he should have suspected.

"Your friend and I found you unconscious under a bridge," his mother said softly. "You were in bad shape, so we took you back to your house to take care of you."

He shook his head—another bad move. "No… you know that's not what I meant."

She caught his eyes, understanding, and gave him a sad little smile. Of course she knew, she was telling him silently, but now wasn't the time to explain such unpleasant things. Just as he was about to pry, a head of violet hair popped into view in the kitchen pass-through.

"How's he doing, Mrs. Naoi?" Ryou asked, lightly waving a small bottle of wine-red liquid in her hand.

"A little hoarse, dear," said his mother, giving her a little nod.

Returning the nod, Ryou exited the kitchen and meandered over to the couch where she was resting with Ayato in her lap. The younger of the two women knelt down and poured a tiny amount of the red liquid into a spoon, then brought it to his mouth. "Here," she said. "Drink this."
As much as he hated being coddled, Ryou knew what she was doing. He'd learned of her decision to switch to nursing a few months back while trying to wheedle Yuri's address out of her, so he could trust that whatever was in that stuff would help. Obediently, he opened his mouth and accepted the remedy, heaving a grateful sigh after the soothing medicine trickled down his throat.

"Thank you, Ryou," he said, and quietly marveled at his voice's fast improvement. The crackle-and-sandpaper quality had come and gone.

"No problem." She capped the bottle and set it on the coffee table, then turned her attention back to her patient. "Do you think you're well enough to tell us who did this to you?"

Ayato wracked his aching brains for an identity, and found none. "I don't know his name. But suffice it to say, I'll be careful who I try to hypnotize after this."

His mother peered at him questioningly, while Ryou's expression quickly grew stern.

"See that you do!" she said, furrowing her eyebrows and getting back on her feet. "I knew that hypnotism stuff was dangerous."

"Hypnotism?" his mother repeated, still befuddled. "What hypnotism? What are you two talking about?"

"It doesn't matter, because he's going to regulate it from now on," came Ryou's voice from a little ways down the hall. She sounded like she was near the hall closet.

Despite Ryou's attempt to brush the matter off, his mother was still silently asking him a question. Her lips pursed in that way that always got her answers—from her son, at least.

Ayato sighed. "It's just a trick that I learned."

She seemed to accept his answer, or at least recognize that he would say nothing more on the subject.

"Well, it's good that you have a nurse for a friend," she said after a brief silence. She smiled down at him again. "Miss Fujibayashi was a great help to me in locating you."

"How did you?" When her mouth twitched into a hesitant frown and she opened it to say something, he shook his head. "And not later. Tell me now."

She looked away, staring straight at the wall, then slowly continued petting his head. Her caution gave away one thing—she'd done something she'd been conditioned to believe that she shouldn't.

"I've missed you every second of every day, Ayato," she said quietly. "But I understand why you wouldn't tell me where you were going when I said I couldn't go with you—"

"You could've."

She paused to give him a warning look, but he stared defiantly back up at her. Nevertheless, she gave a soft shake of her head and continued.

"He would have gotten it out of me sooner or later, I'm sure. He certainly tried to get it out of the Nakamuras, but you know how they intimidate him." She laughed to herself. "And it's difficult to get ahold of them anyway. Such a busy couple. I always knew where Yuri got her type A personality…"

As painful as it was, Ayato cleared his throat. Painful, but entirely necessary.
Her lips quirked, unamused with him, but she got the message. "I don't know how he did it. Maybe he has connections to the town. Maybe he tracked you down like the bloodhound he is. But I overheard your father—" she paused when he flinched in her lap, then continued unapologetically, "talking to few visitors when they came asking for you, and he told them you were here."

Ayato tensed again. "They told me he only knew the city."

"He does. But that's all I needed to come find you," she said, brushing the bangs out of his eyes. "I will always find you."

The surge of affection he felt for his mother was displaced momentarily by a rush of stern, protective concern. Yes, when people loved one another, they would always find each other. But there were circumstances where you couldn't just dive in headfirst.

"And just how did you get past him?" Ayato ventured, not making any attempt to mask the edge of suspicion in his tone.

"I told him I was visiting 'the family,'" she replied matter-of-factly. "Since he was busy in the workshop and all, and he loathes my side of the family, of course he wouldn't want to come."

She sounded rather pleased with herself, but Ayato opened and closed his mouth for a few seconds before forcing himself into a sitting position. "You lied to him?!"

"No, Ayato," she said, grasping his hands in hers. "You're my family. And don't strain your vocal cords like that."

"He's not going to take it that way!" His throat urged him not to ignore her motherly warning, but he was too alarmed by her gall. Where in the world had this come from? "What if he tries to contact your other family members and you're not there? If he finds out—" His gaze flicked to the bruises on her arms and wrists, which despite his firm grip had not come from his own fingertips.

"He won't," she assured him, although he detected the seeds of doubt in her eyes. "I won't be here long, and like I told you, he's very busy."

"But it was you who compared him to a bloodhound," Ayato muttered, more to himself than to her. "And apparently now he makes it his business to know things that concern me."

The back of her hand ghosted across his forehead, now that the washcloth had fallen to the floor.

"Ayato… don't worry about me." She forced him to meet her solemn stare. "Worry about yourself, or else I have to keep doing it for you."

Sighing, she leaned back against the couch with her hands clasped in her lap. "I came to Mizuzaka to see you, Ayato, and I'm glad I did. I'd been searching for you for half an hour when I met your friend Ryou. It felt like fate, until we found that you weren't home."

"But then I remembered Yuri telling me about the bridge and why it was important to her, and I had a feeling you'd be there," said Ryou, returning to the TV room with an armful of pillows and blankets and then setting them down on the empty side of the couch. "We didn't expect to find you passed out underneath it."

Ayato scoffed. "Well, today's just full of surprises, isn't it?"

At this, Ryou noticeably winced, and at the same time, his mother was glancing around the house with an eyebrow raised in confused appraisal.
"I meant to ask, but where is Yuri?" she inquired. "Did something happen to her? Ryou said it was best if I heard it from you."

Well, that'd be Ryou. He glanced at the shy nurse, who was chewing at her lip again as she turned her stare pointedly away from the two of them. Always keeping secrets.

His mother, who'd grown visibly unnerved by his silence, noticed the look and let out a sharp breath.

"She died in childbirth, didn't she?" She turned to give his hands a tighter squeeze. "Oh, Ayato, I warned you when you bought the ring that the girl didn't have proper birthing hips——"

Where on earth had his gentle, mellow mother learned to speak so freely, especially in front of guests? Mortified, Ayato wrenched his hands away and opened his mouth to correct her, but then she mentioned something that brought on even more panic, like a door to his memory slammed open in his still-thudding head. He patted his jacket and pant pockets, but it was fruitless.

The ring. He'd never gotten an identity to the man. The man still had the ring. It might very well be lost to him forever.

"—but of course you told me, 'her hips are just fine——'"

"Mother!" he said, exasperated. At the moment, Yuri's hips were the last thing he wanted to talk or think about. Especially since he had been straddling them on this very couch right before everything changed. Great, now he was thinking about it. "Yuri is alive, and she certainly didn't die in childbirth. If she had, wouldn't I still have a child to show you?"

His mother made a small noise of consideration. "If you were lucky."

Ayato rolled his eyes. "As it is, I never got her pregnant in the first place," he muttered. No child to show for their union, and now no ring either. But that was his doing.

"And it's unlikely you ever will."

Was she attacking her hips or her fertility now? Though of course his mother wouldn't mean any of these things personally, or else she wouldn't have helped him pick out a ring for Yuri shortly before he moved away with her. She wasn't going to be happy with him for already losing both.

"You're right about that," he said at last. "We've been divorced for six months."

He watched her expression fall, and carefully calculated the timing for the bombshell to take effect. In five, four, three, two…

"Divorced?" Slowly, then all at once, blatant disapproval took over her aged features. "Divorced! After all the criticism you gave me about my marriage, you couldn't even last half a decade, that is NOT the hardworking son I know——"

Cringing at her words, he turned away and sank deeper into the couch cushions. Yes, he knew her opinions on divorce. Or else she might not be so stubborn about staying with an abusive pile of trash. It just seemed terrible to be with someone after they've made it clear they don't love you, no matter what you feel for them.

But here his mother was, married to Kimito Naoi and waiting on him hand and foot, while giving him lip for his relationship choices. And even pulling the "who are you and what have you done with Ayato" crap on him. For some reason, that really rubbed him the wrong way.
"Did you turn into an entirely different person in the last four years since I've seen you?" she demanded.

"Of course not!" He was starting to miss the coddling right about now. Perhaps she'd forgotten that her son had been choked and knocked out cold. "That's ridiculous!"

"Well, the Ayato I know was madly, endlessly in love with Yuri Nakamura and wouldn't let anything come between them. Not even his father." The hand she placed on his shoulder was much gentler than her stare. "I can't imagine a bigger obstacle he might've faced. Which makes me wonder… is that Ayato gone?"

Outwardly, he froze, but her words had left him utterly shaken. The bedrock of all he'd believed for the last six months, the bedrock that had withstood quite a few cracks in the last 48 hours or so, was collapsing.

At first, yes, he'd amended that this life had mattered because it had happened. Yuri denying its existence had frustrated him because it wasn't logical. The pictures, the ring, and the locket had existed. Still, he held on to the belief that their time together in this life was too artificial to factor into who they truly were. Almost like a special episode in a series where the characters did something that wouldn't last in canon. Yes, it was a real episode, but it wouldn't be used for continuity, and they'd pick up where they left off.

But if that were true… it would mean that his mother was unintentionally correct—he wasn't the son she knew four years ago. She only knew and gave birth to the son who grew up to fall in love with Yuri. If that version of him was gone, then how could he still love his mother and fear his father the same way for the same things they did? In a life that wasn't supposed to matter to him? What made those feelings still real, while he sorted his feelings for Yuri into the categories "post-memories self" and "pre-memories self"?

He was so tired of feeling like two Ayatos at once, tired of all these confusing thoughts. Tired of the hassle of juggling two lives and an afterlife in his head, and trying to keep himself sane by separating them.

"I don't want to talk about that," he muttered. "Thinking about all of this hurts my head."

His mother and Ryou shared a regretful look.

"That's right," said Ryou. "He did hit the back of his head on a rock. I'm sure the last thing he wants to do is talk or think about his ex-wife!"

He shifted a suspicious glance in her direction. She was fiddling with her fingers, and her smile seemed too nervous and wavering. She was too eager to change the subject, much more eager than he was.

And then it hit him—as hard as that rock but a bit less painful.

"Actually, Ryou," he said, as calmly and pleasantly as possible while his mother propped a pillow behind his head, "may I speak to you alone for a moment?"

The girl continued smiling as she accepted his request, but now her stance was doubly tense, like a doe who felt someone looking down at her through the barrel of a gun. Ayato got to his feet, reminded his mother to make herself at home, then he led Ryou by the wrist to the far end of the hall.

"Tell me, Ryou," he said once they were alone. "Yuri lived with you for quite a while, isn't that right?"
Ryou nodded. "Just until she found a place to live."

"And did you try to entertain her with any magic tricks?" Ayato asked. "I know you're interested in that sort of thing."

"Just fortune-telling." Ryou shrugged modestly. "I tried to cheer her up once by reading her fortune, but she didn't really care to hear about her future."

"I see. Just one more question, then."

Ayato leaned forward with his eyes narrowed, observing her reaction carefully.

"By the time she moved out… did Yuri still know who I was?"

The girl nearly leaped into the air like a shocked frog. If at all possible, her eyes grew even larger. "Y-yes!" she squeaked.

Whether or not she was telling the truth, she was holding something back from him. Ayato pointed an accusing finger at Yuri's shaken conspirator.

"You knew!" he snarled. "You knew she wouldn't remember me! That's why you were trying to keep me from her!"

"I—I only wanted to protect you both—"

"What did you do?" he demanded, balling up his fists. "Why is she like this?"

Wincing, Ryou hugged herself protectively. "I didn't do this to her, I swear! I don't have that kind of magic!"

"Somebody does!" When his shout left an echo, he sighed and lowered his voice. "I just want to know who did this to her and why." He leaned against the wall, thumping his head against the surface—yet another bad move. He sank down a few inches, his shoulders slumped. What did he do to be the only one forgotten completely?

Ryou closed her eyes and was silent for a minute. Possibly debating whether or not she should tell him something.

"She's under some sort of spell," she said, opening her eyes again. Ayato cast a curious glance at her, silently urging her to go on. "There's this strange man… I can't speak his name, but I know he's associated with a lot of dark magic. I know he's responsible for the spell."

"A spell that makes her specifically forget me?" Ayato frowned. What did this magic guy have against him? "I don't understand…"

Ryou gave him another sad smile.

"That's something you might need to figure out on your own," she said, her hands primly clasped in front of her. "Even I can't fully understand everyone's choices. Not even my own. I just try to read the possibilities of their future."

She was trying to be vague to throw him off the subject, he could tell, but he took the bait. "Probably best not to try to understand their choices anyway," he said, crossing his arms. "There are some people whose choices only make sense to them when they're making them."

Ryou eyed him thoughtfully after that, and he felt a little like one of her fortune-telling cards. He
shifted nervously under her stare, until she reached into her pocket and took out something small and golden.

"This was lying next to your hand when we found you." She held it out to him in her open palm, and his breath caught in his throat. "Your pant legs were a little damp, like you'd been looking for it in the river. Did you make a choice that didn't make sense?"

At first his brain registered nothing but the ring in front of him. Gingerly, he picked it up and examined it, newly admiring the beauty of green against purple. He had a feeling Ryou wouldn't judge him for lovingly petting it in relief.

Then he recognized her question, and softly shook his head once he made sense of it. "No… it was nothing like that. Letting it go was an accident. Someone caught it and wouldn't return it to me, even after I tried to hypnotize him." He grazed the golden band, tracing the jewels with his fingers. "I thought I'd lost it for good."

"Your mother said it was Yuri's engagement ring," said Ryou, gazing at it too. Then she looked up and tilted her head at him. "Is it still important to you?"

He nodded, pocketing it. "I want to show it to her, to see if it jogs her memories."

Ryou frowned. "I guess that could possibly be strong enough," she said, "but then again I don't know how his magic works."

"It's worth a shot." He raised his wrist to check his watch. "Now, what time is it? I was going to—"

Nothing there but flesh.

When he glanced back up in confusion, Ryou looked just as puzzled as he was. "Did you or my mother take off my watch for some reason?"

"What watch?"

"The wristwatch I'm always wearing." Scratching his head, Ayato let out a low, frustrated groan. "It's black, engraved... pretty damned expensive?"

"You weren't wearing it when we found you," Ryou said timidly.

"...He returned the engagement ring, but took my watch in exchange for it." Ayato rubbed his temples, feeling the effects of his headache at the realization. "Unbelievable."

Since the divorce, he'd reasoned that there was no reason to hide the watch away with the rest of the Yuri stuff; it may have been an anniversary gift, but it was still a fully practical one. Thus reassured, he'd kept it with him at all times. And now... now some bastard was walking around with his "Ayato—till the end of time—Yuri" watch.

"...It's 22:36, if you still want to know," Ryou supplied, after a heavy silence.

It'd been such a long day. "I'll report it stolen in the morning," he said with a sigh. It was too late at night to drive back to Noroi, heaven help him if he showed up on Yuri's doorstep after midnight shoving pictures and an engagement ring in her face. Besides, by some miracle, his mother was here with him. He turned to Ryou, tired and sheepish but grateful. "Thanks for everything you've done tonight. For bringing my mother to me, and taking care of me too."

"Whatever I can do to help," said Ryou. It was no wonder she was a nurse. "And if you were
planning to go back to Noroi, I can make arrangements for your mother to stay with me if she wants to stay in Mizuzaka a little longer."

The offer made Ayato raise an eyebrow. "You'd do that?"

"Sure!" Ryou nodded toward the older woman, who was passing by the other end of the hall to get to the kitchen. "I already suggested it while we were looking for you after we saw you weren't home. I remembered that if my intuition was wrong and you weren't somewhere in Mizuzaka, it was possible you were already in Noroi instead, so I told her she could stay with me for a while if we couldn't find you. We were getting along great, so it would be no problem!"

"You're being rather generous to me after I hypnotized you and your friend," Ayato noted. "Why are you doing all this?"

Ryou mulled over his question in silence, then unclasped her hands and let her arms fall at her sides. "It's what the Yuri with her memories would have wanted," she said in a quiet voice.

Not if he recalled correctly. Not if, according to Ryou, the Yuri who still had her memories was the Yuri who let the phone ring when she saw his name on her caller ID, the same Yuri who ignored him for weeks and moved without even saying goodbye.

No, not her.

"Yuri wouldn't have had anything to do with me," he said under his breath, before pushing past Ryou and striding down the hallway towards the kitchen. He only paused when he heard a phone buzz.

"It's mine," Ryou said when he started to search. She flicked her phone open to read the text. "It's Youhei. I should head out. But give me a call if you need anything. Your mother has my number."

He nodded at her in acknowledgement and in thanks, but said nothing she passed him by. He was on his way to the kitchen again when he felt a snag on his sleeve, and fingers wrapping tightly around his wrist.

"And Naoi?" she said, in a soft but imploring way that caught his attention. "I know this is hard, but... please don't give up on her the way she gave up on you."

With that, she drifted through the TV room to the foyer and closed the door behind her.

Leaving him to dwell on what in the world that could possibly mean.

The next morning, during breakfast, Ayato filled his mother in on his plans for the day, and was immensely relieved to find out that she understood.

"And I appreciate Ryou's offer, but I have to decline," his mother said through sips of hot tea, which earned her a surprised sound and a raised eyebrow from her son. "I told you last night I wouldn't be staying long."

He didn't mean his next words, but they slipped out anyway. "Then what was the point?"

"I merely wanted to see my son after four years," she said calmly, "and so I did. I have no regrets."

"Hmm," he said, though he was sure she knew how to translate it. *I hope it stays that way, knowing your husband.* But in response she gave him the same defiant, smug stare she'd received from him
last night. "Your timing is impeccable by the way."

"I know you're being sarcastic," said his mother, harrumphing a bit into her eggs. "But if I hadn't come when I did, who knows how long you would have been lying underneath that bridge? It's not like Yuri would have come along and woken you up with true love's kiss."

Ayato squinted at her. "Thank you, Mother," he said after a beat.

"There you go with that cold hard sarcasm again." She stabbed determinedly at her eggs with a fork, only barely hiding a smirk. "Must've been what scared her off in the first place."

He heaved a suffering sigh and rested his forehead against his hand.

"I'm sorry, Ayato."

That had to be his mother's trademark phrase, though most of the time it wasn't him it was directed at. Ayato frowned at the thought and brushed it off; thinking of such things always made him regret not insisting she come live in Mizuzaka with him.

"Why do you do this?" he asked.

"Because I love you," she said matter-of-factly. Then her features softened as she stared down into her tea mug. "And because I just don't understand what could have possibly happened to make the two of you fall apart. I can't imagine her ever having an affair."

"No, it wasn't anything like that," Ayato assured her.

"Of course it wasn't," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "That girl was loyal to you. Protective, too. She would never leave your side, let alone for someone else's."

"She moved two hours away from me," he reminded her.

She didn't bat an eye. "Was that before or after you divorced her?" When he clamped his mouth shut and lowered his eyes to his plate, he heard her chuckle knowingly. "That's what I thought."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying…" His mother released a small sigh and scooted her tea mug aside. "Why is it you've wanted me to come live here in Mizuzaka?"

"So you can be as far away from him as possible," Ayato said automatically. "So he doesn't keep hurting you. So he can't ever hurt you again."

His mother tilted her head in a way that implied he could come to his own conclusions. "Exactly."

"Wh—I never—" Ayato sputtered his indignation, flushing what he could only guess was an angry scarlet. "Don't compare me to him! I—"

"—would never put your hands on Yuri like that, I know," she finished for him. "I remember your vow. I'm just saying." She left them in meaningful silence as she paused to glance out the window. "Sometimes a woman just has to protect herself."

He loved his mother dearly, but in this case she couldn't possibly understand the situation as well as she thought. On the other hand, he couldn't really explain it that well himself. The truth was hard to swallow.
"The divorce was mutual," he said after a while, settling on his signature safety line.

"All right, Ayato," she said, rolling her eyes and dabbing at her mouth with a handkerchief. "I'll let you live in your own little bubble."

"Hey…!"

Come noon, they were both ready to go back to where they needed to be (arguably, Ayato would say, in his mother's case). His mother had traveled light, and he had never really unpacked. Unfortunately, he'd left his things in his car, and Ryou had driven him and his mother home in hers last night. Luckily his mother didn't mind the fifteen minute walk. A little exercise never killed anyone, and the weather was still as perfect as it had been since mid-March when the snow left. Save for a few clouds, surprisingly, but Ayato wasn't going to get his hopes up—a comment that made his mother chuckle.

"In some ways, you haven't changed a bit," she said. "That's a comfort."

They arrived at the park shortly to find his car just as he had left it, box and traveling bags still inside, and he breathed out a sigh of relief. Though he really hadn't expected anyone to steal the lovable hunk of junk he called a car, there was still a ring in that box that men like the one last night might want to get their grubby, wrinkled hands on.

"Well then." Ayato opened the door to the passenger seat. "Should I drop you off at the train station?"

"Not yet." Her eyes had trailed a little ways down the path in the opposite direction. "I want to see this walking bridge that Ryou said Yuri was so fond of."

He crinkled his forehead, playing with the idea. Part of him liked any idea that kept his mother in Mizuzaka a second longer, but something else made his insides churn every minute she was here betraying his father just by seeing him.

But he might as well conquer his avoidance of the bridge. He shut the passenger door, locked it, and off they went, side by side.

Next thing he knew, he was sitting on the bench part of the bridge while she was across from him gazing out over the sparkling river. Her dark hair, usually neat in its bun, was getting mussed and loosened by the April wind, but she didn't seem to mind. He liked seeing her this carefree.

"I like this place better this way," she said, a smile fluttering across her face. "In the daytime, on a nice spring day like this. When we're both above it and you're not unconscious."

Ayato laughed. "Yeah, I guess it didn't give you a very good first impression," he said, meanwhile eyeing a few high school students who were heading across in their direction. "But it has its charms."

One of the kids, a lanky redheaded guy in a baseball cap, chimed in as he passed by, "It's totally haunted though."

"Yeah," said the girl walking next to him, tall, thick, and cerulean-haired. "They say if you come here on a cold, stormy night, you can hear a woman sobbing."

Ayato rolled his eyes. "Don't ruin this bridge with ghost stories!" he yelled after them.

"Kids," his mother scoffed.
They enjoyed the scenery together for a little while longer, her breathing in the fresh air while he listened to the birds chirping and the water's steady flow far beneath their feet. There was a spot like this not too far from the Naoi estate, but this place had the advantage of being nowhere near Kimito Naoi.

"People should always ask their sweethearts to marry them here." His mother turned away from the other side of the bridge to beam at him. "If I'd known about this place before, you might have had less of a struggle convincing me to move to Mizuzaka."

His heart leapt in his chest with hope. "Then why don't you?"

She hummed sadly at his eagerness. "I said you'd have less of a struggle. But just like you, I have someone waiting for me elsewhere. Someone I have to return to soon."

"But I'm going to return to Mizuzaka eventually," Ayato pointed out.

"Maybe I will too, someday." She walked over, bent down, and kissed the top of his head. "For now, it's time to go."

They left the bridge and headed to Mizuzaka Station, arriving just a few minutes early for her train's departure. In the front seat of the car, he unbuckled so that he could turn in his seat and embrace her. As he wrapped his arms around his mother's small form, it occurred to him that before this point he hadn't hugged her at all since she'd arrived.

"This is our first hug in four years," he mumbled into the fabric of her shoulder.

"It won't be the last." She cupped his face in her hands. "I know it's not safe to call you…"

"You've got Ryou's phone number. Maybe that wouldn't be too suspicious?"

She smiled, brushing the bangs out of his eyes again. "I'll see what I can get away with." Then, she leaned in and touched her forehead to his. "My brilliant, handsome boy. Do me a favor and see if you can't win Yuri back with that face."

Ayato tried to stifle a groan. It was a face she couldn't even remember. But he wanted to humor her before they were parted again for heaven knows how long.

"I'll see what I can do," he conceded.

"Good." She beamed at him. "I know you've been lonely. I don't want you to be lonely." She patted his cheek, then unbuckled and exited through the passenger door. After she shut it, she motioned for him to roll down the window, and he complied. "Take care, Ayato. I love you."

"I love you too, Mother."

He stayed in the parking lot to watch until she boarded safely. Then he pulled out of the parking lot and headed back in the direction of Noroi.

---

**Preview:**

"*Fate leads us to the people we're meant to meet.*"

"*If you're done throwing your little hissy fit.*"

"*So you don't... want your memories, then?*"
"Wait a minute… it actually worked."

"I just can't believe I noticed Yui and never Shiina!"

"His son? I thought his son was—"

"There's only you."

[Chapter 10]: **Back To Business.**

Chapter End Notes

Well, he had to get his affectionate side from somewhere. Right? Certainly didn't get it from his father. Good thing he has the ring back, in exchange for the anniversary watch though. Hm. I've never known Rumple to wear timepieces.

Another reunion coming up next! You just can't keep Naoi and Yuri away from each other forever.
"I can't believe it. All that time, she was seriously—"

"—right under your noses," Kanade automatically finished for Hinata, not even looking up from her book.

It was safe to say that, give or take time for sleep, Otonashi, Kanade, and Yuri had endured almost 24 hours of this. Otonashi was starting to feel a little like his "I'm telling Yui" joke from earlier had some validity to it.

Hinata wasn't deterred. "It's just, it's so strange. That whole time, the three of us were all in—"

"In Kyuuya. We know." Perched on the armrest of her couch, where she'd been peering over Hinata's shoulder, Yuri began rubbing her temples. "Your hometown. We get it."

"And I didn't even realize it!" Hinata said, pounding the couch with his fist. "Hell, I don't even remember seeing her in school!"

To Yuri, that really didn't seem too out of the ordinary. "Maybe you just didn't have any classes with her," she offered, then looked considering. "Or, actually maybe you did. She was probably sitting in the back corner in the shadows as usual, once in a while saying to herself, 'This is so stupid.'" Yuri and Otonashi both grinned at the memory. "You remember hearing any of that in Kyuuya?"

"All the time. We had terrible teachers."

Otonashi laughed. "I know the feeling. Shibuya had its share of boring teachers. It was tough just trying to stay in school and study hard, but Hatsune didn't want me to become a delinquent, so you do what you gotta do—load up on Key coffee and make friends with good influences." He gave Kanade's knee an affectionate pat, since her hands were occupied with the book.

Kanade lifted her gaze to the group. "I think what's bothering Hinata is based on something you mentioned yesterday," she said. "Fate leads us to the people we're meant to meet — and as far as he's concerned, he never met Shiina."

Hinata's frown and subsequent silence showed this to be the case, so Otonashi rested a hand on his shoulder.

"Yet," he reminded him. "There's a lot of Battlefront people we haven't run into, but we're going to. We didn't meet Yuri or Naoi either until just these past few days."

"Yurippe's different!" Hinata argued. "With Shiina, she lived in my—"
"—hometown," the other three said collectively.

The doorbell rang, and Yuri sprang up from her armrest. "I'll go get that," she said, pleased at the chance to get a respite from Hinata's redundancy.

As she neared the front door, it occurred to her that there were only a handful of people that it could be. Salesmen, Ryou, Sunohara, Okazaki, religious people, neighbors who had yet to make themselves familiar but were in need of a favor, and…

"Naoi."

The untidy dark hair, gold eyes, and sharp features were beginning to attach themselves to his name. She leaned against the wood of the door, the warning signs of a grin playing at her lips.

"Or is there some sort of pet name or term of endearment I should be calling you?"

"You never were the type," Naoi said, arching an eyebrow. "And I'm not sure it would be an acceptable thing to call your ex-husband."

"No, I suppose not." She nudged the door open a few centimeters wider and moved aside for him. "Come in. If you're done throwing your little hissy fit."

Naoi paused as he was stepping through the doorway. He turned to her, narrowing his eyes. "Hissy fit?" He was near enough to her face that the growl grazed her lips, but she didn't back down.

"What else would you call it?" she asked, and he scoffed in reply before finally entering the foyer. Kicking the door closed, she followed him down the hallway. "I told you what I did and didn't remember. You got all huffy, slammed the door behind you, and went home."

"I had something important to bring back here."

It was then that she noticed the brown shoebox in his hands. After what Otonashi had said to her the other day, she decided to humor him. "What's in the box? Something for my memories?"

He grunted in confirmation. So articulate, this guy. A little rough around the edges, but then again so were a few of the guys in the Battlefront. She followed a step behind him, only because there was some sort of discoloration on his neck. Deep purple splotches. She raised an eyebrow. Wow. Apparently he'd gotten up to more than he let on in the past day.

"By the way," she said, "Hinata and Otonashi told me about their side plan involving your hypnosis. And they explained your abilities."

Naoi slowed, side-eyeing her as they stopped just outside the TV room.

"You can tamper with memories and bring them back." At her words, a light seemed to come on in his head. As if he understood where she was getting at, but for some reason it had never even occurred to him.

Well, good.

"I'll allow it with the other Battlefront members if they don't have their Afterlife memories back," she said firmly. "But don't you dare try anything on me. Do I make myself clear?"

He pressed his lips into a moderate frown. "So you don't… want your memories, then?"

"Your skills are necessary for Battlefront-related memories, and I already have all of mine." The rest,
the ones involving him, were trivial and unneeded—or at least, her brain had seen fit to throw away whatever she knew of him.

Maybe it was for a reason.

"Otherwise, when it comes to hypnosis, I'd rather leave well enough alone if you don't mind." She tapped the lid of his shoebox. "You just stick to showing me whatever's in here."

Naoi was silent for a moment, but then he gave her a nod.

"I see." There was an uneasy edge in his tone. "In all fairness, using hypnotism on people who don't trust me has only gotten me into trouble." He absently rubbed at his throat, and Yuri noticed him wince slightly.

From this angle, she got a clearer view of the marks on his neck. They were finger-shaped. She clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Oh my God! I thought those were hickeys!" He gave her a skeptical, baffled look like she was absurd for even suggesting it, and she just shrugged. Okay, so she'd misjudged him for a second there. "Geez, what happened?"

"A man took something of mine. I used hypnotism to get it back. It failed—"

"—so he choked you." She frowned. Those bruises looked pretty bad, like they had to hurt. It was a wonder he could speak if the man's grip had been that strong. But another troubling thought crossed her mind. "The fact that your hypnosis failed on him is a little concerning. How many times have you done it before?"

"In this life?" She nodded. "Twice, not including the attempt I made on that guy."

Yuri cut her eyes to the side. "So your hypnosis isn't even a for-sure thing."

"Well," Naoi scoffed. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Behind his mask of cool sarcasm was a hint of real disappointment. She'd touched a nerve, but she wasn't quite sure how. "Well, in all fairness, I haven't even seen you do it," she amended, in her defense and his.

The hesitation and the look he gave her in response suggested otherwise. But he didn't correct her. "I suppose we'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he said. And with that, he moved past her into the TV room, the shoebox under his arm.

Yuri watched him as he joined the others. Hinata mussed Naoi's hair once he sat down next to him, and the latter slapped his hand away. The box, now sitting on the coffee table, had already drawn everyone's attention.

"I suppose we will," she mused.

"Heeey, look who's back!" Hinata said as Ayato crossed the room to him. Then he scrunched up his nose, blatantly staring at his friend's neck. "Uh—what's with the hickeys?"

"They aren't hickeys, you idiot." As he rounded the corner of the coffee table, Ayato dropped his box on the surface in exasperation. Now he remembered why he was always calling these people imbeciles. Unfortunately, the only seat that wasn't occupied by Otonashi, Kanade, or Yuri's hat was
next to said imbecile.

Hinata grinned cheekily at him as he sat down. "Sure they are! They're souvenirs from your trip to a bar or strip club to drown your sorrows after Yurippe burned you." He mussed Ayato's hair for good measure. "You dog!"

Mortified, Ayato swatted his hand away (and yearned to have his own cap right about now). "They're not hickeys!"

Of course, part of him knew that Hinata was messing with him, but he couldn't balance recognizing that, keeping a side-eye on Kanade and her fascination in the reappearance of the box, and mulling over that lingering feeling of unsettlement over his hypnotism in this world. It was too much already without him having to deal with Hinata's... jokes.

"They're not hickeys," he repeated, crossing his arms. "They're remnants of a failed attempt at hypnotism."

That got Otonashi's attention. "What do you mean 'failed attempt'?"

Ayato averted his eyes, hesitant to answer, but fortunately someone else took it from there. "While he was gone, some guy tried to take something from him," said Yuri, making her way to her armchair. Moving her hat out of the way, she landed in her seat with a plop and kicked up her long legs so that they dangled over the armrest. "When he tried hypnosis, apparently the other guy was able to defy him."

Kanade stared hard at Ayato. "But it worked twice before..."

Ayato sighed, shaking his head. "I know. I don't know what went wrong."

Chuckling, Hinata laid his hand on Ayato's shoulder. "That's okay, Naoi. It's just performance issues. It can happen to the best of us. One out of five—"

"I perform admirably, thank you very much," said Ayato, squinting at him in distaste.

"But not memorably." Hinata grinned shamelessly at him. "Not that Yurippe can recall, at least."

"She can't recall anything!"

Hinata just snickered, his grin growing wider at Yuri's own laughter and Ayato's increasing indignation. And then at Kanade's and Otonashi's faces when they realized the two weren't just talking about hypnotism.

"You know what?" he said, folding his arms behind his head. "I like this. I can work with this. This is quality comedic material here."

"I'm glad you're getting some good use out of our dysfunctional situation," Ayato said, clenching and unclenching his fists. He lowered his voice to a warning snarl. "Now I'm going to get some good use out of you."

Lifting a brow, Hinata turned his head—and Ayato met his gaze with glowing red eyes.

A keening buzz at the back of his mind, a reflection of crimson in Hinata's vacant, surprised stare, and a body gone rigid. Everything was going right so far.

"You're a stapler," he said lowly. He pointed to a stack of papers lying next to his shoebox, in front
of Hinata. "Go on, make yourself useful and staple those papers."

Hinata slammed his head onto the wooden coffee table.

"OW!"

Yuri smacked a hand over her mouth to stifle a howl of laughter, nearly choking with glee. An "oh my GOD" escaped her lips before it dissolved at the end into snorts and high-pitched giggles. Ayato smirked, falling back into his seat but straightening up slightly.

Glancing from the table to Hinata, who was groaning and rubbing his forehead, Otonashi gave Ayato a thoughtful look. "Wait a minute… it actually worked."

"Of course it did," said Ayato, preening. Although now that he was coming down from the sense of self-satisfaction it'd given him, he felt kind of bad. Not for Hinata, the idiot had deserved it. But for Ryou, because he'd given her the impression that he'd back off on the hypnotism.

Then again, he'd said he'd be careful who he hypnotized. And she'd asked him to regulate it. It should be used for good—not on people he couldn't trust, or who didn't trust him. Someone could get hurt again.

"Then if there's nothing wrong with your hypnotic abilities, why didn't it work on that other guy?" Otonashi asked.

"He must have some kind of defense built up against hypnotism," said Kanade, "and other mind tricks."

Ayato considered this for a moment. "His body did seem to be resisting."

Though looking back, it felt as if the man had been mocking him all along. He'd feigned powerlessness, like a lion being wrestled by a tiny cub. It was embarrassing how easily the man had pushed him out.

"Well, it doesn't matter. It was a fluke," he said. He straightened up some more, feeling another smirk cross his face. "And why are we so invested in this topic? Have the four of you made so little progress without me?"

The shared glances of recollection among the group looked like a good sign to Ayato. Even Hinata, who had still been glaring bitterly at him, seemed to perk up considerably.

"Oh, right!" said Otonashi with a start, giving Kanade's knee a pat. "We decided we're going to look for Shiina. Any thoughts?"

Ayato shrugged. "You could choose worse."

"Yurippe wanted to find Noda," Hinata said with a small scoff.

...Noda?

The sheer bemusement must have been evident on his face as he glanced in Yuri's direction, because she shifted uneasily in her chair and scowled back at him. "You guys asked for suggestions. It was just the first name that came to mind."

"Why was Noda the first one on your mind?" Ayato asked, furrowing his eyebrows.

If Noda found out about this, he'd be thrilled. When he'd joined the Battlefront, it hadn't taken him
long to notice the brute's affection towards Yuri. Perhaps, if she was so quick to think of him, his affection wasn't entirely unrequited. Ayato would sooner return to the Afterlife than stick around to see Yuri track down and spend the rest of this operation with her idiotic boyfriend.

But Yuri's response was a deadpan expression.

"Why should you care?" she said. "Last I checked, I'm not your wife. In your reality or mine. I don't see why I have to explain my random thought process to you."

"In Naoi's defense," said Hinata, and he cringed at the words and subconsciously rubbed his head before continuing, "Noda's smarts are only in battle, if that. This is a friendly-based operation, and he'd only want to pick fights. As the next person to have a reunion with, he's less than ideal."

"And I agreed on Shiina, didn't I?" Yuri said, rolling her eyes to the ceiling. "Geez. You make one suggestion…"

"Speaking of Shiina," Otonashi said, and Yuri threw him a grateful smile for changing the subject, "we may have already tracked her down."

Hinata perked up again. "Turns out she's from—"

"The same hometown as him and Yui," Otonashi, Yuri, and Kanade said in perfect, monotonous unison.

Ayato raised an eyebrow. "And you never noticed her?"

"Oh my God." Yuri buried her head into the chair cushion with a despairing groan.

"I kind of only cared about baseball until Yui came along," Hinata admitted, scratching his hair. "I guess I was in my own little world. I just can't believe I noticed Yui and never Shiina!"

Otonashi chuckled. "Well, as far as I know, you never made a promise to find and marry Shiina."

A hesitant frown from Hinata. "Yeah, but…"

"And you noticed Yui in the first place because you almost hit her with a baseball," Kanade chimed in helpfully.

Hinata looked thoughtful. "You're right… If I had hit that ball anywhere else, I might not have met her." He laughed then, shaking his head. "I was really lucky."

"Yui was lucky," Ayato said, which earned him a surprised look from Hinata. "Lucky her nose didn't get obliterated."

"I don't know what I expected," Hinata grumbled.

"Hopefully not a compliment." Ayato glanced over at Kanade and Otonashi, then at Yuri. "So, if we know where Shiina's hometown is, what's our next step?"

Yuri didn't miss a beat. "We go to Kyuuya."

At this, Kanade raised her head from Otonashi's shoulder and eyed Yuri curiously as the latter stood up and stretched. "I thought you wanted to just spend time here for a while."

"Yeah," said Otonashi, "just the five of us."
"That was before we found a clue already." Yuri smiled sweetly. "And before I endured twenty-four hours of Hinata's incessant Shiina rambling," she said, leaning in and lovingly pinching Hinata's cheeks as she took his chin in her hand. He batted her away, but while the smirk on his face was sheepish, it showed no trace of regret. "We can hang out today as a group. Maybe get some dinner or something. But if this is an operation, then we've got to get this going. I figure tomorrow or the day after that would be a good time to head out."

"I should have known," said Hinata, grinning. "Fast-paced as ever."

"It always has to be now with her," Ayato said to him under his breath, a similar smirk tugging at his mouth. "Trust me."

Yuri narrowed her eyes in their direction, quirked her lips, but said nothing. Kanade, on the other hand, tugged on Yuri's sleeve as she passed and stared up at her inquisitively.

"So what are we going to do now, Yuri?" she asked softly.

Again, Yuri's gaze drifted towards Ayato. Then it dropped down to the coffee table. "For starters, I want to know what's in this box that's so important Naoi had to leave the pleasure of my company to get it." She scooped the box into her arms and perched herself on the armrest of the couch nearest him.

This earned her the most surprise Ayato had ever seen on Kanade's face at a time.

"Are you sure?" Now that Yuri had moved from the armchair to the end of the couch, Kanade was able to reach from the edge of her and Otonashi's couch and touch Yuri's knee. "I know you said yesterday that you——"

"I've decided to humor him," Yuri said sternly. Ayato thought he saw her send a swift look in Otonashi's direction.

She lifted the edge of the lid.

His breath caught.

Her eyebrows furrowed.

With careful fingers, she gingerly lifted a photo from the box. And she squinted at it. And she lifted up another. Twisted it around, maybe looking for a date on the back, so that he and everyone else could identify it while she stared and searched in disbelief. It was one from their wedding night, with them curled up on the couch still in their wedding attire and drinking champagne. Yuri's lips formed a wry grin as she read the back, and when she turned the picture back around he could see why.

"Nothing's changed, we've just stopped living in sin," the back read in Yuri's handwriting, along with the September date of their wedding three and a half years ago.

He searched her face for any sign of recognition, any flicker of a memory behind her eyes. There was nothing. No spark of realization. Just a gradual expression change, sixty percent of the humor and dubious scorn fading from her grin. She set the photos down on top of the lid resting between her and Ayato before picking up another.

Still no spark. Only squinting.

"Thought you said we were together for five years," Yuri said, scrutinizing the picture. "I look sixteen or seventeen in this."
"We were friends before. For about two years."

Yuri hummed in vague acknowledgement, her trademark sound of acceptance when she was too lazy to say "I see." But there was something else behind it. Lifting her gaze from the photo, she gave him an oddly familiar look. One he quickly recognized as the same look Ryou gave him when she was trying to read him like one of her fortune-telling cards.

Something akin to excitement stirred within him. If the spell had broken, or the picture had made even the slightest crack…

"You actually weren't messing with me." Her attention fell back on the picture, and she managed a light chuckle. "I mean, I know I just met you, but I don't peg you as some masterful photo editor."

He shook his head. "Pottery's more my forte, if anything."

That sparked her attention.

"Pottery?" Her head shot back up, and she regarded him with surprise and then veiled distaste. "Tell me you're not related to Kimito Naoi."

Ayato huffed. "Believe me, I would love to."

Lounging next to him, Hinata smirked in sympathetic understanding and crossed his arms. "He's his son."

"His son?" Yuri stared at him as if she were seeing a corpse resting on her sofa. Ayato cringed, a knot in his stomach twisting tighter. God, please don't tell me…

"You're thinking of his other son Hayato," Kanade said before Yuri could finish. For once, Ayato looked on her with gratitude.

Hinata nodded, gesturing next to him. "Yeah. This is his evil twin brother, Ayato."

"You're making it sound ridiculous," Ayato said, glaring at him.

"Hold on," said Otonashi, sitting up. "How come you can remember Hayato Naoi and not him?"

Yuri huffed at him, rolling her eyes. "Maybe for the same reason I can still remember you? It's not like they're the same person."

"But if you remember Hayato, then you should have freaked when you saw Naoi. Right?" said Hinata with a shrug. "They're identical twins."

"Hayato died when he was just a kid," Yuri said. Fixating on Ayato, she made no attempt to hide that she was examining his features. "I never saw his adult face."

"Anyway, we were practically homeschooled until I was twelve," Ayato added, feeling his face heat up underneath her close observation. "Our father kept us home as much as he could get away with. It gave him more time to train us. You would have only ever seen him in the workshop, or the shop, or pictures they took of him at art shows."

"Yeah, you'd more often hear of him than see him…" She trailed off, meeting his eyes. Strange that just the day before she'd been staring straight through him, and now it was like she was trying to detect the exact shade of gold in his irises.
After a moment, she cleared her throat and dropped her attention to the innards of the box just as the photo fell from her hands.

"Well, your story checks out," she said. She pursed her lips, a faraway look suggesting she was mulling over a thought. "It's just…" More glancing back and forth between him and the pictures. "It's like it's not even me. Like I'm seeing a different version of myself."

"At least Naoi can agree with you there," said Hinata, elbowing Ayato in the side.

Discomfort settled in, and it wasn't from Hinata's jab. Or at least not his physical one. Yuri promptly sent both him and Hinata questioning looks.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, putting the lid back on the box. "Either it's me or it's not. It's as simple as that."

Otonashi shrugged. "It's you, pre-Afterlife memories. Naoi believes there's a significant difference between that Yuri and the one sitting here."

Yuri blinked. "Uh, yeah. That one actually knows who he is."

Ayato opened his mouth to reply, but then closed it in bemusement. That was… technically true.

"She knew the Naoi in the picture, but not the one sitting close to you," Kanade explained.

"…What?" Yuri gawked at her.

Hinata snorted. "My thoughts exactly."

"According to Naoi, getting your memories of the Afterlife back changes who you are currently," Otonashi said, trying to help. But even he wrinkled his forehead in confusion, still trying to make sense of the theory. "So there's the you who was born in this life, and then there's the you now who remembers your past life and your time in the Afterlife."

"If it's all based on memory, there's also the Yuri who remembers everything and everyone but Naoi," Kanade considered. "So there could even be three of you."

Massaging her temples with one hand, Yuri held up the other for peace. "Okay, not knowing you is already confusing enough as it is," she said, pointing to Ayato. "It's so unnecessary. For the sake of whatever the hell's left of my sanity, can each of us just be one person, please?"

The request was fair. The more his friends discussed it, the more convoluted it sounded, and he wasn't prepared to deal with that. Yuri's missing memories of him were the bigger concern, as was the operation at hand.

And the fact of the matter was, now that the contents of the box had failed to jog her memories, he would have to stay on her good side. Until they found another way to break the spell, or she let him take it into his own hands with his own specific skill.

She just needed to learn to trust him again. And he needed… simplification.

"Fine." Ayato nodded to her. "There's only you."

Otonashi, Kanade, and Hinata heaved a collective sigh of relief. Moving the box aside, Yuri got back on her feet at once.

"Good. No need to make things more complicated than they have to be."
She bent down, picked her hat up from her armchair, and set it on top of her head. Her hands on her hips, she turned to the group with a smile.

"Now. Back to business!"

**Preview:**

"*Is this how you flirt with an amnesiac?*"

"—*and Kanade was running so fast she accidentally headbutted him!*"

"*My advice? Stop trying to pick up broken things.*"

"*Can't I make a simple comment without you all debating my memory?*"

"*I thought I saw storm clouds.*"

"*You're the only thing about her that's ever changed.*"

[Chapter 11]: **Night in Noroi.**
"Business" was a misleading title, as they spent the next couple of hours snacking and watching movies on TV. Not that Ayato was complaining. After the last forty-eight hours of confusion and complexity, there was a certain lovable charm to their simplicity and laziness.

This wasn't the Afterlife anymore. This was a new life, lacking in soul-sucking shadows and evil clones. They could relax for a while.

Kanade had certainly taken that mindset to heart. She fell asleep thirty minutes into the movie, breathing quietly against Otonashi's shoulder. Judging by the car ride the other day, and the fact that Otonashi didn't look the least bit surprised, this had to be a regular occurrence.

She must have had her fill of whatever snacks she'd happily helped herself to, because she kept touching her stomach in her sleep. It seemed like an odd habit to Ayato, though.

He was more surprised by the former Angel's ability to sleep through Hinata's noise. The boisterous oaf seemed to have a comment for every five minutes of the movie. Ayato was still mentally kicking himself for laughing at one of them, because Hinata looked obnoxiously proud after that.

Yuri, who had briefly moved from her armchair back to the arm of their sofa, had leaned in and whispered, "Never let him know he's funny."

"Believe me, it won't happen again."

Unfortunately it did a few minutes later, and Yuri's exaggerated throat-cutting gestures had only made him laugh more, which Hinata mistook for validation as well. And Otonashi, the proud Papa Bear figure that he was, took it as them getting along.

Oh well. Even low-lives could be humorous.

After the movie, there'd been some catching up—Otonashi, Kanade, and Hinata told Yuri everything Ayato had already heard a couple days ago—before Yuri cut in half an hour into it with a suggestion.

"Why don't we continue this conversation at dinner?" she said, standing up. "I'm starved."

"Starved? You served food during the movie," Hinata said, gesturing to the coffee table. The plates had nothing left on them but a few crumbs, chopsticks, and a lone pretz stick.
"That was over an hour ago, and 60% of that went into Kanade," Yuri corrected. She glanced at their petite friend out of the corner of her eye. "I didn't even know you could eat like that."

Kanade merely blushed and smiled, but said nothing.

Draping an arm around his wife, Otonashi gave a cheerful chuckle. "Believe me. If it had been mapo tofu, you wouldn't have seen any of it at all."

Hinata raised an eyebrow at Kanade. "But you're still hungry, right?" he asked with a knowing grin. Kanade nodded fiercely.

"Good, if we're all still hungry, might be a nice way to celebrate a Battlefront graduation reunion." Yuri turned toward Ayato with a glint in her eye. "I think my favorite restaurant serves mapo tofu. Why don't we go there?"

Ayato knew exactly what she was doing. A subtle test of trivia.

"Nice suggestion, Nakamura," he said, "but I think we're all a bit underdressed for L'Sortilège."

When Yuri looked caught off guard, he smiled back at her. "You're the one with amnesia, not me."

"Fair enough." Yuri thought for a moment. "Favorite casual restaurant, then."

He didn't even flinch. "Namisawa? Sounds good. Let's go."

"Is this how you flirt with an amnesiac?" Hinata muttered aside to Otonashi. The latter shrugged, then grinned for some reason and asked something under his breath. Hinata glared and swatted at him. "No, I have NOT always wondered!"

"I'm merely answering her questions," said Ayato. On the other hand, he couldn't hold back the triumphant smirk he was giving her now. If she wanted to play this with him, then game on.

Still relishing in Yuri's stunned silence, he twirled his car keys on his fingers.

"I'll drive."

Within an hour, they were all seated in a booth at Namisawa—save for Kanade, who had run off to the restroom again. Otonashi had ordered water with lemon at her request while she was gone, and Hinata was catching up with the rest of the table.

"Actually it was Kanade who ran into me first," Hinata said. He leaned lazily against the wood of the wall, propping himself up so that Otonashi had to take up the edge of the seat that was once his wife's spot. "She and Otonashi were chasing her hat. It was a really windy day, so it led her straight to me. I rounded a corner and the hat hit me straight in the face—"

"—and Kanade was running so fast she accidentally headbutted him," Otonashi said, laughing.

This was, in fact, actually news to Ayato. Rather hilarious too, and not just because Hinata got hurt.

"All of our first reunions with each other end up with someone almost getting injured one way or another," he observed, taking a sip of his hot tea. "How fitting for a group of imbeciles."

"Now he's including himself in it," Hinata said aside to Otonashi.

"Yeah?" Yuri said, lifting an eyebrow. "What about us?"
Before he knew what he was doing, Ayato seized her hand from the top of the table and turned it around in his to so that it was palm-up. He had the smoothness of her skin underneath his fingertips for all of three seconds before she snatched it back.

"Hey! Don't get so grabby!"

"I was just showing you the scar!" he said, still holding his palm out for the return of her hand.

Yuri side-eyed him suspiciously. "Then don't show. Tell." While he closed his own hand in exasperated obedience, realization struck her. "Scar? You don't mean the one on my—"

"Middle finger, yes." Ayato nodded. "We walked right into each other, the pottery vases I had in my arms shattered all over the floor, and you carelessly tried to help me pick up the pieces."

It'd been seven years or so, but it had been a deep cut, so there was a tiny white line on her fingerprint. Or at least it had still been there the last time he saw it—while she was handling the divorce papers. She'd gotten a papercut, actually. What an unlucky finger.

"Strange…" Yuri examined her finger, taking care not to look like she was making a rude gesture. "This is the same finger I cut on a shard of a vase in my previous life."

Ayato pressed his lips together into a frown. That finger had taken a lot of abuse. "My advice? Stop trying to pick up broken things."

Yuri's response was quick and light. "Yeah, I didn't ask for your advice." She propped her elbows up on the table with a bright smile. "Hinata, you were saying?"

Hinata and Otonashi shared amused glances.

"Well, not much else to say, other than the part where Otonashi came running up five seconds later, saw me on the ground, and started laughing like it was the funniest thing ever," said Hinata.

"It probably was, go on," Yuri replied.

"And anyway," Hinata cleared his throat, closing his eyes as if blocking out Yuri's quips, "I invited them to come over and have dinner with Yui and me. And after Yui stopped freaking out about having Angel in our house, the four of us had a lot of fun together. They were even there for our wedding. It was just like old times… which eventually led to our decision to bring the rest of the group back together."

"After we figured out what exactly had returned all our memories, that is," added Otonashi.

"Right, Iwasawa's song." Yuri stirred her straw aimlessly in the water glass next to her coffee. "Feels like in this life, it's more powerful than ever. I remember the night I heard it I cried like a baby."

Puzzled, Ayato turned to her again. "No, you didn't," he said, squinting at her.

Yuri tilted her head, as if it were heavily laden with sarcasm. "I'm sorry, were you there?"

"We were still together at the time, and I seem to have my memories back as well, so yes," Ayato responded with just as much sarcasm.

There had been wide eyes, yes, perhaps some hyperventilating, and he had heard her heart pounding rapidly in her chest. Then there had been a lot of shouting, but for a different reason, and admittedly most of it was on his end. It had been an emotional night, but not because of the touching music.
From what he could recall, not a single tear had rolled down her cheek. Not a one.

But Yuri wasn't having any of it.

"Listen, asshole," she said, whipping her head around to give him a stern glower, "as long as I've known you, you've been shoving a bunch of memories at me that I know nothing about. Do me a favor and leave the ones I do have alone."

"But you didn't—"

"Naoi," Otonashi said firmly. He and Hinata were giving him warning looks. Ayato frowned, but begrudgingly settled back in his seat.

"Must not have been crying very loudly then," he said under his breath.

Unfortunately for him, Yuri overheard, and refused to leave it at that. "Are you kidding?" she said defensively. "I'm starting to doubt you were even there. I mean, I know it was a little overdramatic to cry so much over a song, but getting an old lifetime back in your brain can be overwhelming in case you couldn't tell. I'm just saying, it was loud enough that I'm surprised no one heard me over the storm and came outside, though it's not like I'd be able to explain—"

"...Outside?" Ayato said blankly.

"See?" Yuri looked particularly triumphant. "You weren't there."

He faltered, a sinking feeling gripping his chest. No, no he wasn't...

Outside. In the rain. For over an hour. When she came back, she wasn't the woman who'd stormed out on him. Hair plum-colored and stringy, clothes drenched and clinging to her shivering body, eyes vacant and glassy, flecks of rain still peppered on her face...

Perhaps not all of those had been raindrops.

"Wait a minute," said Otonashi, rubbing his chin. "Naoi told us you guys watched it at home on TV."

"Yeah, why would you be crying alone outside?" Hinata's eyes had darkened dangerously, and were fixated sharply on Ayato as if accusing him of something.

Yuri hesitated, then shrugged. "Dunno. Went for a drive to clear my head and I guess it just didn't hit me until then."

Ayato sighed inwardly, feeling the tug in his chest loosen slightly. Maybe she just hadn't wanted to cry about it around him, which did sound a lot like her. But Hinata, the fool who couldn't just do him a favor and leave it at that, wasn't satisfied.

"Are you sure that it was Iwasawa's song you were crying about—"

"Alright, could you guys just lay off with the third degree?" Yuri interrupted. "What else would it be? That was the point of the whole stupid crying comment in the first place! God, I didn't realize it would be this controversial!" Sighing, she looked to Ayato for help. "Am I missing something here? Can't I make a simple comment without you all debating my memory?"

"Your memory is unreliable," said Hinata. "It doesn't have Naoi in it."

"Yeah, well, lucky me," Yuri muttered.
Ayato's face must have visibly fallen, because Hinata and Otonashi gave him simultaneous sympathetic frowns—both of which Yuri must have noticed. A twinge of regret at the corner of her lips, she touched his hand as it went to busy itself with the menu.

"Sorry," she said, offering him a sheepish half-grin that was more like a grimace. "It's just... I kind of get the feeling that..."

"Are you all ready to order?" the server asked, swooping in and setting drink refills on the table.

Yuri sighed in relief. "Oh thank God, a distraction."

Otonashi pointed to the empty seat at the end of his row. "She'll have—"

"—mapo tofu, please," Kanade finished, sliding into her seat next to Otonashi.

As the server was writing down her order, Yuri turned her inquisitiveness on the former Angel. "What, did you get locked in there?" she asked, grinning to assure Otonashi—both Otonashis—that she was kidding.

Ayato scoffed. If he knew Kanade as well as he thought he did, she'd merely gotten distracted by something. Probably a plant she considered cute. Or she'd wandered into the kitchen and poked her nose into the chefs' business.

"I went outside for some fresh air," Kanade said dreamily. "This restaurant has a nice garden."

"Thank you?" The server blinked, then gave Kanade a light smile. "Although the flowers could use some more rainwater. This year has been terribly dry so far, even for Noroi."

"Really...?" Kanade glanced up at her, taking a sip of her drink. "I thought I saw storm clouds."

Storm clouds?

Just now?

Turning around and suddenly very grateful he had the window seat, Ayato pressed up closer against the glass pane and peered out while the others gave their orders. The April sky had gone a shade darker than it would usually be at this early in the evening. Clouds like these had become a distant memory to him; if this was spring finally getting its late start, he would take it.

"Don't get your hopes up." Ayato turned back to Yuri, who was handing her menu to the server as she spoke. She shrugged apologetically, as if the weather had anything to do with her. "Every storm cloud I've seen since I moved here has been a filthy lie."

Well, that was disheartening.

He grunted. "There hasn't been a good storm since—"

"—the night of the concert?" Yuri supplied, and Ayato nodded his confirmation before leaning over her to give the admirably patient server his order.

Six months. Six months of weak or nonexistent thunderstorms. Six months of cold and then "decent" conditions. It was torture, absolute torture. Like a long, grueling death by boring weather.

Yuri made a thoughtful sound as she passed his menu to the server.

"Eh, it's just as well," she said absently, taking her coffee cup in her hands and raising it to her lips.
"For some reason, whenever it storms, I get really…"

Her eyes opened wide, and a searing crimson lit up her cheeks. Her attempt to cover it with a sip of coffee was fruitless.

"Um. Never mind."

Ayato raised an eyebrow, his frown giving way to a close-lipped smile. An odd sense of pride swelled within him the more fiercely she blushed. Hmm, so he had left an impression on her after all.

But then… what if she acted on it?

The idea of her simply kissing anyone else in the rain—the mere mental image of it—burned at his blood and made every single muscle he had clench in a surge of anger that surprised even him. Storms were his. Theirs, even. He wasn't willing to share.

Even if he hadn't seen a good storm since his memories returned. Even if everything that made them special had occurred in this life.

Although… His eyes settled on the woman sitting next to him, who was currently letting Kanade engage her in an odd conversation about full moons.

Yuri had been the one who made them special. She'd shouted at Kimito in his defense. She'd kissed him for the first time. She'd told him on the bridge near the Naoi estate that he could be free of his father, and planted the first seed in his head that led to him escaping to Mizuzaka.

Now that he thought about it, the only things he'd initiated during storms were sex, the conception idea, and… and the argument, and the divorce. He'd wanted to propose during a storm on her birthday, but the stupid weather that night ended up being clear and beautiful.

Ayato frowned to himself. His storm track record paled in comparison to Yuri's.

Perhaps storms were hers.

Then again… everything she'd done during one, she'd done for him. And only him. Call him selfish, irrational even, but part of him wanted it to stay that way…

"Yo, Earth to Naoi!"

Ayato gave a start; to his displeasure, everyone was looking at him—sans Kanade, who was kindly minding her business and digging into her mapo tofu with vigor. Hinata had his hands cupped around his mouth like a megaphone. Once he saw that he had his attention, Hinata pointed to the table.

"You have food sitting right in front of you. Eat it before I do."

This earned him a derisive snort from Yuri.

"If you're going to steal food, you don't warn him ahead of time. You're supposed to do it while he's distracted." Her gaze flicked past Ayato to the window, and she brightened with curiosity. "Oh, look! Lightning!"

Ayato was not proud of what he did next. But Yuri sure as hell was.

Otonashi and Kanade had claimed Yuri's guest room the night before, and Hinata had adopted one
of the couches again. Although Hinata had suggested something along the lines of "why doesn't Naoi sleep with you for old time's sake" (something he had very visibly, horribly regretted as soon as it came out), Yuri had scowled and firmly assigned Ayato to the couch adjacent to Hinata's. Which made them essentially roommates.

How delightful.

Luckily he was tired enough that he'd be falling asleep soon. The group of five had stayed up fairly late watching another movie, double-checking Shiina's location and running the directions by Hinata, formulating a game plan for tomorrow, and generally just harassing each other. Ayato's personal favorite part was when Hinata started talking about the sheer ridiculousness of him never running into Shiina in his past, and Yuri just calmly stood up, walked towards her kitchen pantry, grabbed a spray bottle, and came back and sprayed Hinata in the neck with it.

Ayato almost laughed out loud just thinking about it now. He knew there was a reason he'd accepted her as his leader.

His snicker must not have been as muffled as he thought, because Hinata raised his head from his pillow and sent him a curious look.

"What's so funny?"

He harrumphed quietly, but his grin didn't waver.

"Spray bottle," he replied, and despite his… mild attempts at quieting himself, the snickering resumed.

Hinata groaned, and Ayato didn't need to glance over at him to know that the dolt was rolling his eyes at the ceiling. "You're still laughing at that?" He paused, then gave a dismissive grunt. "No wonder you married her."

His jaw set, Ayato huffed irritably. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that the two of you have the same sick sense of humor," Hinata returned matter-of-factly, turning on his side and chuckling towards the couch cushion.

"And taking enjoyment out of bothering you is an automatic love connection?" He snorted. "Watch out, I'll steal Yui right out from under your nose."

"You're taking what I said too seriously." There was an audible grin in Hinata's tone. It was almost like he was toying with him. "I find that kind of suspicious."

"Then you're the one who's reading too far into things," said Ayato. In fact, it felt like Hinata had been on his case about... things, from the beginning. He would rather stop him in his tracks now, before he got too nosy now that they were alone. "This isn't a slumber party or some high school locker room, so don't look to me for gossip."

Hinata grew silent, and for a joyous, peaceful moment, Ayato thought it would last for the rest of the night. But then, "I think your situation is a little too serious for you to call talking about it gossip."

"Let's call it whatever you want and just not talk about it."

A sigh from Hinata's couch as he rolled onto his back. "I'm just saying... If Yui had no idea who I was, and she refused to try the one thing that might bring back her memories of me, I'd want to talk to someone about it." He laughed. "Hell, I'd even talk to you."
"I'm honored," Ayato said, counting the indents on the ceiling.

"Seriously, man… I actually feel bad for you—"

"You've made that painfully clear."

"—because I've never seen a guy buried as deep in denial as you are," Hinata said, running a hand through his hair. "I swear, you're supposed to be so smart and yet the mental gymnastics you do with your little memories theory, geez…"

Ayato yawned. "Unless you'd like me to reacquaint your head with the coffee table—"

"Fine, keep it to yourself." Hinata's tone was more dubious than dismissive, and Ayato had the feeling that he hadn't heard the last of him. "Just answer one question for me." There it was.

Whatever this question was, he wasn't going to like it. With a sigh, he waved him along. "…Go ahead."

Hinata's response, although automatic, was wistful.

"Do you still believe that crap you told us?" he asked. "All of it?"

Ayato frowned slightly. That was an obnoxiously good question, and at the moment, he wanted to zip Hinata's mouth shut for it. For the rest of the night. Damn, he was starting to miss the hectic times of the Battlefront. What with the clones and the shadows, there'd been no time for Hinata to get this invasive in the Afterlife.

If he'd asked him at any time during the last six months, right up until the last two days, his answer would have been a solid yes. The Yuri he'd known was gone, and he certainly didn't feel like the same Ayato that had loved her. But the past forty-eight hours had shaken some things out of place.

At this point, what did he believe?

"I believe that feelings change, and so do people," he said at last, closing his eyes.

"That answer is way too vague," Hinata mumbled. Yawning, he shifted underneath his blankets, trying to make himself comfortable. "I think you're starting to realize your own bullshit."

"On the contrary," Ayato sniffed, "I believe more than ever that memories make us who we are. The Afterlife Yuri knew the me here and now, this life's Yuri knew the me in this life, but the Yuri we had dinner with doesn't remember me at all—"

Hinata growled, low and long. "Just… stop, alright? The rule that the one and only Yurippe made is still under effect. You said there's only her, so don't relapse."

Covering his face with his hands, Ayato stifled a groan. Somehow, this was more unbearable than the slumber party gossip he'd expected. In fact, it was far, far worse. He'd rather be listening to Kanade hum that silly pop song from the other day.

"Yurippe remembers me. She remembers Otonashi and Kanade. She remembers Shiina, Yui, and Noda." The bastard was counting off on his fingers. Annoyed, Ayato glanced at his wristwatch and remembered he no longer had it, which infuriated him even more. "She remembers she loves Key coffee and the food from Namisawa and L'Sortilège. She remembers she had only one brother and one sister in this life. She remembers her friend Ryou, the concert, your parents—"
Snarling, Ayato pulled his pillow out from behind his neck and threw it at Hinata's head, cursing under his breath when he missed his target.

"Shut up already! I get it!" he hissed, glaring daggers at him. Wishing his hypnotism could explode the scum's head before he got to the part he desperately didn't want to hear.

"She remembers everything from this life, the Afterlife, and the life before," Hinata said, completely undeterred as he put Ayato's former pillow behind his neck. "Everything except you."

"I am well aware of that." His knuckles cracked beneath his clenched fists. "Get to the point."

"She has all the memories that make her who she is. She's the same Yurippe I know." Hinata glanced in his direction, a sudden spark in his eye. "And—just today!—you said to me, 'It always has to be now with her, trust me.' So I think you know her too."

With another sigh—tired, but not just from a long day—he rolled over onto his back again.

"Stop trying to complicate things. You're just sugarcoating it, but the fact is she's just Yurippe." Hinata shifted one more time, turning to face the couch and tugging his blankets with him. "You're the only thing about her that's ever changed."

Ayato's breath caught in his throat. He fumbled for something, anything to say in his defense. He was a significant change.

She had changed him too.

The concert had changed them both.

Things were different. They'd made each other different.

Some things needed to be changed back.

All of these things, epiphanies, facts, buzzed through his half-conscious mind as he shifted his head and opened his mouth to correct Hinata. Before he could say anything, he was met with the sound of soft, steady breathing. Grumbling, Ayato leaned back against the armrest in defeat.

Stubborn idiot had gotten the last word. And his pillow.

---

**Preview:**

"You mean to say – that you literally gave her your heart?"

"I just don't get weepy or excited over lovey-dovey stuff."

"Your road rage is monstrous."

"Hinata was about to ask something stupid."

"Absence makes the heart grow… tolerant."

"I'll do it."

"Is that how you want her to see you?"
[Chapter 12]: **Road to Kyuuya.**
Ayato got his revenge in the morning, because Hinata woke up bright and early—8:15, rather—to the noisy sounds of percolation. In his defense, it was no fault of Ayato’s if the man was a light sleeper. As noisy as it was, Yuri had always slept through the coffeemaker.

When Hinata saw what Ayato was doing, he ran his hand through his sleep-mussed hair and flashed him a knowing grin.

"Oh, you kiss-ass."

"I wake up early, I like to be productive," Ayato replied coolly, leaning against the counter. "Besides, Otonashi likes Key coffee too."

Hinata's grin merely broadened. "Tell me the real reason."

"It's none of your business." Damn, that had sounded a little too defensive.

Fortunately for him, Hinata shrugged it off and went back to lounge on the couch. He whipped out his phone and started texting.

The truth was, instead of falling asleep immediately after Hinata had, his thoughts had drifted elsewhere for a while. Specifically, to the window. He may have been hallucinating from sleep-deprivation, but he thought he'd seen a little fall of rain.

Whether it was real or not was debatable, but it reminded him of what Yuri said earlier. By way of their intimacy during storms, he'd left a mark on her. Maybe that meant there were other ways he could jog her memory.

If he knew Yuri, her ears might not wake her up but her nose would.

She'd be coming downstairs in five, four, three, two…

_THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP._

Hinata glanced up from his phone, towards the direction of the rapid stair-stomping, and his smirk returned almost immediately.

"Nice look, Yurippe," he said, giving her a once-over.

Her shoulder-length hair was disheveled, locks sticking out and curling slightly, and she was sporting a somewhat rumpled silk green night shirt and magenta running shorts as pajama bottoms. Her eyes were glazed with the leftover sheen of sleep, but half-lidded with determination.

"Shut up," she said, taking a whiff of the air. "Who made coffee?"

"Your kiss-ass ex-husband did." He returned his attention to his texts, jabbing his thumb lazily towards the kitchen.

Following his gesture, Yuri looked Ayato up and down before approaching him. As she closed the distance between them, she eyed the steaming cup in his hands. "This brand isn't as cheap in this
world. You better be even better than me at making it."

Ayato harrumphed and handed her the cup, not saying a word. The coffee, he silently reasoned, would speak for itself.

Not taking her eyes off of him, she hesitated at first, then brought the cup to her lips and took a tentative sip. As if he was somehow the exception to her "you can't ever go wrong with Key coffee" rule.

It was like the morning caught up with her face. She blinked twice, a sparkle in her eyes breaking through the sleepy glaze. She wet her lips as if sternly and thoughtfully critiquing it, but he knew she was just savoring the taste that lingered.

"Hmm," she said, raising an eyebrow. "Not bad."

Ayato watched her as she turned on her heel and wandered into the TV room with her coffee in hand. She was out of view once she took her seat in the armchair, but he heard her let out a contented little sigh.

He scoffed, but just the same, a small smirk crossed his lips.

Hmph. That's what he thought.

Otonashi came down not long after and mussed Ayato's hair happily when he discovered coffee waiting for him. Although his hair was untidy enough this morning, he allowed it—Otonashi still had special privileges.

"Smell wake you too?" Yuri asked.

"Nah. Kanade," Otonashi replied with a shake of his head. "Lately she's been getting up early to go to the bathroom, and it always wakes me."

"Bladder of a squirrel," Ayato said, shrugging.

Otonashi grinned into his cup. "No arguing with that. Mine's pretty strong, but I'm not about to give her that too."

Wait, too?

"Huh?" Ayato asked.

Hinata walked up behind Otonashi and slung an arm over his shoulder, nearly making his friend slosh his coffee. "Didn't he tell you?" he said cheerily. "Otonashi was an organ donor in his past life. Kanade had his heart the whole time."

Ayato was glad Otonashi had already taken his coffee, because if it was still in his own hands the cup would have crashed and shattered on Yuri's floor.

"You mean to say," he managed slowly after a stunned silence, "that you literally gave her your heart?"

Otonashi brightened. "I guess so!" he said, rubbing the back of his head and chuckling modestly. "I can't believe I never thought of it that way."

This earned him a small scoff from Yuri. "I should think it was kind of obvious."
"Weirdly enough, you don't seem as impressed as Naoi," Hinata said, giving her an odd look.

Ayato glanced at her too. That was weird. Kanade and Otonashi were both her best friends; even as tough as she was, one would think she would be in tears by now.

Apparently feeling their stares, Yuri shuffled uncomfortably.

"Sorry," she said, shrugging. "It's a pretty cool connection. I just don't get weepy or excited over lovey-dovey stuff."

Hinata laughed. "Naoi ruined you towards romance, huh?"

"I'm not incorporating him into this, seeing as I don't remember him," Yuri responded shortly. She examined her nails. "Far as I'm concerned, I've been single all my life."

Ayato regarded her for a moment, and she caught him looking.

"No offense," she added lightly.

But her once again bringing up the fact that she didn't remember him wasn't what was on his mind. At least, not this time. That wasn't what he'd gotten out of her comment.

So she hadn't been with anyone else since they'd divorced. Not even after she lost her memories. Interesting.

After Kanade came downstairs and they all sat down to a slow, lazy breakfast, Yuri was ready to start pulling things together and get moving. She didn't have too much trouble getting Hinata out of the house; in fact, it was Yuri yelling, "Geez, just a second!" while Hinata was restlessly tapping his fingers against the glass of the front door and whining that Kyuuya wasn't getting any nearer.

Once Otonashi and Kanade came out with their bags, Yuri exhaled a finally and trotted over to the front seat of her car. "Let's go."

"Hold on just a second." Ayato came up beside her and leaned against the door of the car before she could open it. "Just how long is this little road trip going to take?"

"An hour and twenty-five minutes," Kanade said, double-checking the directions on her phone. "Give or take."

"I am going to be driving at least half of that," said Ayato.

Yuri narrowed her eyes at him. "Excuse me?"

"Your road rage is monstrous."

She reeled back, her cheeks burning an angry scarlet. "Wh-what?! No it's not!"

Her voice always got that high, squeaky, and stuttering when she was lying. Complete with the furious blushing. It was her tell—as blatantly obvious as it was when she denied overcoming her lingering emotions in the Afterlife.

"Really!" Ayato snorted, arms crossed. "Does this sound familiar?" He then put on his best high-pitched Yuri impression. "AHH, WHAT THE HELL?!" He faked a car horn for good measure. "ARE YOU STUPID?! GET OFF THE ROAD, YOU JACKASS!"
"I don't sound like that!" Yuri shoved him away from the door. "This is my car. You drove yesterday. Get in the back," she opened the back door for him, "and no more slandering my driving skills!"

"My dear Nakamura, I assure you," he said as he obediently climbed into her car, "I can, and will, backseat drive."

Opening the door to the driver's seat, Yuri made a small sound of annoyance.

"Ugh. No wonder I divorced you."

Ayato frowned, and opened his mouth to correct her, but a whap on his arm stopped him. Shocked, he turned to the person sitting next to him with a questioning glare. Kanade only blinked her innocence.

"That was from Yuzuru," she said. "He didn't want to reach over me."

Sure enough, when he glanced to the right of her, Otonashi shook his head and gestured for him to can it.

Fuming silently, he resigned himself to leaning back against his seat and watching Mahou Complex Drive pass by. A couple of houses down the road, a little girl was chasing a purple ball that was rolling across her front yard. When she caught up with it, she squealed in triumph and ran it back to the baby resting in their mother's lap. Both Mom and baby smiled, but then the mother caught sight of Yuri's car, said something to her children, and lifted the baby's hand in a wave. The big sister quickly turned and waved at the car too. Grinning, Yuri waved back as she passed.

"Who are they?" Hinata asked as they turned the corner down another street.

"Neighbors," said Yuri. "I fixed the older girl's scraped knee once, so we're on a waving basis."

"Cute kids," Otonashi said fondly, turning around in his seat so he could wave too. Kanade made a small happy hum of agreement and joined him, then leaned her head cozily on his shoulder when he settled. Three guesses where that was leading.

Ayato squinted at her. Better asleep than stopping them to go to the bathroom a million times, and yet… Far be it from him to have suspicions about her when they had only been reacquainted for less than a week, but there was something going on with Kanade.

He just didn't couldn't figure out—

"Hey," Hinata piped up, peering over his shoulder at Ayato and then shifting a cheeky grin to Yuri, "did the two of you ever—"

Otonashi quickly reached out and — with a momentary apologetic glance at Kanade for already disturbing her rest — smacked Hinata over the head. Twice.

"What the—Otonashi?!" Hinata swiveled around, too shocked to glare at him. He did, however, glare at Ayato, who was snickering into his fist.

Ayato was far too amused to ask questions, or even remember what he'd been thinking about just now. It wasn't every day he got to see Otonashi hit Hinata; it was like a dream come true.

Yuri, on the other hand, sent the backseat passengers a puzzled frown through the rearview mirror. "What was that about?"
"Hinata was about to ask something stupid," Otonashi said sternly. Ayato had never been so happy in all his life.

"I was not!" Hinata complained, rubbing the back of his head. "You never know—"

"Yuri certainly wouldn't!" said Otonashi. "And Naoi would have mentioned it, wouldn't he? Why bring it up?"

Grumbling, Hinata slumped back down in his seat. " Doesn't mean you have to hit me." He sighed irritably. "I swear. It's like having Yui in the backseat."

Otonashi smiled. "Are you coming on to me?"

"Very funny." But he sounded less mad, and had pulled out his phone. From this angle, Ayato could see Yui's name between two pink hearts in his contacts list. He made a mental note to tease him for that later.

Then again, he had to admit it was nice that Hinata was missing Yui enough to text her… even if getting slapped over the head was what made him think of her.

Apparently Hinata was having little luck getting texted back, so he'd given up on that by the time they left Noroi. Instead, he'd taken to moping about it, which the rest of the car (sans the very lucky slumbering Kanade) unanimously agreed was just as bad as the Shiina rambling.

"I'm not listening to this the rest of the trip," said Yuri, smacking her head against the headrest.

"Does anyone have any music?"

"On my phone." Hinata sadly handed her the device, and she plugged it in.

"Two birds with one stone. Thank you, God," Yuri muttered.

"You're welcome," Ayato said instinctively.

Yuri shot a baffled glance over her shoulder, while Hinata and Otonashi groaned in unison, "Oh no."

She then turned her attention to Otonashi, begging an answer.

Otonashi rolled his eyes. "Naoi used to call himself 'God' in the Afterlife."

"We thought he'd kicked the habit," said Hinata. He scoffed, eyeing Naoi in his peripheral vision. "Just when I was starting to like you."

But going by the expression he caught in the rearview mirror, Yuri was the most perturbed.

"You call yourself God?" she said, wrinkling her nose in distaste. "You mean, like the one I spent most of my afterlife fighting against? That God? How did I marry this guy?"

Frowning, Ayato shifted in his seat.

"It was only in the Afterlife that I made myself God," he retorted. "I can't be God of this world. When I say it now, which is rarely, it's mostly a joke."

"Fine, whatever." The familiar Yuri phrase made his heart twinge a little. "But again, no wonder I divorced you."

With Kanade asleep and Otonashi too far away to hit him, the temptation to set her straight was on the tip of his tongue, but a telltale strum of a guitar cut him off. He'd know that melody anywhere.
Yuri had pressed play on Hinata's phone, and Iwasawa's "My Song" was now emanating from the car speakers. Just as sweet and haunting as it had been when he'd heard it six months ago. Even a rested Kanade woke up to listen.

"Yui loves this song so much," Hinata said quietly. "I bet she's with Iwasawa right now. That's why she's forgotten all about me." Still, he shut up after that and listened.

But Hinata's comment… it stirred something in Ayato.

Forgotten all about him… Iwasawa…

If Iwasawa's song could bring back Afterlife memories once, then maybe it could do it again.

After all, wasn't it powerful enough?

Ayato held his breath, trying to be inconspicuous in watching Yuri as Iwasawa's voice lovingly crooned the lyrics to her. He wished he could see the look in her eyes if it worked – the flood of realization as everything came rushing back into her heart and mind, only hopefully this time without the headache. He'd missed her first epiphany because he was so wrapped up in his own. But he just figured… it might be an interesting thing to witness.

As it was, she was keeping her eyes straight on the road and he couldn't quite see her face through the rearview mirror anymore. The only significant, noticeable outcome at the moment was that Kanade was humming again. Well, at least Otonashi appreciated that. Strangely, Kanade had bowed her head as if she was humming into her lap… either that or she was falling asleep again.

"I'll never get tired of this song," Otonashi said softly, wrapping an arm around Kanade's shoulder and pulling her close. "It's what brought Kanade and me closer together."

How ironic, Ayato thought to himself, returning his gaze to Yuri as the song came to a close. But then he noticed something.

Her shoulders were shaking. Just a little bit, but they were shaking. And then he heard a snuffle.

Hope, clumsily blended with curious sympathy, seared within him. Carefully, he leaned forward and rested a hand on her shoulder.

"Yuri…?" he asked, testing the waters.

She jerked forward, away from his touch, and a surprised Ayato fell back against his own seat.

"Nothing!" Yuri said, in a bit of a prepubescent boy squeak. She took one hand off the steering wheel to hurriedly wipe at her cheeks. "Stupid. I told you this song makes me cry."

There was a silence, and then Ayato slumped lower in his seat.

"Right," he said, crossing his arms and staring pointedly out the window. "I stand corrected."

Stupid song. Only good the first time around. Perhaps it had already given her all that it could. It could give Afterlife memories back but it couldn't break a stupid spell? It obviously wasn't as powerful as everyone thought. Of course, if a portable version of the song could work Iwasawa's musical magic, he supposed the Battlefront would have no need for his hypnotism. Personally he didn't see how it could make her cry.

It was emotional, sure. Touching, even.
But — and just say in this case she was the one and only Yuri — if she was the same Yuri he'd been together with for years, she wasn't about to go shed tears about one pretty little ballad. It always used to take something much stronger to make Yuri cry. Something actually tragic or heartbreaking, if not deeply moving.

As someone who hated tears, it was something he'd loved and hated about her. When she cried, she cried hard; it was just as contagious as her smile—

"MOVE, DAMMIT! THE LIGHT IS GREEN!" Yuri hollered, slamming her hand on the horn.

Hinata flinched and swore in surprise. Kanade's head flew up as she nervously looked around, wide-eyed and alert and extremely awake.

Ayato couldn't help himself; he started cracking up.

"Shut up!" Yuri turned her head so that everyone in the backseat got an excellent view of the crimson blush on her face. "What the hell are you laughing at?"

"This isn't the Afterlife, Yuri," he managed through his snorts of laughter. "You're going to make someone mad and get us killed!"

Yuri very nearly hissed in response.

"I'm not!" she snarled, gunning it once the driver in front of her got out of her way. "It'll be one of these idiots!"

Smirking, Ayato kicked back in his seat. "I warned all of you, didn't I? Absolutely monstrous. Does anyone else want me to drive instead?"

"No," Yuri said, in a misleadingly pleasant tone. "But if you're not careful, I will pull over. Don't make me come back there."

He arched his eyebrows. "Now that you mention it, I always liked having you in the backseat."

Yuri sputtered, while Hinata lurched and scrambled around just for the sole purpose of sending him a very wicked and very traumatized glower. But to be honest, Ayato could scarcely believe the words had left his own mouth.

Yuri had been the flirtatious one in their relationship, the one dripping with euphemisms and seduction. Although a little teasing from him wasn't unusual, for him to be the one turning her into a blushing mess with a clever innuendo after all this time… it was admittedly kind of a thrill.

"...I'm hungry," said Kanade. "Yuri, do you think we could stop somewhere?"

Hinata grimaced. "You still have an appetite after that?"

"I'll stop at Hotto Motto's, does that sound good to everyone?" Yuri said. When she got an affirming hum from Kanade and confirmations from the rest, she nodded. "Right. But I'm still driving after that."

"Thanks for the warning," Ayato said cheerily.

Yuri moved her seat back and squished his legs, making him yelp and kick in defense.

"This car is filled with nothing but morons," she said. Then, after a beat, she sighed happily. "I love it."
They stopped for lunch, and Kanade customized her bento box to her heart's content— but despite her strange and random personalized choices, she still borrowed from Otonashi's box, and he from hers. They really were such a young married couple. Feeding each other and sharing food. He used to be like that…

Oh no, he was turning into one of those bitter divorcees. Cynical towards public displays of affection and young love, when he had a feeling Otonashi was a little bit older than him.

As they neared Kyuuya, Ayato began to notice something else. Hinata had gotten rather quiet—and while this was not necessarily a bad thing, it was actually a little disconcerting. At first he attributed it to Yui not texting him back. He hadn't heard any alert sounds coming from Hinata's phone, not even when it stopped playing music. Ayato almost wanted to tease him about it—whatever happened to "absence makes the heart grow fonder," anyway?—but he was starting to pity him. And then he remembered the other thing Hinata wouldn't shut up over lately.

"Hey, Hinata," he said. The man in question eyed him suspiciously from the passenger seat. "How does it feel, knowing you'll be seeing Shiina again in less than half an hour?"

Hinata perked up, and Otonashi looked happy. Ayato inwardly cursed—did that sound too kind? Was he really getting soft?

"I'm just hoping she remembers me," he said with a little laugh, ruffling his hair. Ayato glared, taking it as a jab at first, but Hinata seemed to pick up on that. He turned slightly and offered him a half-grin. "If she doesn't, I'm counting on you."

Right. The memory-jogging operation.

Ayato shrugged. "I'll do my best."

Kyuuya was a quaint little town, with rolling hills and old buildings and open fields, but its apparent hypnotic hold on Hinata was stronger than any one of Ayato's by far. He supposed he could see the allure—particularly when they passed the high school baseball diamond.

Hinata, whose face was practically pressed up against the glass of the window, bounced into action as if he'd chugged buckets of Yuri's Key coffee. He pointed out the window, near the fence.

"There—that's where Yui and I first met!" he said excitedly.

Yuri snorted. "You're a goddamn sap."

"And you're an ex-wife," Hinata said coolly. Yuri reached out and thwacked him on the side. "Hey! Okay, you're just a long-time single spinster—" SMACK. "Stop hitting me!"

"Pay attention!" Yuri snapped. "You're the one with directions to her house."

Hinata sighed, but obediently sat back down and directed Yuri a few blocks away from the school. The house they pulled up next to was small and engulfed in trees, as if the owner enjoyed her privacy. It was simple but well-tended to and had an air of looming mystery to it. If there was ever a house fit for Shiina, it was this one.

They parked, but as the five of them got out, Otonashi started looking around in confusion.

"It doesn't look like anyone's home," he said, scratching his head. "I don't see another car anywhere."
"Eh, that doesn't mean anything," Hinata replied. "Maybe Shiina isn't the driving type."

With that, he bounded up to the front door like an eager dog. He raised his fist and pounded it against the doorframe with great zeal.

"Shiina!" he called. "Come on out!"

Ayato huffed as he and the others joined Hinata on the porch. The woman was a ninja – a light, friendly rapping with his knuckles would have sufficed.

But they waited ten seconds, and nothing happened. Yuri tapped her foot impatiently. Out of habit, Ayato checked his—bare—wrist (he was getting tired of doing that).

"Maybe she didn't hear me," Hinata said hopefully.

"The entire town of Kyuuya heard you," said Ayato. "She's not home."

Hinata opened his mouth to argue, but only a small, defeated sound came out. He fell back against the wood of the door and looked downcast at his shoes, scuffing the front step with his heel. Then he leaned his head back and closed his eyes, lost in thought.

"So…" Otonashi glanced at Hinata, then the rest of the group in bemusement. "What do we do now?"

"I think we should go play baseball," said Hinata, his eyes still closed.

Baseball… The entire group, sans Hinata, shared a meaningful look. Meaning they were probably starting to see what Ayato had noticed from the beginning—their friend Hinata may very well have cracked.

Yuri was the first to speak. "Uh—Hinata, I don't think anyone brought bats and gloves on this little road trip."

"Well, are we in my hometown or aren't we?" Pushing himself off the door, he straightened up and walked off the front step. Then, stretching his arms out, he laced them behind his neck and gazed ahead down the road. "We'll go to my old house. Visit my parents. I'm pretty sure they've got some of my baseball equipment boxed up in my room."

"Wait a minute. I thought you didn't get along that well with your parents?" said Otonashi, following him onto the front lawn.

Hinata just shrugged.

"Eh, what can I say? Absence makes the heart grow…" he paused, crinkling his brow, "…tolerant."

Ayato snorted despite himself, which brought a grin to Hinata's face.

"So how about it? A game or two at my high school's baseball diamond. It'll be fun," he said, jabbing a finger over his shoulder presumably in the direction of his school. "Who's in?"

Otonashi didn't hesitate. "I'm in," he said, raising his hand. His smile was full of fond, wistful nostalgia. "It'll be just like old times."

Looking quite chuffed, Hinata clapped him on the shoulder. "Great, Otonashi! I knew I could count on you." His eyes had a zealous gleam to them as they swept over the rest of the group. "Any other takers?"
Oddly enough, Kanade's soft voice spoke up.

"I'll do it," she said, hopping off the porch and joining Otonashi.

"Yeah?" Hinata said, Otonashi looking just as amazed as him. He chuckled. "I wasn't expecting that, but alright!"

"Her reflexes *are* killer," said Otonashi, glowing with pride.

Hinata turned to the other two, just as Ayato was following Yuri onto the lawn. "Yurippe, any chance-?

"No," Ayato and Yuri said automatically. Otonashi's and Hinata's raised eyebrows made him smirk, along with Yuri's equally stunned and then unsettled reaction to his matching her exact tone.

Yuri turned to him, cocking her head to the side. "Alright, Mister Ex-Husband. Explain why," she said, placing her hands firmly on her hips.

Oh, this game again?

"Because even though baseball is one of the few sports you like, it's way more fun to watch it than play it," said Ayato.

"And?"

"And… because you'd much rather make fun of the players and heckle from the bleachers."

"…And?"

Now he was starting to feel like a contestant on one of those ridiculous Couples Trivia game shows. Why did she keep trying to trick him? There was no way she was going to win.

"And because… the only sport you ever cared about and actively participated in was gymnastics," Ayato finished, locking eyes with her in an act of dominance.

Yuri's mouth fell open, and he knew he'd won at the mention of gymnastics. It used to be a touchy subject with her. She had been at a birthday party with all her gymnast friends when her siblings and grandparents died in that crash. Out of guilt, she'd dropped out of the team, though she still loved to do stunts. Maybe not as major as jumping off of balconies, now that he thought about it, but the Afterlife skill had certainly followed her into this life.

He smirked at her lingering astonishment.

"What? You didn't think I'd know how flexible and talented you are?"

At this, Yuri's eyes widened considerably. A fiery blush tinting her cheeks, she opened her mouth again, but all that came out was a frustrated squeak.

"Let's – please – not go there," Hinata said, wincing.

Ayato smiled, relishing in the trace of misery and disgust in his tone. "What? I was just complimenting Yuri on her gymnast skills. She's very limber—"

Throwing his hands up to his ears, Hinata squeezed his eyes shut. "Shut up, shut up! I don't want to think about that!"
"Naoi, don't be gross," Otonashi warned. Then, crossing behind Hinata and Yuri, he grasped his shoulder and took him quietly aside, turning Ayato to face him. He had a firm but guiding look in his eyes. This was one of those moments where Ayato wondered if Otonashi wouldn't make a good professor in another life.

"Otonashi, I was just—"

"You're not making a very good impression with Yuri," Otonashi said to him, as discreetly and under his breath as possible. Ayato's breath caught sharply; the accusation felt like his friend had just shoved him hard in the chest. He struggled to say something in his defense, but Otonashi shook his head. "From what she's seen of you so far, you're a loud, dirty-minded, unbearable flirt who makes a big fuss out of everything. She hasn't known you for that long. Is that how you want her to see you?"

"No," Ayato said, frustrated.

"Then cut it out." Otonashi patted his shoulder and wandered back over to Hinata, who was watching them closely.

Frowning, Ayato lowered his eyes. What he said made a lot of sense, but being shamed by Otonashi never felt very good. Even worse when Hinata got to witness it. He joined the group as well, falling back in line beside Yuri.

"What was that about?" she asked, glancing between him and Otonashi.

"Nothing," Otonashi stepped in for him, and clapped Hinata on the back. "So are we moving along or what?"

Preview:

"Bro! Long time no see!"

"You know how much I like having a sister."

"We met at one of his high school baseball games."

"I seem to recall a baseball flying towards my face."

"I guess you guys never really taught me how to do that."

"Hey, we're not all bad."

"You had me at 'get out of here."

[Chapter 13]: **Older Brothers.**

Chapter End Notes

Ending it here because while the next part may be shorter, it has to stand on its own. Welcome to Kyuuya -- fate's gonna have some fun in the next few chapters!
Chapter Notes

This part is based off something I read about the Visual Novel: "Hinata had relationship problems with his family." A picture showed him standing aside as a lonely young boy watching his parents and older brother fawn over a little sister. Since we're in his hometown, it's time we delved a little deeper into his family. Just a little.

Enjoy!

They returned to the car after that. Much to Ayato's displeasure, Yuri awarded Hinata the keys after a little coaxing. She reminded Ayato that besides knowing him longer, it was only logical and not a big deal because Hinata knew the way to his own childhood house. Nevertheless, Ayato almost refused to get in the car. Key word being "almost."

"Alright—later, Naoi!" Hinata had said cheerfully, and started coasting down the road without him. Cursing and repeatedly calling him an idiot, Ayato had begrudgingly reclaimed his spot in the backseat once Yuri and Otonashi got Hinata to stop.

Hinata's old house was so close that they might very well have walked – if they didn't mind puzzling Shiina by leaving a strange car in front of her home. Lucky for Hinata, there was in fact another car outside when they got there.

When Hinata led the group up to his front door and did his trademark barrage of knocking, there was a commotion inside and the door swung open in seconds. Standing in the foyer was a man a little taller and older than Hinata, accompanied by a bright-eyed girl much shorter than him. They both had the same dark blue hair as Hinata, only the girl's eyes were grey-blue like Hinata's while the man's were a more navy color.

"Bro!" said the man, looking surprised. "Long time no see!"

"Hey Hideki!" The girl next to him scanned the crowd on the porch. "Didn't you bring Yui?"

"Geez, Chise. You could at least be happy to see me," said Hinata.

Chise clasped her hands in front of her pink sundress. "Sorry, big brother. You know how much I like having a sister."

"Yeah? Well I wanted a little brother, remember?" Hinata ruffled Chise's hair. Although she protested at first, they both laughed. "And in my defense, I did bring girls."

"But it looks like they're both taken." The man next to Chise tut-tutted in disappointment, grinning at Otonashi and Ayato.

Otonashi returned the friendly smile, but wrapped his arm around Kanade's shoulders while she hummed happily and nodded in confirmation. It was the other woman's reaction, or lack thereof, that surprised Ayato. Lifting an eyebrow, he peered over his shoulder at Yuri, but her expression
remained stoic.

The man invited them inside, leading them into the kitchen while Chise disappeared up the stairs.

"Our parents are going to be glad to see you," he said, to which Hinata immediately snorted. "I know, but it's been that long. And speaking of which, aren't you going to introduce me to your friends?"

"Yes, Hideki, where are your manners?" said a woman with shoulder-length navy hair as she entered the room with her husband and daughter in tow.

Hinata barely veiled rolling his eyes.

"Hello to you too," he said, then turned to the group with a tired look. Ayato had a feeling he was witnessing the stretch of that tolerance Hinata was talking about. "These are my parents, of course. And you've met my little sister Chise and my brother Eichi."

"Older brother," Eichi said.

"That wasn't necessary," muttered Hinata.

Ayato himself had to suppress a scoff. Hayato had been born four minutes before Ayato; it was one of the many things he prided himself on. Some big brothers didn't like their younger ones to forget it… but this Eichi had to be in his mid-to-late twenties. Was that what Hayato would have been like, even at that age?

He never thought he'd find himself sympathizing with Hinata like this; this week just kept on surprising him.

Turning to his family, Hinata gestured to the group. "And this is Otonashi, his wife Kanade, Naoi, and Yurippe. They're old friends of mine."

"Old friends?" said Hinata's father. "Can't be that old if we've never met them before."

The group exchanged glances. See, this was what Ayato had been saying all along – their situation was far too complicated to explain. Or in this case, there was a very simple explanation that was also a little farfetched to outsiders. It wasn't like they could just say they'd met when they were dead.

"Yeah, well… They're not from around here," Hinata said, scratching his head. "We, ah…"

"We met at one of his high school baseball games," Ayato said, stepping forward. He couldn't believe he was saving the idiot from this potentially comedic train wreck, but an old memory had just come to mind. And it actually did include a baseball player with blue hair. "Kyuuya came to play against Akuma, the high school Yuri and I went to."

Hinata turned his head and gave Ayato an odd look. Kanade and Otonashi were staring at him too, but their expressions were more curious than scrutinizing.

"And this genius," Ayato pointed at Hinata, "hit a foul ball straight into the audience, where Yuri and I were sitting. I swear, he could have knocked her out cold—"

"Hey, wait a minute!" Chise said, wide-eyed and bouncing with energy. "I know about the Akuma incident! Hideki, I thought that was when you almost hit Yui in the face for the second time!"

"You almost hit this girl too?" said Eichi, laughing.
Hinata's father raised both his eyebrows, looking amused but critical. "How many foul balls did you hit that day, boy?"

"Just the one!" Hinata said defensively, crossing his arms. "And it did almost hit Yui! But then that one girl was sitting in front of her and saved her again. And need I remind you, that was the game I caught the—"

"—winning pop fly," Ayato finished for him, a little dumbfounded at what was happening just now.

"Y-yeah…" Hinata said slowly, otherwise speechless.

Ayato grinned. Speechless suited him.

"That pop fly was impressive, but before that, you sure did make an ass of yourself," he continued, secretly relishing in the way his surprised friends were trying to keep their cool in front of Hinata's family. "I believe Yui's exact words were, 'STOP TRYING TO BREAK MY FACE, YOU LOSER!'"

Hinata's and Yuri's eyes widened simultaneously—apparently the phrase did ring a few bells. Ayato nodded in her direction.

"Yuri, you remember, don't you?" he said, forcing himself not to get too hopeful. "A guillotine-style foul ball, perhaps?"

"I seem to recall a baseball flying towards my face," Yuri confirmed, sending Hinata a sideways glare.

Hinata grimaced. "It was flying toward Yui's face!"

"We were sitting in the same row; it still scared me half to death."

"And then all he said after that was, 'My bad!'" Ayato snorted. "I swear, when he almost hit Yuri, I wanted to use him as a baseball bat. But then Yuri calmed me down about it. And we met up with Hinata sometime after the game." Not entirely a lie. He, for one, considered seven years to be "some time."

Eichi, who'd been rubbing his chin the whole time, chuckled warmly at the end of the story.

"That's some first meeting," he said. "But it sounds like Hideki, all right. Bro, there are other ways to make friends than by hitting baseballs at them."

"I know that!" Hinata grouched. "I don't use baseball to solve all my problems."

"Oh, boys, be nice to each other," their mother tsked. She turned to Ayato and company. "However you met, it's very nice to meet all of you. I'm sorry my son's way of saying hello was hitting a baseball at your head, Yuri. Very nice name, by the way," she said with a wink.

Hinata groaned in disgust. "It's Yurippe…" he said with some desperation.

"So, Hideki, what brings you here all of a sudden?" Hinata's father asked. "We didn't even know you were in Kyuuya."

"We're here to visit another old friend," Hinata said with a shrug. "But she's not home, so we're gonna go play baseball at the high school's field."

"What happened to 'I don't use baseball to solve all my problems'?" Hinata's father teased.
Eichi laughed at the face his brother made.

"And why are you taking them to the school's baseball field?" he asked, moving toward the kitchen counter and getting himself a cup of coffee. "Why don't you take them to the cool one? The one near the pool and Shinjobou?"

"Because it's after noon on a Saturday and it's probably busy," said Hinata, his tone laced in strenuously subtle irritation.

Although he disguised it, Ayato was a little taken aback. Hinata's patience was shorter with his own older brother than it was with him. That had to be saying something.

"That's not the real reason," Chise chimed in. She clasped her hands together and pretended to swoon. "It's because the high school baseball field is the one where he and Yui fell in loooove!"

Hinata clutched his head in agony.

"I missed you guys so much," he muttered under his breath.

His mother tilted her head. "What was that?"

"Nothing," said Hinata, straightening up. He huffed a little, blowing the bangs out of his eyes. "Anyways, I wanted to come and borrow some of my old baseball stuff if that's okay with you."

"We put the boxes in your bedroom closet—" Chise started to say, but their mother interrupted her.

"Ah, so that's the real reason you decided to grace us with your presence," she said, her features sharpening ever so slightly. There was an odd edge to her tone, an underlying meaning to her smile.


Hinata tensed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means it'd be nice if you tried putting your family first once in a while," his mom replied curtly.

Otonashi, Kanade, Naoi, and Yuri exchanged awkward glances.

"Well, I'm sorry," Hinata said coolly. "I guess you guys never really taught me how to do that." And with that, he hastened out of the kitchen and into the hallway. They heard his heavy footsteps retreating up the stairs.

"Yikes," said Chise, while Eichi swiftly looked away and sipped his coffee.

Hinata's mother turned back to the remaining members of the Afterlife graduation group, shaking her head, and gave them an apologetic smile.

"Going back up into his room again, just like he did when he was a teenager," she said, putting a hand on her hip. "Only ever emerged for meals, school, Yui, and of course baseball. Sometimes I would forget I had two sons."

Ayato's heart dropped to his stomach.

"Well, we better go get him then," he said uncomfortably, and retreated from the kitchen. The others piled into the hallway after him.
Of course they found him ripping open the boxes in his closet. He was rifling through them with a heated determination, though Ayato was certain it wasn't the mitts that were riling him up.

He and Otonashi were standing over him for all of thirty seconds, watching him sift through his stuff aimlessly, before Ayato cleared his throat.

"So," he said, crossing his arms, "older brothers, huh?"

Hinata grunted something incoherent and continued sifting.

"Hey, we're not all bad," Otonashi said self-consciously.

"I'm sure you were a very good one, Otonashi," Ayato responded, patting him on the shoulder. "But I'm afraid this is one of the few things you wouldn't understand."

"Older brothers?"

"Being a younger brother." Shaking his head mournfully, he leaned against the wall next to the closet. "And he's got Middle Child Syndrome too. That's got to be a rough combination."

Hinata heaved a long, frustrated sigh. "Thanks for the pity, Naoi. It feels good."

"Actually, I think…" Yuri was studying Ayato intently when he turned to look at her. There was a curious little curve at the corner of her mouth and an arch of her eyebrows. "I think he's trying to be sympathetic with you."

"Wow, Yurippe. You really don't know him, do you?" Hinata said, but Ayato distinctly heard him chuckle. Satisfied, Ayato let loose a little smirk of his own.

Otonashi knelt and laid a hand on Hinata's shoulder, while Kanade closed one of the boxes and lifted it in her arms.

"So, you ready to get out of here and play some baseball?" he asked.

Hinata stood up. "You had me at 'get out of here,'" he said with an appreciative smile. And for a moment it looked to Ayato like it was partially directed at him.

After a brief goodbye to Hinata's family, they loaded the boxes into the trunk, then piled back into the car and drove off.

---

Short one! But I didn't want to make the previous or the next chapter too long. Plus I figure Hinata's family situation deserved a section on its own.

I'm enthused for the next two chapters. Fair warning though: Chapter 15 will be a mid-season finale of sorts (though Chapter 25 is the real season finale). Meaning I'll take a school hiatus for however many weeks so that this fic doesn't catch up with me. I don't want to leave anyone hanging.

See you next Saturday for the start of a very strange ball game!

---

Preview:

"That isn't a sport, potter."
"Our team would have beat your ass if Yui hadn't tackled Hinata!"

"That's your own fault."

"How much do you remember about her?"

"When you get a chance to escape, you don't just go back!"

"Just don't get obliterated."

[Chapter 14]: From the Stands.
Personally, Ayato could understand how and why Hinata became such a baseball fan. Apart from Kyuuya being known for its baseball team, the school (along with its field) was only a few blocks away from his house. It was an easy escape from home life. He had felt the same sense of escape at the walking bridge in Akuma.

Plus he had to agree, as Hinata pulled up alongside the school, that it had a certain draw to it. There was something special about the field. Maybe because it was so empty and peaceful-looking, especially at this point in the spring season at this time of day. It was like the gym on their Afterlife graduation day, reserved only for them and not another soul in sight.

It was nice, walking out onto the baseball field on a warm day like this. It felt even more like the Battlefront ages. Ayato chuckled to himself. Strange that he would be so wistful of a time when he was dead.

"Alright then!" Hinata said brightly as they arrived at the plate. Swinging his bat to rest on his shoulder, he turned to Yuri, who was carrying the cooler they'd brought along on the trip. "Yurippe, you sure you don't want to get in on this? Even Kanade's playing."

Yuri waved a free hand dismissively.

"No, Naoi's right," she said, already wandering over to the bleachers. "You know me, I'd rather just watch and heckle."

Ayato watched her go. She still had that little sashay of hers…

"What about you?" Ayato jolted back to attention, shifting a little under Hinata's stare. "I never got a chance to ask if you wanted to play."

He frowned, checking over his shoulder at the bleachers where Yuri was sitting alone, then back at Otonashi, Hinata, and Kanade. The guys were giving him expectant looks, while Kanade's gaze was mellower. Like not only did she already know his answer, she'd already heard it and wasn't fazed. Then again, nothing could faze her.

"Not this time," he decided. "Baseball isn't really my sport. If anything, I prefer basketball, or soccer… something with goals or hoops." He grinned. "Besides, heckling does sound fun."

Hinata laughed, hunching a little. "You could just say you're not very athletic."

"Excuse me?" Ayato said, placing a hand on his hip. "For your information, I have been told that I have pottery muscles."

Even Otonashi had to cover a smile.

"That isn't a sport, potter," Hinata said, snickering.

"Have your laugh now." Ayato clapped him on the shoulder, then spun around and sauntered toward the bleachers with a lackadaisical wave. "I'll be having the rest."
Otonashi and Hinata exchanged a look, while Kanade smiled in Yuri's direction.

"Oh, I see how it is," Hinata said, elbowing Otonashi in the side. Then he pumped a fist into the air. "Alright, play ball!"

Pretty enthusiastic cheer for a game with three players. But it was Hinata, so they made it work. Kanade stood behind Hinata as the catcher, while Otonashi got ready to pitch to Hinata from the mound.

Tapping the home plate with his bat, Hinata winked at Otonashi. "Let's have at it, big shot."

"Just don't break any windows," said Otonashi, laughing, and then he let it fly.

CRACK.

Meanwhile, Yuri eyed Ayato with more than a little curiosity as he approached the bleachers. He offered her a small grin to settle her nerves, and although she returned it, she lifted an eyebrow when he sat down next to her.

"So you'd rather sit with me, your amnesiac ex-wife, than play baseball with the guys?" She turned her attention back to the ball game, if they could call it that, but made a small amused sound as she leaned back against the bleacher step behind her. "You're unique, I'll give you that. Or just lazy. Though I guess if you joined the Battlefront right before Kanade did, you must not have been part of the baseball tournament."

Ayato sniffed. "On the contrary. As vice president, I was right alongside Kanade in forming Team Student Body." Grinning, he added aside to her, "And I'm told you were watching the whole time. I hope you got a good view of my team beating yours."

At this, Yuri straightened up in her seat and bristled at him. "Our team would have beat your ass if Yui hadn't tackled Hinata!" she said, much louder than intended.

Hinata, the closest to them besides hyper-focused Kanade, snapped his head around to look at the pair.

"Are you guys talking about me?" he asked, squinting in distrust.

Unlucky for him, Otonashi's pitch flew uninterrupted into Kanade's mitt at that precise moment. "Strike one!"

Hinata flinched and turned back to face Otonashi again. "Hey, that's not fair! I got distracted!"

"That's your own fault," Kanade said briskly.

Hinata was so shocked that his bat almost tumbled out of his hands. Ayato and Yuri stared at Kanade, then at each other. He could tell by the look on her face what she was thinking – even he, a newbie in her eyes, would know that was out of character of the mild-mannered former Angel.

"What the hell, Kanade?" Hinata said.

Kanade seemed surprised at herself too, backing up a step. "That…. that came out wrong," she said softly. "Sorry."

"It's still a strike, though," Otonashi called from the mound. Although he looked just as confused as they all felt, he clearly wanted to come to his wife's defense. "C'mon, let's go again."
Hinata shrugged it off. "Alright, no worries. This one'll make up for it," he said, getting into a serious posed-and-ready stance.

**CRACK.** Sure enough, Otonashi shielded his eyes from the sun to watch the ball as it went soaring overhead.

"That was odd," Yuri said quietly to Ayato. He knew full well that she wasn't talking about Hinata making such a successful hit just now.

"She's been acting strange since I ran into them a few days ago." Ayato rubbed his chin; considering the circumstances, he wasn't entirely sure if he was qualified to say that. "I know this is her in a new life… so there are bound to be some changes. But with her Afterlife memories back, I figured her personality and habits would be the same."

"They are." Yuri was now watching said Angel's husband as he threw an impressive fastball. "Of course she's the same. Otonashi even told me he fell in love with her for all the reasons he did before."

Ayato harrumphed. That did sound like something Otonashi would say.

"Anyway, didn't you see his face a minute ago? He thought it was weird too," Yuri continued, folding her arms across her chest. "I'm pretty sure the guy knows his wife."

"Then what's with her?" Ayato asked, exasperated. "What's with all of you women this week? First you with your amnesia, then my mother sneaks out of Akuma, then Kanade and her little quirks… is there some sort of full moon this week?"

Yuri's lips briefly twitched in amusement at the mention of a full moon for some reason, but then she narrowed her eyes. "Hey! …Wait, what was that about your mom?"

A pulse of joy flickered in his heart at her reaction. Maybe she didn't remember him, but she might still know enough about his mother, and he was aching to tell someone the abnormality that had transpired. Somebody who would understand. It occurred to him then that despite having her Afterlife memories back, Yuri could still be that person.

"How much do you remember about her?" he asked, daring to hope.

Yuri leaned back, staring up at the sky and thinking hard.

"She was distant, but nice. I started seeing a little more of her, and she was even nicer, back when I was sixteen." She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "I guess that makes more sense now."

He laughed, thinking back on it too. The happiest he'd ever seen his mother was the day he brought Yuri home with him for the first time. Or, rather, the day she'd dragged him home. His mother had taken one look at their conjoined hands and lit up like a Christmas tree before ushering them inside for tea. Although a coffee-drinker at heart, Yuri had warmly accepted the offer, which had charmed his mother even more.

"It's fuzzy, but there are some memories of her. And your dad." Yuri shrugged. "I always thought for some reason I was there to see her. Like we were friends. Or like she was sometimes my second mom while my parents were away, and I was the distant daughter she never had." She wrinkled her nose, and her eyebrows furrowed in anger. "Not like I would ever be there to comfort Kimito Naoi."

Ayato scowled. "She's the one who needs comforting. Because of him."
"I remember I even screamed at him one night and threatened his business if he ever hurt his family again." Yuri's eyes flicked over to meet his. "And he's still hurting her?"

He averted his gaze. "He doesn't have me there anymore. I imagine he needed a scapegoat all these years."

After a moment, her hand came to rest on his shoulder. It was a hesitant gesture, but comforting and gentle. A genuinely supportive touch he hadn't been anticipating, but didn't flinch at or brush off. "That's not—"

"Strike two!" came Kanade's sing-song voice.

"DAMMIT!"

Yuri retracted her hand, startled, and Ayato glared daggers at Hinata's back. What if she had been on the verge of remembering, and that idiot's stupid outburst had ruined it? As it was, there were more devastating things than getting another strike in baseball.

"...So, what were you saying?" Yuri prodded, turning her attention back to him. "What happened to your mom this week?"

He stared ahead at the diamond, watching as Hinata impatiently whacked the dirt with the tip of his bat and Otonashi wound up his arm for another swing. It was faint, but he could hear Kanade humming something peppy and energetic, befitting a baseball game.

"If you recall," he said, and managed not to snort before going on, "you haven't seen her in four years. Because you moved to Mizuzaka with me, but she wouldn't come with us."

"My parents always said she was very devoted to him." Yuri frowned, biting her lip. "Never disobeyed him. I'm not surprised she didn't leave him and go with you. But—"

"She did leave." His statement made her blink twice in surprise. "The day we all reunited, you remember, I went back home. And I – well, that night, she came to see me."

Yuri was stunned. "She actually left him?!"

"No, she just left." The hopeful light left her eyes; he knew the feeling. "She told him she was going to visit family, she came and found me, and she took a train back to Akuma the next morning."

"She just went back to him?!" Yuri said in disbelief, her mouth falling open.

"I know!" said Ayato in frustration. Though strangely enough, at the same time it felt good to have Yuri be so understanding despite her situation. It felt good to rant about this. No matter who she was and what memories she had, they'd both grown up in the same area and known the same people. It was... comforting.

Sure enough, Yuri's eyes were bright and wild with an indignant flare, as they often were when she got riled up.

"When you get a chance to escape, you don't just go back!" she said, her fingers squeezing the edge of the bleacher. "Not when they've caused you that much pain. You put as much distance between you and the person who hurt you as possible, and pray they don't come after you. If she goes back, he'll just hurt her again."

"That's what I said!" Ayato burst out, almost breathless and gesturing frantically with his hands.
When he noticed he'd caught the attention of the baseball players, and that his windmill motion had been a little too enthusiastic and close to Yuri's face, he quickly regained his composure with a scoff. Closing his eyes, he ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "You see my problem."

Yuri nodded, peering back out at the field as Kanade called Hinata's third strike. "Full moons, right?"

Ayato snorted.

Amazingly, Hinata shrugged off the strikeout and tagged Otonashi in as batter without too much fuss. Otonashi was only happy to take his place closer to Kanade while Hinata strolled over to the mound.

"No big deal," he said, stretching his arms out behind his head. "It's about time I gave you a chance at bat. Let's see what you got." When he reached the mound, he clapped his fist into his mitt and laughed. "Don't feel bad if I catch a lot of 'em."

"You're all talk," Otonashi jeered from home plate. "Give me your best shot!"

Hinata rolled up his sleeves, twisted his arm back, and let the ball fly. It whistled toward Otonashi, who stepped through with impressive form and caught it with the core of the bat. His hit went zipping over Hinata's head before he could blink twice.

Straightening up, Otonashi swung the bat around, playfully swiping the air. "You were saying?"

"Beginner's luck! You swing like Yui!"

The two struck up a spirited back-and-forth, yelling trash talk at every swing while Hinata tried to stop any low-lying hits from going too far. Kanade even stopped humming to giggle at them. After a few minutes of this, she backed up from the home plate and made a small suggestion.

"Hinata, I think you really want to make some catches," she said, resting her hand on Otonashi's arm. "Would you like me to pitch to Yuzuru instead?"

"What, switch out?" Hinata asked, scratching his head.

"No, I'll take your place at the pitcher's mound and you can go into the outfield," said Kanade, sounding happy. "Then you'll have a better chance at catching a fly ball."

Otonashi appeared to consider this, leaning his weight on the bat. "Hinata, what do you think?"

"Sounds good to me," Hinata said, moving out a little farther from the mound. "I always wanted to get Otonashi out."

"Are you—"

"Shut up, Otonashi, I already heard it!" Hinata barked over his shoulder. "I think that one's a bit of a stretch!"

Otonashi conceded this with a laugh, and Kanade threw her husband a supportive smile from the pitcher's mound that Ayato was sure he returned. "Just don't get obliterated."

Frankly, Ayato thought Hinata should consider himself lucky he hadn't let slip something about pitching or catching. He mentioned this to Yuri, who snorted with laughter and lightly thwacked his shoulder. Hinata shot them both a suspicious glare, which silenced them but broadened their grins.

The game continued on this way at a quicker pace; with Hinata catching the low-flying hits and
tossing them back, they spent less time racing across the field to retrieve them every so often. Kanade didn't pitch quite on the same level as Hinata, but Otonashi seemed to appreciate that his wife was sending him a few easy ones.

"Nice arm, Kanade!" he called after one of his better hits, earning a blush and a cheerful hum from the Angel.

There was something pensive about Yuri's frown while she stared straight ahead at the field where the others were playing. She looked as if she were deeply considering something; Ayato wondered if it was the way Otonashi had flirted with Kanade just now.

Of course… Otonashi had been more open about it when they were preparing for graduation together. Yuri had been asleep then, it would make sense that she wasn't as attuned to it as he was. He and Hinata had witnessed firsthand Otonashi's gushing and tender admiration for every diploma the girl put together.

But her frown remained, minutes afterwards, and it became evident that her thoughts were somewhere else.

At last he couldn't contain his curiosity any longer. "What is it?"

His shattering the silence startled her out of her fog, and she looked at him briefly before returning her gaze to the baseball diamond.

"Why wouldn't she stay?" she said suddenly. He sent her a questioning glance, a little puzzled by the outburst. She met his eyes then, while hers were still narrowed in thought. "Why did your mom want to leave Mizuzaka?"

"Why did you?"

Ayato had no idea where that question came from—it slipped out of his mouth as quickly and involuntarily as a breath—but upon a few seconds of reflection, it seemed fitting and even warranted.

However, Yuri pressed her lips together for a moment, pausing as if the question had annoyed her.

"That's different," she said. "I was looking for a fresh start. Unlike Akuma, Mizuzaka could have given her that. Why would she choose Akuma?"

The beginnings of a grimace twitched at his mouth. "Because she loves him."

Yuri's gaze fell to her shoes. "It doesn't make sense," she muttered, absent-mindedly kicking the bleacher in front of her.

CRACK! Otonashi struck hard and sent a ball soaring sky-high.

"I don't understand it either." Ayato crossed his arms, watching Hinata snap out of some sort of daze at the sound. Then he turned back to face Yuri with a wry, half-hearted grin. "But I guess when someone really loves another, they can't stand to be apart from them."

Hinata backed up a few steps, raising his glove in the air. A pop fly to second was right within his reach.

"It makes them crazy," said Ayato, feeling an odd tug in his chest as Yuri stared at him almost contemplatively. "Like they won't stop running until they've finally found them again—"
"AAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

**Preview:**

"That's 91%!"

"I feel kind of bad that we never got to say goodbye."

"So you checked her house too, then?"

"…leave the poor amnesia patient alone."

"What made us get a divorce?"

"So instead, you'd rather be my wife?"

"What, were you trying to hypnotize me?"

"LOOK OUT!"

[Chapter 15]: **Wife.**

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I don't think I have ever written a baseball scene before this. Getting people exactly where you want them is the real sport. Plus I think Otonashi was looking as hard for baseball jokes as I was. My dude, you're a bit rusty. Getcha head in the game.

As for the cliffhanger, stay tuned for Chapter 15 to solve the mystery of the scream! And to see more NaYuri bonding. :D Among other things...
Previously, on Heartbreak Cure...

CRACK! Otonashi struck hard and sent a ball soaring sky-high.

"I don't understand it either." Ayato crossed his arms, watching Hinata snap out of some sort of daze at the sound. Then he turned back to face Yuri with a wry, half-hearted grin. "But I guess when someone really loves another, they can't stand to be apart from them."

Hinata backed up a few steps, raising his glove in the air. A pop fly to second was right within his reach.

"It makes them crazy," said Ayato, feeling an odd tug in his chest as Yuri stared at him almost contemplatively. "Like they won't stop running until they've finally found them again—"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

Hinata's scream made them both jump. They spun around just in time to watch as something akin to a small human freight train barreled into him at an unimaginable speed, bringing both Hinata and his attacker to the ground with a gravel-skidding, ground-shaking crash. Hinata was all but eating dirt by the time Otonashi's ball tumbled past his head – and then his limbs were being seized in a relentless and powerful lock.

While Hinata was yelling in pain, Otonashi had doubled over laughing hysterically at home plate. His face was red from pent-up laughter that was finally being released, and he wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. The attacker tugging at Hinata's hair, face, and limbs didn't come as quite as much of a shock to Otonashi, so it seemed.

With a grunt of effort, Hinata escaped his lock, grabbed his assailant, and swiftly rolled them over so that he was pinning her down into the ground. His expression changed from shock to sheer amazement in a matter of seconds.

"Yui!"

"That's 91%," Otonashi reminded him through his continued snickering. He gasped for air in between hoots of laughter. "I saw her coming the whole time!"

Maybe Hinata would have yelled at him for it, but the look on his face showed quite plainly that everyone else but Yui had disappeared from the baseball field. He dipped his head down and kissed her furiously into the dirt as if they'd been separated for years. Yuri let out a low whistle, while Ayato rolled his eyes. What a show-off.

When they parted, Yui giggled and stroked his cheek. "Did you miss me?" she asked with an impish
little grin.

"Of course I did!" said Hinata, his eyes still wide as they gazed into hers. He was grinning too, happiness splitting across his face as he began to laugh in disbelief. "What are you doing here? How did you know—?"

"I didn't," Yui said shyly, dazed but just as thrilled as he was. "I was just here looking for someone."

Hinata quirked a brow. "I think we'd have noticed or remembered if GlDeMo grew up in our town, Yui."

"Maybe they moved here while you were gone," Otonashi offered in her defense.

But Yui merely shook her head, dismissing it.

"I wasn't looking for GlDeMo." Her confession caught Hinata off-guard, and she took that opportunity to shift out from underneath him. She sat up and shook the dirt out of her hair. "I mean, I was at the beginning, but… then I realized there was someone else very special to me I wanted to find first."

Hinata sat up too. Noticing the soft pink that had colored her cheeks, he grinned and ran a hand through his hair. "Oh yeah? Who's that?"

"Shiina."

Hinata's eyes flew wide open. Behind him, Otonashi and Kanade looked equally surprised, staring over at Ayato and Yuri to include them in their exchanged glances. This was too much of a coincidence!

"No way!" Hinata gaped at her, grabbing her wrist excitedly. "Us too! I guess great minds think alike."

"Implying either of them have great minds," Ayato said to Yuri, who snorted. But apparently Hinata was either too far away or too absorbed in Yui's presence to hear them.

On the field, Otonashi raised his hand to get their attention.

"So wait, you came to Kyuuya looking for Shiina?" he asked with a curious tilt of his head. "I didn't even know you two were close."

"Of course we were, you big dummy!" said Yui, who was beaming as Hinata helped her to her feet. She crossed her arms, reminiscing happily. "Remember that one day at the river? While you and Hideki were hanging around Angel, Shiina was the one who actually paid attention to me. We went fishing together and then we cooked together…" Frowning suddenly, she lowered her eyes. "I feel kind of bad that we never got to say goodbye."

"Mmm," Otonashi said, sounding eerily like his wife, but said no more on the matter.

"So you checked her house too, then?" Kanade asked.

"Yeah, a few minutes ago," Yui clarified. "She wasn't home, so I left my car there and went for a walk. Then I had a good feeling about the baseball field, like that's where I'd find what I was looking for. Instead, I found you!"

Hinata let out a short bark-like laugh. "Well, sorry to disappoint you," he said, and engulfed her in a
A tight hug before kissing her again. Yui grinned against his lips and, ever the lecherous one, gleefully deepened it as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Yuri looked less than impressed by the display. And although the reunion had been… charming, at first, Ayato had grown similarly unamused.

"Hinata, you already had lunch! There's no need to eat the poor girl's face," he hollered from the bleachers.

The couple broke apart, both parties turning sharply in the direction of his voice and simultaneously remembering that other people existed. Yui blinked twice, registering their faces. Her eyebrows shot up her forehead.

"Hey! Commander!" she said, waving. If she'd had that silly devil's tail in this life, it would be twitching excitedly. Then her eyes fixated on Ayato with a curious glint. "And… uh, guy whose name I don't know!" she finished brightly.

Ayato harrumphed, caring little for Yui's flippant greeting. That is, until Yuri tensed beside him.

"You don't know him either?" Frowning, Yuri cast a suspicious glance Ayato's way. "Why doesn't Yui know you?"

"She knows him," Hinata said, rolling his eyes. "She just never remembers his name since he kept introducing himself as God." Yui nodded enthusiastically in confirmation.

"So she doesn't know my name, and she had no idea we were in Kyuuya," Ayato deadpanned as the two couples on the field moved closer to the bleachers. Hinata reached out and stole two drinks from the road trip cooler, passing one to Yui. "Then what the hell have you two been texting to each other this whole time?"

Hinata and Yui exchanged furtive looks. Hinata cut his eyes to the side, taking a sip of his soda. Yui just grinned.

Connecting the dots, Ayato wrinkled his nose. "Unbelievable."

"Hey, hypocrite, I had to listen to you and your sick innuendos about Yurippe."

"Well, I know enough," said Yui, after a generous glug of soda. Her whole face lit up with intrigue; she leaned forward into Yuri's space, a fascinated gleam in her eye. "Yurippe, you actually married the God guy?"

"I'm really the wrong person to ask about this," Yuri muttered.

After setting down her soda, Yui perked up once more in realization. "Oh, yeah, yeah, that's right!" she said, bouncing on her feet. "You can't remember him at all, can you? Why do you think that is?"

Yuri groaned. "I really don't know…"

"Alright, Yui, leave the poor amnesia patient alone," said Hinata, draping an arm around her shoulders and herding her away from the bleachers. "Want to stick around and play baseball with us?"

"Play baseball with you at the place where it all started? Like you need to ask," Yui said, laughing as she wrapped her arm around his middle. "Sometimes I think we should've gotten married here."
Hinata slowed his walk. "Here? Get married on a baseball diamond?" He chuckled, but the idea seemed to appeal to him. "Could someone really do that?"

"Probably," said Otonashi, considering. "All you'd need is someone who can officiate it."

Hinata snapped his fingers. "Damn it—that would have been cool."

"Wait a minute." A hesitant Yui touched his arm, stopping him in his tracks. "What about Shiina? Aren't we going to look for her?"

"We'll find her, Yui." Hinata sounded faraway but sure of himself. "Or… you know, just wait her out. She's gotta come home eventually. In the meantime, we might as well get into the Kyuuya spirit."

"Just like old times," Yui agreed with a happy sigh. "I missed this place."

She, Otonashi, and Kanade followed Hinata back to the home plate to discuss positions. As soon as they got there, Hinata and Yui started squabbling over the role of batter, nearly biting Otonashi's head off when he wryly offered himself for the role to settle the argument. He backed off, sweating nervously, and grabbed Kanade's hand for safety.

A minute into their bickering, though, Otonashi was letting a grin slip through as Hinata seized Yui in a lock and had her screaming "uncle." The nostalgia seemed to be getting to him after all. Kanade giggled and whispered something in his ear, making him smile.

Ultimately, Hinata won the wrestling match but awarded Yui the role of batter anyway. She'd just gotten here, and he'd already had a turn. However, Ayato suspected some of it had to do with his underlying soft spot for his wife. After a great noisy cheer, Yui claimed her spot at the home plate.

"She sure missed Kyuuya," Yuri mused, digging a can of coffee out of the cooler. She popped the lid, but in fact looked more invested in the pink menace who was practicing her swing as Hinata jogged to the outfield.

"Hmm," said Ayato, partially agreeing but not quite.

Personally, he figured it was the present company making her happy right now. Otonashi had reclaimed his spot at the pitcher's mound, Yui was up to bat, and Hinata was standing in the outfield watching her. The only difference between this scene and the proposal that Otonashi and Hinata had told him about was that the fearsome so-called "Angel" now known as Kanade was standing close by as her catcher.

Of course, he had to admit there was something endearing about them reliving their Afterlife moment in their most cherished spot in this life. There was almost a magic to it.

"I miss Mizuzaka."

Ayato snapped to attention, focusing intently on Yuri. "You what?"

Did he hear that right?

"Noroi's nice," Yuri continued with a small shrug, absently stroking the can in her hands. "I feel safe there. It's just… Mizuzaka had its charms."

"What do you miss about it?" he asked. Any chance to dig into her subconscious he would take, however small it was.
"Well, for starters…” She guzzled her drink, then crushed it in her fist. "Its coffee tastes better."

He found himself smirking as she licked her lips critically. Even if he wasn’t already aware of his coffee-brewing talents, he would have been able to see that now. Licking her lips after drinking coffee was a habit she’d had as long as he’d known her. If she did it slowly, she was savoring the taste. If it was only a brief flick of her tongue, the coffee was good but she just wanted it off the corners of her mouth.

"And," Yuri said, setting the drink on the bleacher behind her, "the storms are way more intense."

"They were intense," Ayato corrected. Despite himself, he grinned before adding, "And fun."

She threw him a strange look, and at once Otonashi’s stern warning flashed through his mind. He cleared his throat and tried to look innocent, hoping his innuendo had been subtle enough that she didn’t notice.

"Oh, right. Mizuzaka's going through a dry spell too." Ayato relaxed, but made a small chagrined sound of confirmation. "That's depressing."

You have no idea, he wanted to agree with her. On second thought, yes she did. But could she possibly imagine how unbearably dreary Mizuzaka had been, without… well… how miserable it had been these past few months?

Granted, it was sunny now and he didn't mind. He chanced a look at her out of the corner of his eye.

The weather hadn't improved, but his company certainly had.

"Okay, so Mizuzaka may not have storms right now," Yuri said, after Kanade called Yui's second strike – second? Perhaps they hadn't been listening. At least, he wasn't. Stretching her legs out a little, Yuri kicked back against the bleacher behind her. "But it does have my friend Ryou."

"And me," Ayato prodded with a smirk, confidently tossing his hair for good measure.

A pointed silence fell, and when he turned his head to gauge her reaction, she was squinting at him. What, no girlish sputtering? No pretty little blush rouging her cheeks? Her eyes were narrowed, but he swore he saw a corner of her mouth threaten to curve upwards. She was reading him again.

"You sure do flirt with me a lot," she said, raising her eyebrows. "For an ex-husband."

Ayato was floored. He couldn't seem to close his mouth. "Wh—I—"

"I get it. It's the amnesia, right?" Yuri fixed her gaze directly on his; he could feel her analyzing him. "You're teasing me, and it's like you're including me on this inside joke I know nothing about. I'm just," she paused, before finishing with a light, wry laugh, "trying to understand your motive here."

To be honest, he hadn't really thought about it. Other than making coffee for her this morning – which was purely experimental – most of these things just slipped out. Being with her again, on an operation like this, he felt lighter than he had in a long time. Playful, even. And maybe part of it was her amnesia. Making light of it made him feel better. It was like the fake-flirting they did in high school before he realized he had a crush. He couldn't help himself, teasing her when she was like this. Flustering her.

The voice in the back of his head murmured a reminder he hadn't heard since his school days:

"The thing about fake-flirting is that if it's unplanned, it isn't fake."
He thought back to the first time he told himself that. They were sitting just like this in their empty club room, and she was looking at him the exact same way she was now. A skeptical, curious twinkle in her eyes, her lips pursed in concealed amusement.

He averted his eyes, willing the warmth in his face to fade. "It's a coping mechanism, I suppose," he said, watching Yui and Hinata tag each other out. He must have missed the third strike too. "As long as you don't remember me, I might as well have fun with it."

"Hmm." A hesitant but acknowledging noise. She quieted then, a wise choice since she likely wouldn't be heard over Yui yelling some sort of threat about Hinata and foul balls as she moved to the outfield. Hinata shot back with a crack about her "killer guillotine" soccer move.

Then, after Otonashi ended the exchange with a suggestion that nobody try to kill each other in this life, Yuri spoke again.

"I think I can accept that. If you answer just one more question for me." When Ayato turned slightly and nodded for her to go on, she narrowed her eyes again. "What made us get a divorce?"

Ayato faltered with a slight grimace. For some reason, the prospect of answering that question unsettled him.

He was able to tell Otonashi without hesitation, but… telling Yuri herself? That it was divorce at first sight? What would she make of that? She might decide that if the Afterlife memories of him were so divorce-worthy, those memories weren't worth bringing back. And that he couldn't be trusted.

"Things sort of fell apart after the concert," said Ayato. That was the safest, truest explanation. "It was a mutual decision, but you didn't really want to see me after that."

"Oh." Yuri frowned, suddenly looking lightyears away. She brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "There was just… a lot going on in my head back then. Everything got so… complicated, and so simple."

"Same here," Ayato chuckled, offering her a sympathetic half-smile. "An extra lifetime and a half… it's hard to juggle that, an identity crisis, and a marriage at the same time."

Another hum from Yuri, this one a bit more listless. "Otonashi and Kanade did it."

"We don't exactly have the same history between us." Seven years in this life was something, but it wasn't like it could ever compare to a love that originated in the Afterlife. Kanade and Otonashi were soulmates – heartmates, even. He and Yuri were… he didn't know what they were.

How could he know what they were when sometimes he didn't even know who they were?

"Now I have a question for you," he said. He was glad she hadn't pressed further about the divorce, but something else had been bugging him for a while.

"What's that?"

"Back at Hinata's old house, his brother suggested you were taken. By me." He saw her lips press into a tentative line, and her focus on the field heighten. "Why didn't you deny it?"

Closing her eyes, Yuri gave a noncommittal shrug. "I dunno, I didn't want him to hit on me," she said. Her features twisted in disgust. "Hinata's brother, trying to get with me? How creepy is that?"

Ayato laughed. He couldn't blame her there. In fact, he was rather pleased with her reasoning. "So
instead, you'd rather be my wife?"

"Your girlfriend!" Yuri corrected, feigning indignation with a sneer. Turning to him, she waved her left hand in front of his face. "Please. He didn't see a ring on this finger."

He grinned back at her – *well, well, well, look who's flirting now!* – until something about her words resonated with him.

"Oh, right…!"

His eyes widening with realization, he immediately patted his jacket and pants pockets until he felt what he was looking for. He fished the band out of his right pants pocket and held it up for display. He could say one thing about sunny days – they gave the emeralds and amethysts an attractive glow.

Yuri stared at the ring, then at him.

"I didn't mean it literally," she said, smirking, but he caught her regarding the ring with noticeable interest. Not even the smack of a baseball against the core of the bat broke her focus. "You aren't proposing, are you? I've got a few reservations about marrying someone I just met."

"I'm not proposing, Yuri," he said with a scoff. "But it *is* your old engagement ring. I thought it might at least stir something in you."

He twisted it around in his fingers, as if showcasing it. Recognition didn't flicker in her eyes, but curiosity did.

"Well, there's only one way to find out." Yuri reached out and plucked the ring from his fingertips. Before he'd even processed its absence, she slipped the golden band easily onto her left ring finger and held out her hand to model it properly in the sunlight.

The ring fit like a glove, like a glass slipper finding its princess. The band hugged her skin, the amethysts matched her hair, the emeralds brought out her eyes. It looked as perfect on her finger as it did the night he asked her to marry him. Ayato's heart thudded in his chest as he gazed at her in astonishment.

It looked the same. It felt the same. It *was* the same – he knew that now. It had only ever been her. All this time, he had only been fooling himself. He'd been an absolute idiot, completely and utterly ridiculous, to think – to *cling* to the thought – that she wasn't the woman this ring had been meant for.

She was Yuri Nakamura, and he loved her. God, how he still loved her.

And she didn't remember a damn thing about him.

"Alright, so I'll say one thing about you." Ayato glanced up sharply, catching Yuri's grin. "You at least know my ring size."

Looking at her now, it felt like he'd been transported back in time. To eight years ago when he first glanced up into familiar sea-green eyes in this life and wondered how he knew them. To six months ago, when he stared down into those same beautiful eyes and remembered why. To just this moment, when Ayato Naoi was seeing Yuri Nakamura for the first time *for the third time in this life*, and he couldn't for the life of him understand how he could have possibly been able to gaze into her eyes like this and not want to kiss her…

"What are you doing?"
Her naturally commanding voice splintered his train of thought and made him stop dead; he hadn't realized that he was leaning into her like this. He'd brought his face dangerously close to hers, but far away enough to see tickled bemusement crinkling her features. He found himself, embarrassingly, a bit tongue-tied.

Yuri offered him a hesitant grin, but it wavered with uncertainty. "What, were you trying to hypnotize me?" Her clipped tone had an edge of warning in it.

Pulling back in surprise, Ayato stared at her dumbfounded with his mouth somewhat agape. To be honest he wasn't sure what to make of the accusation. He'd leaned in, completely lost in her eyes, and she thought he was trying to hypnotize her?

His stomach sank. Apparently she had forgotten his newfound rule: he didn't hypnotize people who didn't trust him.

She was still observing him warily, so he opened his mouth again to defend himself and put her mind at ease. But words failed — and a piercing crack rang out, ball meeting bat with a heavy smack that made them jolt.

"YUI, LOOK OUT!" Hinata and Otonashi shouted.

Out in the field Yui let out a shrill scream, directly in the foul ball's trajectory but too frozen in fear to flee. She threw her arms up in a vain attempt to shield her face but the blow was inevitable and Ayato almost didn't want to watch but he couldn't look away. It was like a car crash in slow motion, but it was coming.

And then something else was coming. Whistling through the trees and across the diamond faster than the baseball itself, barely touching the ground but kicking up a cloud of dust like Ayato had only ever seen once before out the student council window on a dark night. The figure shot across the field so fast he swore it broke the sound barrier and sent everyone's hair whipping around everywhere. Everything had gone from slow-motion to a dizzying blur of navy and dark blue, and Ayato barely had time to rub his eyes as the human jetliner roared past.

There was the harsh sound of skidding against dirt, a peculiar thunk, then all was silence. Flinching, Yui kept her semi-fetal position, but peeked out through her hands with a small, puzzled squeak. For the sickening blow had not come to her head. The ball had been intercepted.

When the figure stilled, the group breathed a collective gasp. It couldn't be…

Towering in front of her protectively, the savior stood with one arm folded across her front, clutching the foul ball in her other painstakingly wrist-guarded hand. Her long navy hair was still fluttering in the remnants of her own breeze. Her ruby eyes narrowed as she took in her spectators, but she particularly focused on Hinata, who had moved a few feet closer toward Yui in the chaos.

"I feel a strange sense of déjà vu," she said solemnly. Her gaze flicked to Yui behind her (who had unfurled and was standing stock still, mouthing the woman's name in disbelief), then back to Hinata. "After all these years, you two are still very dangerous together."

"Shiina…" Hinata took a few hesitant steps toward her. "You remember us, then?"

She looked perplexed and a little surprised at the question. "Of course I do. You two lived here, you went to my school. Three times now, I've had to save her."

It was too cryptic; she always had been. Otonashi moved closer too, scratching his head and coming up next to Hinata.
"But wait," he said, sounding unsure but hopeful, "do you remember — all of us?"

This earned him a curious glance from Shiina; a double-take, even. She peered over his shoulder at Kanade, who stared unblinkingly back at her. Then her gaze swept over to the bleachers, and Ayato saw her eyes widen ever so slightly upon noticing Yuri. Then she looked away, straightening her stance.

"I don't know your names. No." She shook her head, dropping the baseball from her grip so she could cross her arms. "I've lived my entire life in Kyuuya and I don't believe I've ever met some of you."

Otonashi seemed to deflate, as did Hinata and Yui. Personally, Ayato didn't see why they were so surprised. He couldn't picture the cool, isolated Shiina with technology; of course she hadn't heard the song.

"But," Shiina paused with a raised eyebrow, picking up on the group's chagrin, "maybe in… another life?"

Everyone on the field brightened at once. Beaming like the ray of sunshine his name described him to be, Hinata turned to Ayato with a wink and a thumbs up.

"I believe that's my cue," Ayato said, feeling smug as he stood up. He made a swift descent from the bleachers and sauntered over to the group that had collected in center field, with Shiina in the very middle.

Confident that Yuri was watching from somewhere behind him, he locked eyes with Shiina. Her stance was defensive, but past that, he saw curiosity.

"With your permission," he said courteously, "I'd like to help you remember that life."

Shiina stared him down quite intensely. Though he had never been deterred by them, her intimidation tactics always had impressed him. Finally, looking rather unperturbed, she gave him an affirming nod.

"Very well then. How are you going to do that?"

He merely grinned. It was time for him to do what he did best.

"Just look into my eyes," said Ayato, the telltale buzz in his head becoming a mere tingle, "and trust me."

Shiina's eyes opened, and so did her mind.

---

**Preview:**

"You proposed to an amnesiac?"

"It wouldn't be the first time he manipulated her memories."

"I'm just wondering what else happened between us that you haven't told me."

"Something hacked her brain and rewrote her life God guy free."

"It's been a while, hasn't it?"
"Do you have anything similar to that, but with long lost friends?"

"And what if I want to find him?"

"Naoi, your vote?"

[Chapter 16]: **Connections.**

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So ends the Shiina arc! I hope to pick this back up in mid-October, school permitting, which according to my Heartbreak Cure timeline would be just after Iwasawa's infamous concert. The next half of this "season" will have more fluff, more changes, and more Battlefront bonding.

Thanks for following along this summer! See the preview above for a little taste of what's to come.
Mid-afternoon, the group that became seven with the addition of Shiina (an unintentional pun not lost on the group) had migrated back to her house at her invitation. Yui and Hinata were chatting her ear off, much to Yuri's and Otonashi's amusement and Ayato's annoyance. Kanade looked tired but amiable, just happy to sit down after a long day of activity and listen to her friends catch up.

When Shiina had woken from her trance and was showing even the slightest sign of seeing her friends anew, Yui had launched herself at her, followed swiftly by Hinata in a strong group hug that left the ninja looking overwhelmed in a good way. The hug did eventually break in favor of hugs from Otonashi and Yuri, but when Yui enthusiastically begged to know how she found them, and Shiina admitted to following a stray cat to the school, Hinata laughed and he and his wife both engulfed her in their arms again.

Needless to say, the former ninja was getting a lot of love. It made Ayato almost want to laugh to think about how she must be feeling. Living alone in an empty house for such a long time, an isolated person like her, and then going out one day and being barraged with attention and affection. It must have been like what he went through a few days ago with Hinata, Otonashi, and Kanade times a hundred.

Right now, while Hinata and Yui were jokingly calling Shiina their matchmaker, Yuri was rolling her eyes and smiling into her coffee. That pure, joy-filled aura she had when he and the rest of the graduating group appeared on her doorstep came back in full force, an energy that made her glow. Ayato grinned. What an extrovert. He'd always known, even when it was mostly the two of them in high school, that there was a social butterfly in her just waiting to get out.

"Well, enough about us," said Shiina, ever the introvert. She flicked her gaze in his and Yuri's direction. "Yuri, how did you and Naoi end up together?"

Yuri blinked, caught. "I don't—how did you know about that?"

Shiina stared back at her, reading her intensely, then motioned to her hand. "The ring."

"Oh, I—" Yuri raised her left hand to eye-level, arching an eyebrow at it as if just remembering that it was there. In all fairness, Ayato had forgotten it too. She gazed at her finger for a minute, or it might've only been seconds, before twisting off the band and dropping it into his outstretched palm. Their fingers brushed. "Sorry."

He wondered if she was apologizing for holding onto the ring or for the brief, tingling skin contact. It wasn't her wearing the ring that was killing him, it was taking it back. "It's fine."

"You proposed to an amnesiac?" Hinata asked in snickering disbelief, his arm around Yui's direction. "Yuri, how did you and Naoi end up together?"

Shiina blinked, caught. "I don't—how did you know about that?"

"I did not!" Ayato and Yuri protested in unison. He threw a particularly offended look at Otonashi, who shrugged his innocence.

"I did not!" Ayato and Yuri protested in unison. He threw a particularly offended look at Otonashi, who shrugged his innocence.

"I was just trying it on," said Yuri, rubbing absently at her bare ring finger, "because he wanted to know if it would help with my memories. I figured, what's the harm in modeling jewelry? But then Shiina showed up and he went and did his little… memory-giving hypnosis thing on her."

Frowning, Shiina tapped her puppy-covered tea mug with restless fingers.
"What about your memories?" she asked. "Why did Hinata call you an amnesiac?"

Yui's hand shot up, earning her an amused glance from her husband.

"Ooh, let me field this one!" she said excitedly. Once she had Shiina's full attention, she preened a little, looking smug to be the one with all the gossip. "Yurippe used to be married to this guy — um, God guy—"

Ayato rolled his eyes. At least someone called him God.

"—but they divorced six months ago, and during that time, she forgot everything about him!"

"Everything?" Shiina stared hard at Ayato, cold and calculating. "About just him?"

He shifted under her glare; perhaps some of her intimidation tactics did have an effect on him. She had trusted him enough in the Afterlife to stand near him once in a while, a rarity from an evasive and reclusive ninja, so the suspicion radiating from her threw him off guard.

Kanade nodded, watching their staring match. "It's a very specific amnesia," she said, quoting Hinata. "Just Naoi. He hasn't been very happy about it. He's been doing all he can to jog her memories. The ring is his latest attempt."

If Ayato didn't know any better, he'd think his former student body president was trying to defend him.

"What if that stems from guilt?" said Shiina, not taking her eyes off of him for a moment. "If it's so specific, maybe he did it himself. He has the power."

He stood up abruptly, slamming his hands on the table. "How DARE you—"

"Hey. Hey," Otonashi cut in, putting up a hand for peace. "It's okay, Naoi. None of us think you would do that to her."

Shiina made a small considering noise. "It wouldn't be the first time he manipulated her memories."

If Ayato had felt any better when Otonashi defended him, his stomach dropped in an instant at the bewilderment and outrage that crossed Yuri's face.

"Excuse me?!" Her mouth tightened as she sent him a sideways glower. "You didn't tell me about that!"

"It never came up!" he said, sweating. Yuri just gave an angry, indignant snort. "Honestly! What was I supposed to say in the midst of all this? 'Hello Yuri, nice to see you again, while we're trying to round up all our friends, would you please help me return your memories so I can remind you of the time I was the Battlefront's worst enemy—'"

"Actually—" Hinata started.

"—and tried to obliterate you with false memories so I could take over the Afterlife as God?"

"That does sound clunky," Yui reasoned.

Yuri continued to frown at him, looking him up and down. "I'm just wondering what else happened between us that you haven't told me," she said, taking a slow sip of her coffee.

Ayato raised an eyebrow, watching her. "You know, I can help you figure that out."
"Anyways, Shiina, we really don't think it was him," said Hinata, and Ayato glanced over at him in interest. "He was genuinely shocked when she didn't know who he was. Plus he only developed his hypnotism again recently."

"Something like that takes time," Kanade agreed, looking far away. "In the Afterlife, I saw him poring over books for months before NPCs started mindlessly following him around. In this world, he would've had to do it again. Long after Naoi and Yuri last saw each other."

"That's fair." Shiina poured Yui more coffee before Yuri could call dibs on the last of it. When Yuri frowned at her, betrayed, Shiina squinted back. "What else do you know about this?"

Yuri shrugged. "It's what I don't know that's the problem. Apparently my brain hole-punched him out of the Battlefront, and from seven years of my life."

"Her slate got wiped clean of him!" Yui chimed in, small and jittery from caffeine. "Something hacked her brain and rewrote her life God guy free."

Shiina paused. Her brow furrowed, she gave both Yui and Yuri a curious look. "You mean… like a spell?"

A spell? Ayato's forehead creased, thinking back. Ryou had called it that…

"Sorry for the intrusion!"

Shiina, who had whipped her head around at the sound of the front door opening, relaxed suddenly at the person's voice but still looked surprised. Everyone present peered at her in confusion, then followed her gaze to the front hallway.

"Shiina, are you home? I was wondering if you knew whether or not I left my—"

The woman, petite with mousy brown hair tumbling down her shoulders, widened her dark blue eyes once she stepped foot into the hall and saw everyone gathered in the kitchen.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you had guests." She laughed shyly, rubbing her arm and taking in her audience. "I suppose I should have known by the mysterious cars…"

As she scanned the table, her eyes fell on someone in particular.

"Oh, Yuri! Fancy meeting you here!" she said, beaming with recognition. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Yes it has," Yuri said thoughtfully, knitting her brows as if trying to piece together a memory. Then it dawned on her. "You're Ryou's friend, aren't you? Yukine Miyazawa. The one who knows magical charms and stuff."

"I have quite a few books on them, yes." Yukine glanced Shiina's way. "Speaking of which, I think I left one here. The one on trust and affection in various species?"

Shiina was unconsciously knotting her finger in a lock of long hair. "It's upstairs on my dresser."

"Thanks, I'll go—"

"Wait!" Ayato said, just as Yukine was about to turn on her heel towards the staircase. She stopped and looked at him, all doe-eyed and innocent. Just like Ryou when she was hiding something. He
frowned suspiciously. "Magical charms? You mean like ones involving memory?"

Just as he suspected, a knowing look crossed her face.

"You're the ex-husband, aren't you?"

He nodded. The subsequent sympathy in her eyes made him clench his jaw. Oh, was she sorry for erasing his entire existence from Yuri's brain?

She seemed to sense his bristling. "Well, I haven't dabbled with anyone's memories," she told him, crossing her arms but looking at him gently. "Ryou told me what happened to Yuri, but that wasn't my magic. That magic comes from a man much more powerful and meddlesome than I am."

He deflated, believing her. Another mention of that magic man! Why was there a man out there erasing people's memories? Why him? Why Yuri?

She didn't deserve this mental crisis, and neither did he. They both deserved answers.

"Who the hell is this magic m—?"

"What kind of magical charms do you know?" Yui interrupted, scowling. Her fingers drummed against the wood of the table impatiently.

Yukine blinked, suddenly noticing Yui was there.

"Well," she said, sending her a smile that she didn't return, "I have quite a library at home, but the charms I'm most knowledgeable in have to do with love, luck, and location."

"Location charms?" Hinata looked curious. "What do those do?"

Yukine tapped her chin, musing for a moment. "There was this one charm I used back in high school," she said. "I told my friends to make a heart with their fingers, say 'she loves me, she loves me not' three times, and walk around the school campus one time. The person who cared for them would be the first one to come up and talk to them."

Yui made a small acknowledging sound. "Is that how you and Shiina got together?"

Both Shiina and Yukine went a sizzling red. The former turned sharply and threw Yui a piercing glare, which only made Yui wither for a second before meeting it defiantly.

"Come on, Yui," Hinata said tersely, resting his hand over hers. "That's none of our business."

"Oh goodness, are we that obvious?" said Yukine, putting a hand to her cheek. She managed a sheepish smile. "Shiina and I aren't together though. We broke up over a month ago. I only came over to pick up that book. I... I really should go get it."

"Wait!"

This time, it was Kanade who stopped her. The urgency in her tone caught the rest of the room by surprise.

"About that location charm you used," she said, rosy-cheeked at the attention, "do you have anything similar to that, but with long lost friends?"

Otonashi perked up. Even Ayato had to admit to himself, that wasn't a bad idea.
Yukine looked pensive, glancing instinctively at the clock above Shiina’s stove. "I think I have a few 
spells like that, but they're in the books I'm bringing with me to Ryou's, and I'm in a hurry. Ryou's 
having a bit of a crisis."

"Crisis?" Yuri echoed. Her eyebrows rose a notch. "Why didn't she tell me?"

Ayato frowned. Last time he saw Ryou was only a day and a half ago, and she appeared to be fine. 
Except perhaps that was because she was too busy taking care of him after the incident with his 
attacker. And telling him about that stupid spell.

"I'm sure she just thought you might be busy," Yukine said soothingly. "I'm going because I've got a 
spell or two that should make her feel much better!"

"Magic isn't the solution to everything," Ayato muttered.

"Says the guy with actual hypnotism," Hinata said with a snort.

Yuri's attention was still fixated on Yukine. "So you're headed to Mizuzaka now?"

"Yes. Ryou sounded very upset, and her sister didn't seem to be of any help. I'd love to let you 
borrow the books when I get back tomorrow, maybe tonight if all goes well."

"Or," Yuri broke in, "we could follow you there."

Her words took a minute to settle in with the rest of the group. Then Hinata blinked at her. "We're 
going back to Mizuzaka?"

"Yep." She sensed Ayato's gaze on her, and looked him straight in the eye. "I've already told Naoi, I 
miss it there. And I want to see Ryou, AND we need a main base. I've checked the maps and it's the 
best meeting point for most of us."

"That sounds fine," said Yukine. "You all can discuss this amongst yourselves while I go get my 
book."

Ayato, who'd been distracted by the excited buzz of his thoughts, watched Yukine go. He'd been 
thinking – establishing a main base in Mizuzaka could be extremely helpful to him. It had plenty of 
places, things, and people who could jog Yuri's memory. But he was still stuck on why it was 
impaired in the first place. The pictures hadn't succeeded. The ring had only backfired on him. He 
had hope for Mizuzaka, but what if it was a "hair of the dog that bit you" situation? If all else failed, 
he wanted to at least know what or who cursed her.

Ignoring the prattle going on between his friends, he trailed Yukine to the bottom of the stairs.

"Miyazawa!" She paused on the steps and turned around a third time. He would admire her patience 
if he weren't so exasperated himself. "I'll let you go, but first tell me – who the hell is this magic man 
you and Ryou keep talking about?"

She considered him for a moment, then shook her head.

"It's not a name I like to speak," she replied. "Calling his name is sometimes how he finds you."

"And what if I want to find him?" Ayato pressed, forcing her eyes to meet his. He wasn't going to 
hypnotize her, but she needed to know he was serious. "He stole Yuri's memories. I want to get them 
back for her."
"I understand that." Yukine chewed her mouth restlessly. "If you really want answers, one effective way is to go to the place that means the most to you. That's where you'll find him."

Ayato frowned, then nodded. They both took that as their cue to leave. While she hurried up the steps, he returned to the kitchen where everyone was waiting.

"Naoi," Otonashi greeted him. "Your vote?"

All eyes were on him. He realized he'd missed an entire discussion, and now they were waiting on him for a decision.

"I agree with Yuri," Ayato said. "We should go to Mizuzaka."

After all, he had a walking bridge to get to.

---

**P review:**

"*We're taking a break?*

"*I need time alone with my thoughts."

"*You protected her."

"*Hinakins, their faces were this close!*"

"*Of course she wouldn't trust me."

"*Did you or did you not try to kiss her?*

[Chapter 17]: **Our Strange Quartet.**
As it turned out, the vote was unanimous. Shiina promptly blew past the group and headed towards the stairs to pull a travel bag together. While she was gone, there’d been some more discussion about rides.

"Wait, so we're all going now?" Hinata had said. "I don't think we can fit in one car, Yurippe."

Yuri had scrunched up her face in thought, then turned to Yui with a sudden epiphany. "Hey, Yui, didn't you drive here?"

"Yeah. Hideki, you and Shiina can come with me!" She'd scrambled down the hallway and halfway up the staircase to yell for a confirmation from Shiina, who'd accepted the ride.

But then, Hinata wasn't the only one with sudden travel-related realizations.

"Nakamura, you seem to be forgetting that my car is an hour and a half's distance away right now," Ayato said, rubbing his temples. Honestly, they'd been all over the place in less than a week. "I'm not going home just to have to drive two hours and back to get it."

Yuri sighed, reading his mind. "I know. I imagine we're all sick of driving by now. That's partially why we're going to go get your car."

Kanade seemed to understand what she was getting at. "We're taking a break?"

"Right," said Yuri. "We'll go with Yukine and find out about this location spell. Maybe see if it works. Then I'm calling for a break Sunday night." She gave the group an authoritative once-over. "We'll reconvene the weekend after that, but this isn't the Afterlife. Some of us have work that we do need to take seriously."

"I guess," Hinata said, rolling his eyes.

Yuri had to cover up a grin, but once she'd composed herself, she touched Ayato's arm. "Come on. We'll take my car."

"You're driving him?" Hinata asked.

This time it was Yuri who rolled her eyes. "No, I'm going to let him have me in the backseat."

Hinata smacked himself in the forehead like he should have seen that coming, while Ayato snorted with laughter.

Then, of course, came Otonashi with his words of wisdom. "I thought you wanted to get to Mizuzaka quicker than that so you could help Yukine comfort Ryou."

Yuri frowned. "Yeah. You're right."

Hinata added helpfully, "Plus driving from Noroi to Mizuzaka tacks on two hours—"

"Not the way she drives," Ayato said, smirking. Yuri elbowed him in the side, but of course she had no cause to deny it.
"—and it'll be awkward, us getting there first without you," Hinata continued, gesturing to himself, Yui, and the Otonashis. "We don't know Ryou or Yukine that well."

"Shiina does," said Yui.

"Alright, then who is going to drive him back?" Yuri demanded, crossing her arms. "I was kind of looking forward to driving to Mizuzaka by myself. I need time alone with my thoughts."

"Then drive with the quiet ones." Hinata gestured to Otonashi and Kanade. "Shiina, Yui, and I can take Naoi."

Otonashi, done deliberating over whether or not he should be offended by being called "the quiet one," tilted his head at him thoughtfully. "Just the four of you?"

Hinata shrugged. "Yeah, it'll be fun. And then when we drop Naoi off, Shiina and Yui and I will have some time to catch up."

"Fine, whatever," said Yuri.

Satisfied, Hinata clapped a hand on Ayato's shoulder. "Naoi, good with you?"

The gesture had startled Ayato, who was too busy wondering if Yuri had sounded disappointed. He was too caught off guard to knock Hinata's hand off of him. "Yeah, sure."

And that had been that. Yukine had come downstairs with her book, Shiina with a bag. Otonashi and Kanade had left in Yuri's car, and Ayato had piled into Yui's car with the other three. Hinata multitasked driving and flirting with Yui, while Shiina sat in the back with him.

It wasn't that bad, riding along with Mr. and Mrs. Imbecile. They mainly shot playful dialogue back and forth between the two of them, him quietly observing like it was a ping pong tournament. Once in a while, Hinata would throw a flippant remark his way, and he was in a moderate enough mood to humor him.

Yui occasionally dragged Shiina into it; although she was perfectly content with Shiina's brief answers, she was also an opportunist. She pointed out cute animals on the sidewalks, and Ayato could see her side profile beaming with pride whenever she heard Shiina coo joyfully in the backseat.

Half an hour into the drive, the ninja actually emerged from her quiet cocoon and cast a glance at him.

"I'm sorry for accusing you earlier," she said, and Ayato regarded her with raised brows. It was one thing for Shiina to talk, but to get an apology out of her? Curious. "I can see I misjudged you."

"Well, you were right that it wouldn't have been the first time," he muttered. Remembering the attempted obliteration made him feel like dirt. In the Afterlife, he'd let Yuri sweep it under the rug, but now he wished he truly was a separate person so he could teach his Afterlife self a lesson. Pulling her hair and controlling her like that… wasn't the man he wanted to be.

Shiina wasn't fazed.

"That doesn't mean you would do it again," she said, watching him out of the corner of her eye. "I remember you from the baseball game eight years ago. Hinata's second foul ball. You protected her."

Ayato felt himself smile at the memory. "Of course. You're the girl who wore a scarf in June."
"I don't sweat," she said severely. "And don't change the subject."

In the seat in front of her, Yui grinned back at them, looking suspiciously cheeky.

"Speaking of baseball," she said sweetly, "Naoi—"

Ayato's eyebrows shot all the way up his forehead. "Why, Strawberry Shortcake! You know my name now?"

Yui wasn't deterred either.

"I picked up on it!" she said cheerfully, and twisted around more fully in her seat. "So, Naoi. You know how Shiina had to save me from a baseball to the face again today?"

Only a girl who'd agreed to marry Hinata would say something like that with such a sunny smile.

"Yes?" Ayato said tentatively.

"Well, it was because I got distracted by something in the bleachers," she continued, grin broadening so much he could see her sharp little eyeteeth. "And I was wondering, Naoi… what was with that almost kiss between you and Yurippe back there?"

"WHAT?!"

Hinata braked hard enough for his tires to screech almost as loud as he did. Ayato paled considerably, and not because of the whiplash. But Hinata must have gotten it a second time when he snapped his head around to gawk at him. Apparently sending a horrified glare through the rearview mirror wasn't enough.

"What almost kiss?!" Hinata demanded.

"NOTHING!" Ayato hadn't meant his voice to sound so shrill. He winced; he sounded just like Yuri in denial mode. "It was nothing, damn it!"

Yui giggled evilly.

"Hinakins, their faces were this close!" she said, taking Hinata's chin and tilting it towards her. She leaned in until their lips were mere centimeters apart, noses almost brushing. Any closer and her abnormally long lashes could very well be tickling his cheeks. Hinata's eyes flicked to her mouth.

"This close," said Hinata, breathless, "is not nothing."

Ayato snarled very much. "Will you just drive, you jackass?!"

They were at a stop sign on a ghost of a road, but he'd be damned if he sat in the backseat and watched Hinata and Yui neck like a couple of kids at a drive-in movie theater. Making a fool out of him in the process. Damn it. He should have taken a train.

Shiina smirked at him sympathetically, but didn't seem as nauseated by their PDA. All the same, she harrumphed her satisfaction when the car got going again.

"Fine, but you have to tell me everything," said Hinata, coasting down the road. Then he grimaced as an afterthought. "No wait, don't, I don't care—crap, I do care—what the hell happened?!"

"I said nothing happened!" Ayato shot back. When he heard the words come out of his mouth, he cringed and slumped back in his seat. There he went again, sounding exactly like Yuri.
"This is so stupid," said Shiina.

He gestured grandly at her, grateful to have an ally – and some attention away from him. "Thank you!" he said emphatically. Then, to Hinata and Yui, "See? Shiina gets it."

Shiina closed her eyes, unimpressed. "I meant your denial."

Yui and Hinata laughed triumphantly in the front seat. Ayato sunk even lower. He couldn't wait to get to Noroi. But in the meantime, these idiots wanted an answer.

"I…" He glowered out the window, refusing to catch any of their gazes. "She tried on her old ring. I was feeling sentimental. I… I didn't realize I was… until she accused me of trying to hypnotize her."

He laughed then, bitterly.

"She's only known me for three days. Of course she wouldn't trust me."

Hinata went quiet, staring straight ahead down the road. The silence made Ayato want to groan and smack his head with his fists. Apparently his pathetic self-deprecation and moping could silence even the mouthiest of his friends.

It was just… Shiina's accusation had hit a sore spot. He'd never even thought of using hypnotism on Yuri in this life, not until she brought it up back in Noroi. She'd assumed it was his strategy beforehand and shot it down point blank. Then at the baseball field, she'd thought he was trying to do it anyway, without her consent. It made him feel… vile.

It made him feel like his father.

He'd stared slack-jawed at Yuri, astonished that she could think he would do such a thing to her – that he would ever harm her in body or in mind. Only for Shiina to remind him within the hour that he'd once seized her by the hair and done precisely that.

Maybe she was right not to want her memories back. He wasn't worth it.

"Alright, come on," said Hinata, wrinkling his forehead at him through the mirror. "Did you or did you not try to kiss her?"

Ayato sighed heavily in resignation.

"I did not try to kiss her," he said defensively, frowning out the window. "I wasn't thinking about it, didn't even know what I was doing. It was just an old impulse."

"But impulses can be controlled," Shiina countered. "Yui said you two divorced six months ago. Yukine and I ended our relationship just over a month ago, and I think you'll remember that I did not mindlessly almost kiss her."

Ayato scoffed. "We don't know what you two did together when you were upstairs for so long."

In the front seat, both Hinata and Yui frowned and exchanged glances.

"How about we change the subject?" said Hinata.

"Yes, let's."

Ayato was all too happy to comply, letting Hinata and Yui steer the conversation towards… whatever they were talking about now. They had Shiina's attention more than his, and he tuned in
and out while they rambled to her about whether or not they should get a cat or dog as a practice baby. Thank God, he thought between internal shudders, there won't be a tiny Hinata or Yui toddling around just yet.

After roughly another half an hour of that, plus some discussion of who they'd find next (he didn't give a damn as long as it wasn't Noda), Hinata dropped him off at Yuri's early, according to the clock in Yui's car. The former got out of the car and helped him put his things in the trunk; Ayato figured the act of altruism was just an excuse to harass him further. To his amusement, he wasn't wrong.

"Well, lover boy—"

"Hinata, your wife is right there," Ayato said, giving him a scandalized side-glance.

His friend rolled his eyes at first, but surprisingly, he shook his head and a grin broke out on his face.

"Smartass," he quipped, aggressively mussing his hair. Ayato flinched away and pretended to glare at him. "I was going to say, do you want us to wait so you can follow us back? I know Yui and Kanade were the ones with the directions."

"No, thanks." Ayato shoved the trunk shut, then leaned against it, staring out over the street. "I've already driven home and back. I know the way."

"Right, when you stormed out." Hinata nodded, remembering. "So, you're okay driving back by yourself."

"Without your dulcet tones in my ear? I don't know how I'll be able to focus on the road."

Hinata laughed, looking fondly over his shoulder at the women in the car. Yui had stolen the driver's seat, since it was her car anyway, and Shiina was lounging unsafely in the back now that she had the leg room. In all honesty, Ayato hadn't minded riding with the three of them. Still, it was going to be nice to have time alone with his thoughts without a certain oaf breaking into them with a dumb comment about reincarnating into animals.

No, Ayato was not a stag in a past life. Although he could buy into the idea of Hinata being a dog.

"Whatever," Hinata said. "I was just thinking. Yurippe was the one who offered you a ride first, wasn't she?"

"I guess." He moved off the trunk and wandered around to the driver's side of his car.

"So, she would've been fine, being alone with you in the car for an hour." Hinata shrugged, giving him a meaningful look. "Kind of sounds like she trusts you. She's starting to."

"Right." Ayato slid into the driver's seat and slammed the car door shut, a barrier between him and Mr. Words of Wisdom.

Who did he think he was? Otonashi? Besides, he remembered what she'd said. She was looking forward to driving to Mizuzaka alone after she dropped him off. Her giving him a ride would've mostly been a means to an end.

Once he started the engine, Hinata tapped on the window annoyingly until he gave in and rolled it down.

"I know Yurippe. Give her time."
"Got it."

Hinata frowned, gripping the edge of the door. He certainly had a bold amount of trust in Ayato to not roll the window back up and crush his fingers. But he looked annoyed with the short answers.

"Are you…?" He was squinting at him, his forehead pinched in thought. Oh no. Not that look. The card-reading look. "I mean, do you…?"

Having no watch to check for sass's sake, Ayato just stared back at him darkly, narrowing his eyes and trying to subtly carry the threat of hypnotism. Not only did he know the look, he knew what the question was. And he told Hinata, silently, that he did not want to know the answer.

The buffoon, full of surprises, got the message.

"Alright, I get it," he said, putting up his hands in surrender and backing away. "We'll see you back at your house." Then he looked briefly over his shoulder, and back at him with a grin and raised eyebrow. "Unless you're up for a drag race."

"Dumbass," Ayato said with a scoff. When Hinata didn't back down, his mouth twitched slightly. "Rain check."

Hinata looked happy. He threw him a lazy wave before making his way back to Yui's car and dropping into the passenger seat next to her. Ayato let the engine run for a few seconds, watching them disappear down the road. He had the distinct impression that sometimes Hinata said ridiculous and especially stupid things just to bait him, or even cheer him up.

"Rain check" indeed, he thought to himself, shaking his head as he put the car in gear and followed after them.

With the weather as it was these days, he might as well have said "when pigs fly."

---

Preview:

"No, I came back for you!"

"You never want to hear about my love problems!"

"I'm not listening! I'm not listening!"

"I'll do whatever it takes to bring back her memories."

"Did… you do that?"

[Chapter 18]: Ryou's Crisis.

---

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sorry for the late update! Not sorry for the corny chapter ending (okay maybe a little bit). If you're reading this on AO3 instead of FFN, maybe you don't know/mind that this version's a couple chapters behind that one. I might make up for it by updating again on Saturday.
Yukine was already inside with Ryou by the time Yuri, Kanade, and Otonashi arrived. The door was unlocked, so the other three let themselves in with a "sorry for the intrusion" and made their way into the sitting room, where Yukine had her charm books scattered on the coffee table and Ryou's head in her lap.

"I used a charm like this on myself once," Yukine explained to the curious onlookers. She patted Ryou's hair, most of which was matted to her cheek from tears. "It was for sleeping well, but I found that a variation helps with peace of mind."

However, Ryou looked very much wide awake, and the glaze over her eyes was not from exhaustion.

"It's not working," she said miserably, sitting up and wiping at her face. "How could I ever have peace of mind after this?"

"Ryou, what happened?" Yuri asked, feeling an old sisterly pull at her heart. She faintly remembered warning Sunohara not to hurt Ryou, or she'd tie balloons to his pants and watch him sail away into the sun. She'd been living with Ryou then, and Kyou had overheard and cackled happily. One of the rare times she felt welcomed by Ryou's sister.

Ryou blinked, stood up, wiped at her eyes again. Then she gasped, "Yuri!" and rushed across the room into her arms. Yuri returned the hug with vigor; she didn't get to see Ryou very often because her friend's nurse career kept her busy. When they parted, Ryou looked up at her, flabbergasted, still grasping her arms. "You're here? In Mizuzaka? Did Naoi-?"

"No, I came back for you!" Yuri said, making a mental note to ask her what she knew—at a better time, of course. "What's the crisis? Why didn't you call me?"

Ryou looked guilty. Among other things. Her eyes, red from crying, nervously danced away from hers, and she started twisting at a lock of damp hair.

"I'm sorry, I... I just didn't think this was something you wanted to hear about." She moved back to the couch and sat down, locking and twiddling her fingers. She picked up a charm book from the coffee table and thumbed through it, too fast to actually be paying attention.

Yuri frowned. She rounded the coffee table and stood by the edge of the couch, having the distinct feeling that this was a Ryou way of being insulted.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked. "Why wouldn't I want to hear about your problems?"

"You never want to hear about my love problems!" Ryou burst out, voice shaking with emotion. Even Otonashi and Kanade were startled, standing in the background as know-the-faces with moral support. "I've tried talking to you about Youhei, but ever since you..." she hesitated, biting her lip, "...ever since you moved, you haven't been helpful. You give advice like someone who's forgotten how to love. Like someone who can't love!"

Yuri crossed her arms, hurt. Her heart gave an offended twinge. "I can love!" she insisted, narrowing her eyes at the inaccuracy of it all.

Of course she could love! She brought love into the Afterlife, where it shouldn't have bloomed. She loved so hard that she filled a whole room of computer screens with full red hearts. Then again, she'd
proceeded to shoot every computer in the room until all the hearts and screens had shattered, sputtering and fizzling pathetically.

She had a defensive urge to tell Ryou about all that, leaving out the last bit. But that was a long time ago, and the Afterlife was something Ryou knew nothing about. It was something she'd never talked about with her. Just like how Ryou didn't talk about Sunohara with her anymore. As much as she hated to admit it, Ryou was right. She felt vaguely detached when Ryou had brought up boyfriend struggles on the phone, because she couldn't relate. Maybe there were things that she and Ryou just couldn't share.

Wait, but that wasn't entirely true…

"I… I loved Naoi, didn't I?" she pointed out, feeling triumphant.

Ryou stared at her. "You don't remember that."

Her triumph collapsed. "But I did."

"You loved him," Ryou said, lowering her eyes, "and look at where it got you."

Yuri felt awful. It wasn't her fault she couldn't remember Naoi. She didn't ask for some magical spell to be cast over her, or to feel like she'd never been in love. Anyway, maybe she shouldn't have to know romantic love to care about what her best friend was going through.

With a sigh, Yuri sat down next to Ryou, sandwiching her between Yukine and herself, and patted her hand.

"At least tell me what happened."

Ayato got home before the Kyuuya trio, who arrived five minutes later with empty fast food bags, Hinata sucking down the last of his soda, Shiina clutching a toy from a kids' meal, and Yui dancing around erratically as soon as she got out of the car. He rolled his eyes and let Yui into the house to use the bathroom.

"Hey, aren't we going to Ryou's place to meet up with everyone?" Hinata asked, following him inside.

"After dropping off our stuff," said Ayato. Then he remembered something he'd thought about on the way home, and turned to him after dropping his bag onto the couch. "By the way, you and Yui can have my bed this time. Just please don't... fool around in it."

Hinata smiled. "And just when I was going to give you points for being hospitable."

"You're disgusting."

"You're the one who kept making gross innuendos," said Hinata with a cheeky grin. "I've earned my revenge."

Ayato stared at him, unblinking. "No, you're disgusting for thinking about doing anything with Yui in the same bed where Yuri and I—"

Hinata clapped his hands to his ears. "I'm not listening! I'm not listening! It's been six months, it's decontaminated!"

Ayato laughed, gave him an unconvincing pat on the shoulder, and walked into the kitchen. At first
he hoped to unnerve his guest with silence, but he felt a fleeting moment of mercy. "If you're so concerned, I have a couple of spare mattresses I can dig out."

"It's fine," Hinata's voice came from the other room. "Yurippe and Shiina can have them."

"Shiina?" Ayato arched his eyebrows. "Does she sleep?"

Floating by the kitchen pass-through, Shiina sent him a wicked ruby glare. It was especially vampiric and only furthered his suspicions.

She almost always wore scarves, didn't she? Maybe she was covering up a bite mark.

They didn't stay long. Ayato offered to let them just hang out here in case the others ended up bringing Yukine back from Ryou's house, but Hinata waved it off. Some sappy, corny comment about new friends and "the more the merrier." Outgoing people were so bizarre.

He drove them over in his car, after Yui and Hinata fought over who got to sit in the back with Shiina. He would have pointed out that there were three backseats if he weren't mildly offended. Shiina punished them by sitting in the front, but he could see in his peripheral vision that she was clearly pleased by the attention.

At Ryou's house, people weren't quite so tickled. Ryou had her face buried in the couch, and Yuri had a look on her face like she'd been repeatedly swatted over the head with a rolled up newspaper. She caught his eye and frowned hard, chewing on her bottom lip. Oh great, Ryou-ness was contagious.

Ayato gave the house a quick once-over. The entire surface of the coffee table was covered with what he assumed to be Yukine's charm books, about five cracked open. Some of the covers he recognized from the eccentric bookstore where he'd found information on hypnotism. Yukine was over in the kitchen with Otonashi and Kanade mulling over a different book. His guess was that Yukine had started to be of service to Ryou, but then Yuri had commandeered the crisis intervention. He raised an eyebrow, searching curiously for traces of candy wrappers or tubs of ice cream.

"What's the crisis?" Yui asked, unabashedly making her way into the sitting room. "I'm good at girl talk!"

"I'm fine," Ryou said, muffled through the couch cushion.

Yuri made a considering noise. "No, maybe Yui and Shiina can help. At least Shiina knows what it's like to have loved and lost."

The mood in the room instantly soured.

"Sunohara broke up with her?" Ayato scowled, remembering their confrontation a few days ago. Maybe he had hypnotized the wrong person. "Is that why he texted her the other night?"

That idiot, he was lucky to have her. In fact, the brat had insinuated as such during their run-in. *Because we don't throw away what we have with the women we love.* Indeed! Utter nonsense. He wanted to roll his eyes so hard they disappeared into his sockets just thinking about it.

Ryou raised her head from the couch. "No, I broke up with him," she said, tears staining her cheeks. Conflicted, Ayato wrinkled his nose. His first thought was, good on her. Sunohara was whiny and obnoxious and full of himself. He struttered around with an unearned confidence – probably from having a girlfriend – and made far too many dirty jokes. Even when Ayato had known very little
about Ryou and found her squeaky and peculiar, he didn't think that Sunohara deserved her.

And yet Ryou looked pretty miserable without him.

"Meanwhile, apparently we can't get her sister Kyō over here because she's out on a date with her stupid boyfriend," Yuri said spitefully.

Ryou tilted her head at her. "You don't know he's... stupid," she said, pursing her lips thoughtfully. "You've never met him."

Yuri dismissed it, sniffing, "He's either really stupid or really important if he's keeping her from being there for her little sister. I thought she'd protect you from everything!"

Ryou looked sheepish. "I... I never called her."

"WHAT!"

"I didn't want to bother her!" Ryou squeaked, wide-eyed. "Not when she's on a date, no matter how much it hurts! You know how—!" She paused, looking flustered, and looked briefly at Ayato before continuing. "You know how I can be."

He nodded thoughtfully. Ryou really could be too considerate for her own good.

Yuri frowned in disapproval, fishing out her cell phone. "I'm calling her."

"Don't!" Ryou shrieked, diving at her.

Obviously the girl had never tried to fight Yuri before, because after about ten seconds of scuffling and squawkng, she ended up pinned on her back with empty hands. Yuri held the phone up in the air with a triumphant yell – until someone snatched it away from her. She blinked twice when her right hand only grabbed air.

Hinata stuck the phone in his back pocket. "Come on, Yurippe," he said. "If someone broke my brother's heart, I wouldn't want to hear about it on a date with Yui."

Ryou gave him a watery smile; Hinata grinned back at her. His grin only widened when she sniffled and turned to Yuri curiously. "'Yurippe?"

Yuri snarled very much. Ayato wasn't sure if it was the spread of the nickname or Hinata's betrayal.

"Yeah, but I gather that you wouldn't kill me if I didn't tell you about it immediately," she said wryly. "In fact, you'd probably be too busy running off to give her a high-five."

Hinata laughed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, I would."

The situation was still bothering Ayato, who right now didn't care about siblings being busy on dates or Hinata's friction with his obnoxious brother.

"Why did you break up with him?" he asked, then furrowed his forehead. "Besides the obvious reasons."

Ryou sniffled again, and buried her reddening face in her hands.

"He told me he loved me," she said meekly.

Ayato sucked in his cheeks; he did not understand women. Metaphorical full moon strikes again.
"So what?" he asked, giving her a skeptical look. "He isn't lying. I heard him say it when I ran into him on Wednesday." Was six months really too early for that? He thought a girl like Ryou would want to hear her boyfriend say it by now.

"It's nothing like that." Ryou blew her nose on a tissue Yuri handed her. "I know that he meant it."

"Then what—"

Kanade, still immersed in the book Yukine was showing her, spoke up from the kitchen: "Ryou has lost faith in love."

Ayato's mouth fell open, aghast. Ryou? The one who had, just a few days ago, gazed at him in wonder like he was some knight going off to fight a dragon or some villainous suitor for the heart of his dear princess? To him, the fairytale analogy was still ungodly, but Ryou! It was like finding out she didn't believe in… well, magic, anymore!

"Lost faith in—" He closed his mouth abruptly, trying to process this. "What the hell for?"

Yuri clicked her tongue. "Apparently it's because we didn't work out."

Dismayed, Ryou squeaked in defense – something incoherent about not blaming them and "just being realistic" or "careful" or whatever it was she was yelping about.

Ayato turned his eyes heavenward.

"Lost faith in—" He marched over to the couch and stood in front of her, arms clasped behind his back. "Can I speak to you for a minute alone?"

Despite her flagrant lack of enthusiasm and energy, she nodded and hoisted herself up from the couch. Since it was her house, he let her show him into a room, one that appeared to be a guest room. This must have been where Yuri was staying until she moved to Noroi...

Ryou cleared her throat, and he shook the thoughts away. Right. Best to stay on track. Sighing, he gave her a stern look.

"Is what Yuri said true?" he asked. Her eyes skittered away from him, but he was persistent and held her gaze. "You've lost faith because of us?"

Ryou shrunk under his stare. "You're not trying to hypnotize me again, are you?"

The accusation made him take a step back.

"What?" His eyebrows shot all the way up his forehead. He was more than a little offended. It wasn't like he'd tried to hypnotize her on Thursday night. "No! I—"

A bothersome voice reminded him – much like Shiina and Yuri, she had every right to be suspicious.

Ayato sighed, repentant. His history with hypnotism could be tiresome at times. "I'm sorry for hypnotizing you without your permission," he said, letting his arms fall at his sides. "I let myself believe the ends justified the means."

A look of understanding crossed her face. "I know. You wanted to find Yuri."

"Do you know why?" he asked.

"Because…" Ryou eyed him hesitantly, rubbing her arm. "You were going to reunite her with the
rest of her friends."

"Is that all the cards said?"

Ryou continued to stare at him, now in silence. Maybe it was her card-reading expression, or maybe she thought he was just humoring her. Well, not this time.

"It's because I missed her... I wanted to see her again." Ayato closed his eyes. "And when... when she didn't know who I was, it destroyed me."

When he opened his eyes again, he saw fresh tears in Ryou's. He resisted the urge to curse out loud. He was never a fan of womanly tears, especially growing up with his mother, and Ryou was a very sensitive girl. But she had to hear this from him.

"But I went back to Noroi the next day," he said firmly, "because you told me not to give up."

"You both gave up six months ago!" Ryou said, bleary-eyed and with a fervor that startled him. "After three years of marriage, you just decided out of nowhere to get divorced for no reason! If you could fall out of love with Yuri so suddenly, after all you've been through together, why should I believe in what I have with Youhei?"

"Circumstances were different!" Ayato insisted. As far as he knew, Ryou and Sunohara would never have a reawakening quite like theirs. "I made a mistake letting her go. I will never give up on Yuri like that again, I promise you that."

Ryou inhaled sharply, a shaky post-sob gasp. Her hands were trembling, so Ayato seized them both.

"I'll do whatever it takes to bring back her memories. I won't give up on love." He looked at her steadily. She was biting her lip again. "So don't you give up on love either."

She took on a measured look, then drew her arms away—and flung them around his middle.

"Thank you, Naoi," she mumbled into his shoulder.

Once again, Ayato was aghast. When did he start stealing Yuri's friends? He had hugged exactly two other women in his life—Yuri and his mother. Still, he supposed Ryou was alright enough to be a third. He let his arms wrap around her shoulders.

"We should go back out there," he said once they broke apart, with a sheepish smirk. "Some of my friends have minds like Sunohara."

Ryou glanced over at the closed guestroom door and promptly blushed like a strawberry. She squeaked once more and rushed over to it, yanking on the doorknob.

So skittish. She reminded him of someone. But who?

When he realized, he felt the color drain from his face. Kurimu Aoki—or Kurimu Hejjiguchi, her married name—that was who she reminded him of. His and Yuri's friend from high school. Hopefully she wouldn't meet the same fate...

"Naoi?" He blinked back into focus and saw her waiting at the door, which was half-ajar. She smiled at him, thankfully dry-eyed. "Do your best."

He nodded, trying not to picture her with wild honey-brown hair and orange bows.

"You too," he said, and followed her out into the hall.
In the sitting room, he caught up with Ryou just as she was running into Yuri's arms to give her a hug. Baffled, Yuri returned it and stared over Ryou's shoulder at him. She sent him a questioning look that he decided not to answer for now, so he just shrugged modestly.

Ryou pulled away after a minute, looking happier than ever.

"I'm sorry, Yuri. I don't blame you for anything," she said sincerely. "I just need to believe in myself. Love's not predictable, and that's okay."

With that, she dug her phone out from between the couch cushions and started walking towards the front door.

Yuri watched her go, still wide-eyed from the apparent 180 mood swing. "Wait, where are you going? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to call Youhei and tell him I love him too!" Ryou called back to her, just before the door swung shut.

Once she was gone, all eyes fell on him.

"Did… you do that?" Shiina asked, peering at him from her spot in the corner next to the doorway.

"I guess so."


Ayato felt pleased. "God works in mysterious ways."

Elsewhere, in the space between the kitchen and the sitting room, Yukine leaned over to Shiina, Hinata, and Yui. "He's spiritual?"

"He's narcissistic," Yui replied.

Yuri overheard and snorted with laughter. Though she clapped a hand to her mouth, he could still see a smile through the cracks in her fingers. Ayato felt even happier.

Since Ryou was outside making amends, Yukine made her way over to the coffee table and closed the open charm books. When she got to the last one, she lingered over the cover and gave a thoughtful hum.

"Well, since Ryou has no more need for my services, how can I help you all?" she asked, turning to the group. "You mentioned wanting a locator spell for long lost friends. Do you want to borrow some books, or would you like me to help you—"

"We'll rent the books," Yui interrupted. "You probably want to head back home to Kyuuya anyway."

Hinata rolled his eyes at his wife. "Of course, Yui, and then she can drop by Shiina's place to pick them up when we're done with them."

Yui frowned hard. "Oh," she said, like she'd just realized something.

Oblivious, Yukine beamed helpfully at them.

"It's no trouble, actually. I told Ryou I'd stay for the weekend if necessary. I'm here as long as she doesn't have a date with Sunohara." She scribbled something down on a piece of paper, then walked
over to Yuri and handed her the book and the paper scrap. "Why don't you borrow one or two for now, and if you need help with research or enacting any spells and charms, you can give me a call."

"You're as helpful as ever," Yuri said with a grin, taking the book. She didn't seem to mind too much when Yui stole it out of her hands.

Bashfully, Yukine laughed and bowed her head at the compliment. "I'll be researching too," she said. "And anyway, it's not the first time you've needed help finding someone."

The comment gave Ayato pause, particularly as Yuri's grin faded into deep thought. Who did Yukine mean by that? Yuri couldn't have gone looking for the Battlefront before, or else she wouldn't be trusting in Yukine's help now. Perhaps she'd wanted to find her parents. Or, at the most far-fetched of hypotheticals, a certain fellow gymnast.

No matter. A reunion like that was unheard of. And according to Hinata, Yuri had been lonely when they found her, so whoever it was mustn't have been too important.

And now more than ever, Operation Battlefront Reunion was underway.

---

Preview:

"I didn't starve without you, Nakamura."

"Didn't he just tell you to shut up?!"

"You could tell him about the time I stabbed you."

"Ooh, I found something!"

"What can you tell us about Locus Felicis?"

"Mizuzaka is such a magical place."

[Chapter 19]: **Locus Felicis.**
A little after 19:00, the graduating group plus Shiina and Yui found themselves heading back to Ayato's. He got out of the car just in time to see Yuri gazing contemplatively at the house, and it hit him. This was the first time she'd seen this place in half a year. Six months since she'd packed a bag, left in the night, and never looked back.

Smirking, he leaned against his car, waiting for her to come up the driveway.

"Who did you think you sold it to?" he asked cheekily. When she approached, he led her to the front door. "Or did you think you just abandoned it?"

Yuri stepped up behind him on the front porch with a melodramatic sigh. "I guess I just figured I left it up to my parents. And to Ryou," she said. "She and Kyou were the one helping me house-hunt."

He frowned as he held the door open for her. Ryou had told him that Yuri moved, she hadn't mentioned she'd given her a nudge out of town. And he'd let her hug him with those traitorous arms! He fumed about that for a bit until everyone else had made it inside, then Kanade gave him a little tap on the shoulder and he followed her inside, closing the door behind him.

In the TV room, Yuri made herself comfortable on the couch with Shiina and Kanade, while Yui and Otonashi pored over their respective charm books and chatted amiably. Yui had become engrossed in hers during the car ride home. Frankly, Ayato was surprised at how quickly she absorbed the information. He hadn't pegged her for the bookish type, but she read pretty fast. Hinata briefly went on a mattress hunt and set one up in his and Yui's temporary room for Shiina after getting a confirmation from the woman. Yui had looked up from her book to squeal about it being like a sleepover.

Ayato personally appreciated the arrangement. With a stern ninja in the same room, Hinata and Yui would be less likely to... canoodle.

He'd stopped making dinner at the thought, horrified. Canoodle! Disgusting, he sounded like Kimito.

"Do you want any help?"

He glanced up from the cutting board and looked over his shoulder. Yuri stood in the entryway, her hand braced against the woodwork, watching him chop vegetables.

It did make him kind of wistful for the times they'd made dinner together, but he was still skeptical.

"I didn't starve without you, Nakamura," Ayato said, feeling protective of his cooking skills. He eyed her curiously. "Do you remember where everything is?"

"I think so. As long as you didn't move anything." She sashayed into the kitchen and flung open a cabinet. Satisfied, she nodded her approval and ran her fingers along the spices before closing the doors. She moved to the next cabinet and found the cups and mugs. "Did you keep any Key coffee around?"

"Nope!" Otonashi called knowingly from the TV room. "Just tea."

"Uh-oh," said Hinata from his spot on the couch next to Shiina, "did she say the 'Key' word?"

"Shut up, idiot!" Ayato snapped, glaring at him through the pass-through. His face warmed...
noticeably, and he hoped it was just the heat from the stove.

Turning, Yuri pinched her eyebrows at him.

"You've got a problem with Key coffee?" she asked, as if it was a deal-breaker with her.

"Of course not. I made it for you this morning," he reminded her. Had it really only been this morning? So much had happened today. "I used to make it for you every morning. It's just not my drink. I was tea, and you were coffee."

"Hmm." Yuri busied herself with the greens he hadn't washed yet. "Sounds like we complemented each other."

From the TV room again came a deep groan, and Hinata's exasperated voice. "Trying to keep my appetite for dinner over here, Yurippe! Please keep the flirting to a minimum."

Yuri whipped her head around, hair flying. "Didn't he just tell you to shut up?!" she snarled at him.

Ayato swore he felt his heart flutter.

While he and Yuri worked in the kitchen together, Shiina and Kanade struck up a conversation about the movie that was on TV, an animation based on what pets do when their masters aren't looking. Hinata seemed perfectly content to just kick up his feet and watch. Apparently he already identified with a shaggy black talking dog named Inuhoshi, and would point to the screen occasionally, saying, "That's me" or "Hey, Otonashi, that one's you. The wolf-like one."

Otonashi and Yui were still invested in finding something useful in Yukine's books. Every once in a while, Yui would excitedly read a charm out loud. Not ones they were looking for, just something she thought was cool.

"This one helps you find someone just by saying a spell or pouring a potion over something that belonged to them!"

"Yui, we don't have anything like that," said Shiina.

"I know! But if we're ever in danger—like maybe if you leave behind your scarf—"

And then there was:

"No way! If you have a melody stuck in your head but you don't know the lyrics or the title, all you have to do is tap a surface and say the note scale twice! Then it'll come to you somehow, like you'll see or hear part of the title somewhere."

Kanade hummed in interest, peering over Yui's shoulder. "That one sounds really useful."

"No kidding, Miss Earworm," Yui retorted. "Miss 'Hums A Million Tunes 24/7 and Never Tells Me The Names.'" Kanade just beamed guiltily.

They took a break to eat, and honestly it felt like being part of one of their old Afterlife cafeteria meals. Hinata, the walking garbage disposal that he was, had plenty of room for it, his appetite clearly having survived two occasions of fast food and the oh-so-horrrendous "flirting" that had transpired earlier. Ayato knew he had been all talk. Otonashi didn't show any flirting discretion, happily sharing some of his portion with Kanade. She'd stolen a piece of fried shrimp from him and he'd looked absolutely besotted.
When Yui turned the topic to charms, Shiina made an offhanded comment about making pinwheels out of dirt, and Hinata and Yuri had laughed appreciatively for some reason. Ayato didn't get the joke, but he liked watching her laugh. Then Hinata started making mention of lost limbs, which had Shiina giggling. Good God – either he needed to tune back in, or that woman had a terrifying sense of humor.

Hinata saw his face and tried to explain – something about how they met Shiina in the Guild – but Ayato tuned out again because nostalgic was a good look on Yuri. It made her face soften and her eyes twinkle.

"—and you know, I don't think you've ever heard the time Yurippe threw me off the roof—"

"Wait, what?" Ayato snapped to attention.

Hinata rolled his eyes heavily. "See? He only cares when it's something about me being the victim of violence."

"You could tell him about the time I stabbed you," Kanade offered helpfully.

"What?" Otonashi blinked, looking affected and weirdly jealous. "When was this?!" Apparently his wife was not talking about that time in the Guild, when it was a clone and didn't count.

"Back before you were there." Kanade touched his hand, as if comforting him. "It was an accident. I was aiming for Yuri."

Ayato hid his bewildered expression behind his tea mug. What a strange couple! Tragic and beautiful and fate, but downright mystifying sometimes. He looked across the table at Yui and Shiina, who were exchanging the same puzzled glances. Oddly enough, from his recollection those two were the only ones at this table who had never enacted some sort of violence on each other.

Otonashi and Kanade weren't strange – this whole damned friend group was strange. Not that he was complaining.

Later, after Hinata and Shiina did the dishes, everyone was either huddled up on the couch (Ayato, Yuri, Kanade, and Shiina) or lounging on the ground. Otonashi and Yui were back to studying, their backs pressed against the sides of the couch, while Hinata had his head propped up on Yui's shins and was half-watching the news, half-listening to his wife mumble charm descriptions to herself.

Their group downtime suddenly got interrupted when Yui gave a jolt of excitement.

"Ooh, I found something!" she said, pumping a fist into the air victoriously.

"Watch your legs next time," groaned Hinata, rubbing his head.

Yuri leaned over Ayato and Kanade to see over Yui's shoulder. "What'd you find, Yui?" she asked, sitting up on her knees.

Pointing to the page she was on, Yui traced a header with her finger. "This section in here – it's called 'Soul Friends!'"

"Soul friends," Otonashi repeated, rubbing his chin. He mouthed it to himself again, grinning. "I love it."

Ayato regarded the title for a moment and found it fitting. The header did have an air of fate and destiny to it. "Soulmates" had always sounded silly to him, but considering the group of people
hanging out in his TV room right now, he would say he was a believer in people who were meant to
be in each other's lives.

Yui's eyes scanned the page so fast it was almost cartoonish.

"This charm is... unmei no basho," she read. "Location of luck or destiny. It uses a powder called
Locus Felicis, which is Latin for the same thing. You're supposed to sprinkle it on the ground and
walk in it, or get it on your shoes somehow, and walk around a building in the town where you want
to run into someone. It creates an epicenter of fate that radiates through town."

"What if stalkers use this?" Yuri asked absently.

"The spell knows if your heart is true!" Yui argued, hugging the book to her chest. "Stalkers aren't
soul friends. It just says you'll run into the friends of your past, present, and future. The ones you're
meant to meet."

Yuri dug a piece of paper out of her pocket, then her phone out of her purse. "I know one way we
can find out more about it," she said, punching in a number.

Moments later, they had Yukine's voice on speakerphone.

"Yukine," Shiina said when the woman answered, "what can you tell us about Locus Felicis?"

Their charm-loving friend sounded interested.

"Locus Felicis?" she said. "I know it's a variation of a potion called Felix Felicis! More commonly
called Liquid Luck. When you drink Felix Felicis, you'll be very lucky for a few hours, and
everything you do will be successful."

"Including finding the people you're looking for?" Kanade asked.

"That's right. But it's a potion, not a charm, and it's much more complicated. I've heard it takes six
months to make." Yukine laughed easily. "It's lucky you're only asking about Locus Felicis. That's a
much more specific version. It gives fate a little nudge. Some people think it's a lazy way of finding
your soulmate, but really, it's just a way of bumping into someone special. Location of luck makes it
more likely for you to be at the right place at the right time."

Yuri looked pleased. "I think this is exactly what we're looking for."

"I think so too," said Yukine, cheerful. "It takes about five to seven days to make the powder. Maybe
less. Will that be a problem?"

"Not an issue," Yuri replied automatically. "We'll be seeing each other on weekends mostly anyway.
Shiina can drop by and pick it up when it's ready."

"Alright, that's perfect. The charm's effectiveness wears off after six hours, and should be used
sparingly. Lucky days can get to a person's head!" A thoughtful pause on the other line. "Is there a
lucky location you have in mind?"

"Here in Mizuzaka," said Ayato, slightly thrilled when he remembered they were establishing their
home base here. No more driving back and forth, not for him!

Yukine hummed in approval. "Mizuzaka is such a magical place," she said. "I'll start making the
powder when I get back home. But maybe we can meet up again beforehand."
"Sounds good. Thanks for the help, Yukine," said Yuri. They gave their goodbyes and hung up.

Although it was a shame to give up planning who they would find next, the bizarre Battlefront managed to find a whole new way of making it interesting – betting on someone. Hinata and Shiina guessed Ooyama. Otonashi had his money on Matsushita the Fifth. Yuri and Kanade were almost positive they'd find Fujimaki, then Ooyama. Yui earnestly hoped for Iwasawa. Ayato wasn't a betting man, but he decided to guess Noda anyway.

"Just so it'll be the first time I'm happy to lose money," he said with a grin.

"He's not that bad," Yuri told him, rolling her eyes.

Ayato made a small dubious noise and let Otonashi change the subject to their plans for tomorrow. The more he mentioned his aversion to Noda, the more likely she was to sing his praises. He, for one, didn't care to hear about how Noda was the fifth original member of the Battlefront. According to Hinata and Shiina, Ooyama had been the third, and Ayato was more than willing to lose bet money to find him first. He liked him well enough, after all – he was upbeat and agreeable.

When he tuned in again, Otonashi was talking about Mizuzaka.

"—but we might not have to wait around for fate," he was saying. He looked to Ayato just then, who mentally patted himself on the back for his timing. "What do you say, Naoi? Maybe you can show us around town. If it's going to be our main base, we'll want to know the area."

Ayato nodded. "I can do that."

"I can, too," Yuri reminded them.

"That's right." Kanade glanced at Yuri contemplatively. "Maybe there are some places here that could help jog your memory."

Yuri didn't look too against the idea. She lifted an eyebrow in Ayato's direction. "Anywhere in particular?"

He hesitated, absently rubbing his throat. Of course there was somewhere in particular. That was another thing he'd been mulling over on the drive back from Noroi. For some reason, he felt like Yuri wasn't ready for the bridge after all. Or maybe he wasn't. As a last option, maybe he'd try the bridge again – for memories, or for him meeting that magic man. Still, he needed to at least sleep on it first.

"The park, maybe," Ayato said after a moment. "And a road a few minutes away from our neighborhood. Maybe the bookstore and the coffee shop."

"I thought you made me coffee at home."

"You like their pastries," he replied, undeterred. When was she going to learn that he would never lose at her trivia games?

Once everyone agreed that the memory-based itinerary for Sunday sounded good, operation discussions fizzled out and they took to a medley of randomness. A werewolf yokai TV horror movie played in the background that only Shiina, Hinata, and Otonashi were really paying attention to, while Yui and Kanade huddled over the charms books and started reading more of them aloud for fun. Yuri listened absently as she sat behind Kanade braiding her hair.

"Ooh!" Yui yelled, making Kanade jump and accidentally tug too hard on her braid. "This one can
amplify a sound! It can make music or voices even louder!"

"We do not need you any louder," said Ayato, horrified. Yui made a face at him, while Kanade frowned and rubbed her scalp. "How does that have anything to do with location?"

"They're not all location charms. Just a few sections," she sniffed. "And besides, smarty God guy, it could something to do with sound localization! Or throwing your voice." The woman went starry-eyed. "Imagine using this stuff for Girls Dead Monster concerts!"

Ayato was a bit affronted by her rebuttal – and by being called "smarty God guy" – but he let it go. So did she, after a few more minutes of researching for music-related spells, when Shiina and Hinata coaxed her into watching the werewolf movie with them.

"I'm more of a vampire girl," she said with a toothy smile (Ayato nervously noticed her sharp eyeteeth again), but she squeezed in between them happily and laughed at Hinata's jokes about the werewolf being Otonashi when he didn't shave. She let the book slide off her lap and onto the floor, then started to kick it out of the way much to Shiina's chagrin. Kanade gently reached over and picked it up, thumbing through the pages. The ninja looked appeased.

However, sometime after the credits rolled and Hinata and Shiina both agreed Yui was yawning too much (and too contagiously), Yui snagged one of the books from Kanade as a bedtime story and started reading it again on the way to their room.

"You better have a very small and inconspicuous flashlight," Hinata warned, guiding her upstairs.

Kanade, who had only stayed awake long enough for Yuri to finish doing her hair, nearly dozed off on the carpet next to her own book not long after. Shaking his head fondly at the sight, Otonashi decided to take her upstairs. First, at the foot of the staircase with Kanade leaning against his arm, he turned back to Yuri.

"Didn't anyone grab you an extra mattress, or blankets?" he asked, eyeing her thoughtfully. "Where are you going to sleep?"

Yuri glanced up at him, tired and lazy. She and Ayato had moved to the couch the moment the other three disappeared upstairs. Now she had her arms wrapped around a pillow and cared more about the crime show episode that had come on a few minutes ago.

"That sounds like a problem for Future Yuri," she said.

Ayato snorted appreciatively, but Otonashi just stared at them like he was trying to figure something out.

"Alright," he said at last, turning with a light wave. "Goodnight. Don't stay up too late."

"Yes, Mother."

"Goodnight," Ayato said, more politely. Otonashi smiled over his shoulder at him before climbing up the stairs and rounding the corner.

He wasn't sure what those looks were for. It wasn't the first time he had been alone with Yuri. Not even the first time today. They could carry a conversation. Not that they'd need to. If this was anything like their old movie nights together, the TV would soothe her to sleep sooner or later.

The thought made him frown suddenly. "Do you want me to get a mattress for you?"
A grunt from Yuri. "Are the mattresses and blankets where they always are?"

"Yeah."

"I'll get it myself," she mumbled, leaning back against the cushions. "Later."

He couldn't help but grin, watching her move and adjust the pillow and snuggle into a cozy position. Her hair was getting mussed. "You don't want the mattress, do you?"

Her eyes closed. "Couch is more comfortable," she said drowsily.

"I'll take the mattress," Ayato said decisively, starting to pull himself into a better-postured sitting position. Then he did a double-take at the screen and thought better of it, resting his head against the pillow on his side's armrest. "After the episode is over."

"Good thinking. They're about to do a number on the mom's murderer."

On the screen, the detective partners ripped off the ski mask to reveal the woman's killer – the controlling, jealous husband – and then wrestled him into submission. Satisfied, Ayato rested his eyes. He couldn't remember a good enough reason to leave this spot.

Maybe there wasn't one.

Ayato could feel the morning upon him before he even opened his eyes. A tranquil quietness in the house mixed with freshness and energy. It was like a liminal space, nothing really existing or moving, but at the same time he felt more awake and well-rested than he had in months.

He also felt a heavy weight on his chest.

Glancing down, he tried to keep his heart rate as slow and steady as Yuri's breathing. She had fallen asleep after he did, and he should have seen this coming. Whenever they passed out on the couch together, she ended up unconsciously using him as a pillow. Now, she'd tucked her head just beneath his chin, her hand resting on his chest while his arm had draped over her shoulder in his sleep.

The TV was off. He wondered briefly if or how she could have been conscious enough to do that and still inadvertently fall asleep on his chest. But then, from the looks of it, the remote was on the other end of the coffee table, too far beyond the reach of a lazy Yuri. Someone must have come downstairs and done it for them. While they were snuggled up together on the couch.

Damn, he hoped it wasn't Hinata. He would never hear the end of it. Unless it was just traumatizing or creepy enough for him not to want to bring it up. Worse, what if it had been Yui? He almost cursed out loud just thinking about it.

Maybe whoever it was had come down before they'd ended up in this position. Or maybe it had been too dark to see. He could only hope.

For now, he needed to think about how a more awake and alert Yuri would react to waking up in his arms. After all the flirting he'd done, she'd probably blame him and bludgeon him with a pillow. Good thing she was such a heavy sleeper. Hesitantly, he freed his arm and rolled her off, scooting out from under her and moving her into the cushions. She stirred and grumbled a bit, as she always did when he had to move her off his arm, but settled after a few seconds. He breathed a sigh of relief, slowly getting to his feet.

She made a few peaceful sounds in her sleep and nuzzled a pillow. Ayato caught himself staring, and
shook his head to snap himself out of it. There was no guarantee she’d be this peaceful when she woke up.

He thought for a minute, then headed down the hall. Stepping into his shoes, he slipped quietly out the front door and started making his way towards town. There was something at the grocery store he needed to pick up.

Preview:

"Don't do that!"

"We thought you were never coming back!"

"I blew the place to high hell."

"Anything seem familiar?"

"Our explanations would confuse you too."

"What do you know of the afterlife?"

[Chapter 20]: Morning in Mizuzaka.
20. Morning in Mizuzaka

The TV was off and the downstairs was empty when Yuri woke up. It didn't stay quiet for long. As she sat up and stretched her arms out with some contented noises – that was a pretty damn good sleep for a couch, better than she remembered – she heard footsteps on the stairs. Hopefully, she glanced toward the source; maybe it was Naoi or somebody coming down to make breakfast.

"Morning, Yurippe," said Hinata, yawning as he crossed the TV room into the kitchen. He peered out through the pass-through curiously. "You got the couch? Where'd Naoi sleep?"

She blinked a few times, looking around the room. "Dunno. I don't think he's even down here."

"Well, he wasn't upstairs." Hinata started snooping through the pantry. "Go check the foyer for his shoes or something."

"Don't make me do things early," Yuri whined.

"Seriously, what if he left?" She frowned at him blearily. "C'mon, I'll make you food."

That launched her off the couch. She padded down the hallway and stared down at the pile of shoes by the door. Then she remembered she didn't know his shoes or even look at his feet. Ugh, Hinata didn't think this one through – but she still wanted food. Sighing, she crouched down and counted the pairs of guy shoes. Only two.

Where would he have gone? Was it an emergency?

Frowning, she got to her feet. She was about to yell over her shoulder to Hinata, but the front door creaked open right then and there to reveal Naoi himself.

"Aaah!"

"Shit!" She threw a hand over her heart. "Don't do that!"

"Do what? Enter my own house?!" Naoi said, wide-eyed and jabbing a finger at her. "Don't do that!"

She ignored him and his accusatory pointing. "Where the hell were you?"

"I went to the store."

"For wh—" Yuri inspected his bag; she would know that logo anywhere. Curious, she glanced back up at him. "Key coffee?"

"By popular demand." Naoi ran a free hand through his dark hair, looking modest behind the whole "cool and aloof" guise he thought he was pulling off.
Popular demand… She wanted to laugh, but she wouldn’t do it right in his face. Only two out of the seven friends here drank it regularly. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was stocking up on it for her. Problem was, she didn’t really know whether or not she knew better.

Those thoughts were too much of a pain, so she waved him past and followed him into the kitchen. She’d rather think about happy things, like good coffee.

In the doorway, Naoi crossed his arms indignantly at the sight of Hinata making breakfast. "What are you doing in my kitchen?"

"You were gone!" Hinata said solemnly. "We thought you were never coming back!"

While Yuri laughed uproariously (so she was a little slaphappy), Naoi made a considering noise.

"You wish, idiot," he said, and fished out the coffee maker.

Yuri loved Sunday mornings.

The bookstore was a hit with Yui, who was disappointed with the lack of charm books but ultimately found other eccentric things that caught her interest.

"Her mom used to read to her," Hinata explained, watching his wife fondly as she scampered through the aisles. "In both lives. She loved TV when she was paralyzed but she liked her mom's voice more. Kind of leaked into this life too."

Shiina idly suggested that if she wanted more spell books, Yukine had a whole library she could borrow, and Yui briefly gave her a dour look before lighting up again when she spotted the book version of the movie they watched last night. Ayato wondered if one of Yukine's books could give life to a toy devil tail, because if Yui had one again it would be swishing back and forth with delight.

With Kanade and Otonashi engrossed in the tragedy section, all in all the bookstore trip seemed to be a success.

Except for, of course, in the case of Yuri's memories.

At least she found some books that she liked in the spiritual section where Ayato found her. She picked up book after book on various viewpoints of the afterlife, from a relatively unfamiliar purgatory perspective to a novella-sized book on the "Underworld."

"It comes pretty close," Yuri said thoughtfully, scanning the author page for details. "Says that people can only move on after they've dealt with their unfinished business. But then there's a 'better place' and a 'worse place,' and I have my doubts about a god being down there in the afterlife, but I know the one in ours wasn't Hades."

Ayato smiled. "Of course it wasn't."

Yuri glanced at him out of the corner of her vision, vaguely amused.

"You know," she said, shifting the books in her arms, "if you really were God back then… I had a chance to supplant you."

"What do you mean?" He furrowed his eyebrows, confounded at the idea.

God wasn't someone she could replace. In the Afterlife, it was a role he easily stepped into, with the help of the hypnotic powers he gained. Besides, she couldn't replace someone she didn't know. But
he was curious, since he'd always been the supplanter rather than the supplanted.

"Down in the computer room," Yuri continued, "there was a massive system. Angel Player-like software, the shadow program... all created by some human programmer. But he turned himself into an NPC and left it down there."

"And you had access to it," Ayato said, understanding. All that power, up for grabs. He knew what the shadow program could do. Yes, she absolutely could have given his God status a run for its money.

"I did." She had a faraway look in her eyes now, and was playing restlessly with the plastic corner of the book. "Not even his AI stood in my way. I could've been invincible. I could've turned it into an eternal paradise and stayed there forever."

"What did you do?" he asked, leaning against the shelf.

She grinned. "I blew the place to high hell."

He felt himself grinning back at her. Of course she did; that was why they found her later curled up on the floor in the middle of sputtering, smoking debris. It had explained why all the shadows they'd been fighting had disintegrated into computer data. He'd found himself just as concerned as the other three when she didn't emerge, and followed right behind Kanade when she led them down the path where Yuri had gone. The four of them had been less surprised to see sheer destruction than they were to see Yuri still lying there in the middle of it.

And now he knew it was because she'd faced temptation and defeated it. Yet she'd still stayed behind.

"I'm not sure I would've been strong enough," Ayato admitted. "To turn it down like that."

She shrugged, a rare moment of bashful modesty. "I just... realized power wasn't what I was really fighting for."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "What were you fighting for, then?"

Yuri stared back at him, then bit her lip. Ayato consciously tried not to lean in this time. He still couldn't stop his gaze from dropping to her mouth.

"There you guys are!"

They both jolted at their friend's voice, Yuri snapping her book closed like she was a teenager who'd been looking at something dirty. Otonashi appeared at the end of the aisle with a bagful of books on his arm.

"Are you two almost ready to go?" he asked cheerfully. "Kanade's getting antsy."

"There's a bathroom in the store," Ayato said, masking most of his irritation since Otonashi didn't deserve to be on the end of it.

Otonashi laughed. "It's not that this time." His focus switched to Yuri, who was grabbing some of her preferred afterlife books off the shelves. "Any luck, Yuri? Anything seem familiar?"

"This place does," said Yuri, balancing the books in her arms. She tilted her head towards Ayato. "He doesn't."
Ayato grunted, standing next to Otonashi as they both watched her go up to the front to pay. Really, he didn't expect anything more from a bookstore they'd frequented, but life sucked.

Otonashi kindly touched his shoulder, and he softened a bit. Still, even with relaxed muscles... life sucked.

They had to make a stop back at the house to drop off most of their books – the initial goal was only to browse and see if Yuri got sentimental, only apparently his friends were bigger nerds than they let on – but it was fortuitous, because the park was in the opposite direction anyway.

As the group tagged along on one of the trails through the park, one heading away from the bridge, Ayato had to admit it was a good day for this kind of outing. The cherry blossom trees were in full bloom, and though it had supposedly rained a little overnight and sprinkled again while they were in the bookstore, the sun had come back to warm up the afternoon.

The others seemed to be having fun. Yui jumped and tried to hit every low-lying branch they passed by, occasionally pulling Shiina's attention away from the multitudes of dogs she'd spot playing in the fields or trotting alongside their owners on leashes. Dogs were cute, but it was quite a sight watching a small pink jumping jellybean like Yui try to assert her height among the trees.

As for Otonashi and Hinata, they were flanking Yuri like a golden trio and chattering to her about stuff in the park. Once in a while the guys would scout hopefully for a good spot to play baseball. Ayato knew of a good place but decided not to tell them, purely out of spite that they were hogging Yuri's attention. He didn't think Otonashi cared as much as Hinata anyway. As they passed some food carts, Hinata grinned and leaned over to say something to Yuri. She snarled and hit his shoulder, yelling, "I hate nattō!"

Of course she hated nattō. Didn't Hinata know anything?

Hinata pretended to look surprised. "I thought your taste buds had changed. Naoi said he used to make it for you every night!"

Ayato, who had moved closer to eavesdrop, snarled at him severely and hit his other shoulder. "I did not!"

Otonashi and Hinata laughed happily. Even Yuri giggled, but she threw Ayato an apologetic grin that cheered him up a bit. Of course he knew Yuri better than to think she'd buy into Hinata's dumb jokes.

Kanade, ever the eager one, sometimes trailed ahead, humming and hopping with a skip in her step, but they'd inevitably catch up to her because she'd stop to admire some sort of flower or plant life. She was particularly pleased when Yui took one of the yellow flowers she'd picked and fastened it into her hair. Otonashi had gone moony over her for five straight minutes because of it.

"Naoi, I meant to ask, but why are we going this way?" Yuri asked. He looked over at her curiously, and she shrugged and jabbed a thumb behind them. "It feels like I used to go the other direction. Farther upstream of the river."

He frowned. The bridge was still up in the air for him. It made him feel uneasy and miss his mother.

"I just have a good feeling about this particular trail," he said. It wasn't a lie, anyway. Almost instinctively, his eyes fell on a familiar looking stone border bench up ahead, a perfect sitting spot underneath the shade of a tree lying just where the trail started to make a sharp curve. He recognized it as the place where they'd most often had picnics, and where he'd once dramatically "confessed" to
Yuri only to suddenly notice her ring finger and feign jealousy about her hypothetical husband.

_I bet he's a god among men_, he'd complained. Ayato bit back a laugh at the flashback, shaking his head.

His laugh fizzled out completely when he saw the look of curiosity and recognition in Yuri's eyes. She was staring in the exact same direction, right where he used to be looking.

Was it — did she—?

He was about to open his mouth and ask her, but then he heard cheerful laughter up a little farther ahead on the trail that brought his attention forward again. Two girls were rounding the bend arm-in-arm — Ryou and Yukine.

"I guess you were right about that good feeling," Yuri said lightly. She trotted merrily ahead to meet up with them. "Hey, Ryou! Yukine!"

They greeted her eagerly, waving back, and took no time meeting her in the middle. The rest of the group didn't take too long to catch up with her.

"Hi, everyone!" said Ryou, looking much more like her old self. She smiled warmly at Yuri and Ayato's friends. "I love your hair, Kanade. Did Yuri do it for you?"

Kanade hummed her confirmation, playing with a lock of hair that Ayato just noticed was curly. "Yuri braided it. Yui added the flower."

Yui preened at the acknowledgement. Meanwhile, even he had to admit the combination of yellow flowers and white curls looked nice. Very angelic. She almost had a glow to her face, but maybe that was just Otonashi's moonstruck expression reflecting off of her.

"I used to braid my sisters' hair all the time," Yuri said modestly. Luckily Ryou didn't bat an eye at the "sisters" pluralization. "It's great to have someone else to work on again."

"Sorry I don't have enough hair to work with," said Ryou, brushing a lock behind her ear shyly. "I thought about growing it out over the winter, but the new hair stylist at the beauty parlor has such a way with scissors."

"It's just good to see you again," Yuri assured her with an easy smile. "We didn't get to catch up that much yesterday. Speaking of which, I'm surprised you're here and not on a date with Sunohara."

"Not when I have a guest!" Ryou sounded scandalized by the very thought. Yukine and Yuri exchanged knowing grins and headshakes. Oblivious, their mutual friend continued, "Youhei and I met for coffee last night and discussed things. We'll have dinner together on Tuesday. But I didn't want to leave Yukine alone by herself for too long when I basically dragged her all the way over here."

Yukine chuckled. "I would've been fine, Ryou. You're a sweet hostess."

"When I stayed with her, she fawned all over me for some reason," said Yuri, smirking. "You've got to literally push her out the door."

Ryou frowned. "...She did."

Yuri and Yukine laughed some more.
Slightly offended, Ryou crossed her arms at them. "Well, enough about Youhei," she said crisply. Then her expression switched to curiosity as she acknowledged the others. "Yukine told me you guys want to use Locus Felicis to find some long lost friends, right?"

"That's what we're hoping," said Otonashi.

Ryou looked thoughtful. "It's just strange that Yuri and Naoi ever mentioned very many old friends before. None by your names, anyway."

"Well, you never mentioned Naoi before," Yuri countered.

Ryou squeaked theatrically, her lip sticking out in a guilty pout. "That's different! I didn't want to confuse you!"

Shiina made a small pensive sound. "Our explanations would confuse you too."

Ryou and Yukine exchanged glances as if having a silent conversation, then, still in the same uncanny unison, decisively stared everyone down.

"We would like to know," said Yukine, staring at Shiina in particular, "how you all mysteriously happen to know each other. It would answer a lot of questions, old and new."

Frowning guiltily, the ninja hid behind Hinata and Yui.

This time, the Battlefront group were the ones in a telepathic discussion. Ayato could see it on their faces that they were inwardly asking themselves the same thing.

Should they tell them? Would Ryou and Yukine believe them?

The moment he asked himself this, it felt like a ridiculous question with an obvious answer. Would Ryou and Yukine believe that the people standing before them had a fantastical supernatural bond tying their souls together after meeting each other and fighting powerful enemies alongside each other in a world where they were dead? And would those girls even consider helping them after hearing that story?

He, Yuri, Otonashi, Kanade, and Hinata nodded at each other. Then Yuri took a hesitant step forward.

"Alright then," she said, lowering her voice. "What do you know of the afterlife?"

---

Preview:

"Maybe I haven't felt like taking a lot of walks lately."

"I got a message from her this morning."

"Why don't we document our progress?"

"You don't ride home with an ex!"

"I have to talk to Yuzuru about something in private too."

"I want to know I can trust you."

"I will never do anything like that again."
[Chapter 21]: Mizuzaka, Continued.
As expected, Yukine and Ryou took it rather well. Yuri had led them to a more secluded place in the field, off the trail, and told them everything, with Kanade, Otonashi, Hinata, and Yui chiming in here and there. Afterwards, Ryou was positively starry-eyed. She was especially excited to hear that Iwasawa was one of them, though her smile looked forced when she found out that Iwasawa's song at the concert had brought back their memories. She looked like she was going to cry. Hinata must have noticed it too, because he threw in the story of how he'd proposed to Yui right after the song.

Yuri caught her friend's expression anyway. "What's wrong, Ryou?" she asked, concerned.

Ryou shook her head and wiped at her eyes.

"Nothing," she insisted, sniffling. "It... it's just so beautiful."

Ayato nervously chewed the insides of his mouth. Perhaps Ryou was putting the pieces together that he and Yuri started their divorce the night after the concert she told them about. As much as she supported their relationship, he hoped she didn't blame herself.

As it was, he was grateful to Otonashi for steering the conversation towards the topic of a Battlefront reunion and their plans to find everyone else. Ryou seemed particularly interested in the fact that they'd all run into each other without the help of a spell so far.

"Do you really think you even need a spell?" Ryou asked. "Maybe some of your friends do visit here sometimes, but you two—" she pointed to Ayato and Yuri, "—were too wrapped up in each other to notice!"

Ayato furrowed his brow. He wasn't so sure.

"What about me?" he asked, tapping his fingers on his knees. "I've lived here with my memories for six months, and I haven't run into anyone."

"But ever since Yuri left, you've been wrapped up in your job!" Ryou said. She gave him a sharp look. "I heard from a friend whose brother works with you that all you do is sleep and work long hours. I almost didn't believe Youhei when he said he bumped into you, because hardly anyone in town ever sees you out of the office."

Lots of eyes were on him now, including Yuri's. Ayato felt cornered.

"That's not true!" he insisted, feeling his face grow warm. "My boss makes me take long weekends off sometimes!"

Ryou crossed her arms at him. "And during that time, do you ever leave the house?"

God, she was just like his coworkers! She made him sound so depressed!

Raising a finger, Ayato opened his mouth to give an answer.

"I," he said eloquently.

"Besides when we found you," Hinata interrupted.

Ayato scowled at him. Nosy traitor.

"Sometimes. To buy groceries and stuff," he offered, after a pause. Yuri was staring at him with a
thoughtful frown on her face. She must think he was so serious, a workaholic just like his father. He added defensively, "It was a long winter!"

"We're like a month into spring," Hinata pointed out.

"Well, maybe I haven't felt like taking a lot of walks lately," Ayato said darkly, quietly annoyed that Hinata seemed to have built up an immunity to his glowering.

Ryou patted his hand. "Is that because you and Yuri used to take walks together?"

Ayato looked at her spitefully. He was in no mood nor situation for such blatant sympathy. "No. It's because I was relearning hypnotism."

Ruffled, Ryou pulled her hand away and twisted her mouth at him in disapproval.

Luckily, the subject changed as Yui enthusiastically defended the use of a location charm for this operation. As expected, she wanted to increase her small chances of running into the rising but elusive starlet Iwasawa. Her inexplicable disdain towards Yukine even seemed to dwindle as the woman answered all sorts of questions Yui fired at her. Behind her, Hinata and Shiina looked a mixture of happy and amused.

The group moved the discussion off the grass and back onto the trail, branching off onto the path that was closer to the river. As they walked, Otonashi leaned close to Yuri, pointed towards the water, and said something to her with a big grin (Ayato thought he heard the name "Fujimaki"). Yuri snorted so hard she had to slap a hand over her mouth to muffle her laughter.

He didn't get the joke, but he smirked anyway. Her humor was contagious as usual.

After a few minutes, Ryou started slowing behind the group until she was walking next to him. He didn't mind. Yuri and Yukine were otherwise occupied, and she didn't know anyone else that well. An earlier conversation with Yui about Iwasawa had fizzled out when the former lost interest upon learning that neither Ryou nor Nagisa had heard from Iwasawa or knew what she was up to these days.

It was nothing personal on Yui's end, of course, though it made him want to laugh. Her attention span was just very particular and fleeting—

"Your mother called," said Ryou.

His heart started hammering in his rib cage – he hadn't expected that! And on top of that, good God, in his situation, "your mother called" was just as bad as "we need to talk."

"Is she alright?" he asked once he'd regained his breath.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Ryou gasped, clapping her hands to her mouth. "No, she's fine, she… I got a message from her this morning."

Ayato nodded, closing his eyes and breathing a sigh of relief. Kimito usually left early in the morning to open up shop, so she must've called then, but he still felt a little uneasy. And yet, it was good to have someone playing telephone for him so that he knew she got home okay.

"She says not to worry, and that your father didn't suspect a thing," Ryou continued, as if reading his mind. "She really hopes she'll get to talk to you. I told her we could try getting her a prepaid cell phone, and she said she was thinking about it."
He didn't know about that. The last time his mother tried to hide something from Kimito, she got busted. So did her lip. And so did the thing, into hundreds of little pieces.

But he still… really wanted to hear her voice. It gave him hope. Hope that despite everything, a family could find each other and come back together.

Absently, his gaze drifted to Yuri – who happened to be looking right back at him. Well, at them. A half-smile tugged at her lips, and he wondered how much she had heard of their conversation.

"I'd like that." He felt a buzz of happiness, even when Yuri turned back to talk to Otonashi and Kanade. "Thanks, Ryou. I really do appreciate that you're doing this for us."

"It's the least I could do," Ryou said, her voice quiet and her fingers restless.

Ayato frowned. Even though her nosiness grated on his nerves, he still didn't think she deserved to feel guilty about the concert thing. "It's not your—"

"Ryou!"

The interruption came from Yuri. Ahead of them, the group had slowed to look over the railing at the river and sit on the benches. Yui had spotted a drinking fountain and was already sprinting over to it. Yukine sat on one of the benches, holding one of the books Yui had brought to the park and actually thumbing through the pages in mild interest. Shina was staring longingly at another leashed puppy in the distance, while Otonashi, Hinata, and Kanade were admiring the water and chatting aimlessly. As for Yuri, she had turned her back on the trio in favor of him and Ryou, a decisive look in her eye.

"Sorry to cut in," she said, acknowledging him with a nod. Then she turned her attention fully on her friend. "Can I talk to you alone about something?"

"Okay," Ryou said agreeably. "Later, Naoi."

She let herself be led loosely by the wrist a little farther down the trail underneath a streetlamp, Yuri glancing briefly over her shoulder at him before looking swiftly away and tugging her aside. Ayato mindlessly watched them go. There was a little cherry blossom petal in Yuri's hair he kind of wanted to brush off.

Hinata tapped him on the shoulder. "Naoi, the river's looking a little dry. Drool over here."

Otonashi had to struggle to hold a wriggling Hinata back from jumping into the water and joining his fellow fish friends – but Ryou didn't need to know about that one.

It was surprisingly late in the afternoon by the time they all left the park. Yukine and Ryou had departed first, with Yukine promising to have the charm ready for them by next Saturday at the latest.

"It was really good to see you, Yuri," Ryou had said, hugging her tightly. "I'm glad you're going to be back in Mizuzaka again."

"Almost makes me want to thank Kyou for being away on her date last night." As she pulled away, Yuri looked considering. "Though it would've been cool to see her again too."

"It's just as well," Ryou said, waving it off. "She would have brought her boyfriend, and they both would have tried to teach Youhei a lesson. Youhei's terrified of him."

Ayato beamed, thinking of Sunohara cowering in fear. "He sounds great. You ought to introduce us
After that, Ryou had whispered something to Kanade and given her an encouraging smile. Although the latter blinked at her, visibly startled, she'd nodded softly and slipped her hand into Otonashi's. Ayato wondered what someone could possibly say to the stoic angel to make her react like that.

It was Otonashi's idea to take a group picture in front of the park at the last minute.

"We're going to be adding a new member to our group every week, right?" he pointed out, his smile optimistic and contagious. "Why don't we document our progress?"

"Great idea, Otonashi," Hinata said, punching his arm.

The approval was unanimous. Yui willingly handed Yukine the camera she took with her everywhere (especially to gigs and concerts) and scurried over to the park gate where everyone was already posed. Ryou cheerfully told them to say cheese, and Yukine snapped the photo.

It turned out pretty good, actually. Yuri was smiling, hand-in-hand with Kanade on her left and Otonashi on her right. Ayato stood next to Otonashi, looking regal. He'd been staring at both of them, but luckily the camera angle made it look like he was staring more at Otonashi than Yuri. On Kanade's left, Hinata had gotten distracted by Yui, who was deliberately making a silly face at him. Beside them, Shiina stood arms crossed and stoic, trying not to pay attention to the shenanigans on her right.

Classic Battlefront. He expected nothing less.

Once Ryou and Yukine had said the rest of their goodbyes and headed home, Ayato took the group to Yuri's favorite café. The pastries there didn't bring back her memories but they certainly did bring her bliss. Yui drank three sodas and half of Shiina's iced tea and Ayato grinned happily at the prospect of how annoying Hinata's drive home would be. Shiina didn't seem to mind too much, blithely interested by her friend's hyperactive chattering about Girls Dead Monster and spells and potentially epic concerts.

Meanwhile, between bouts of conversation with Yuri and Yui, Kanade would study Otonashi as he talked to Hinata about working at the hospital, smiling into her melonpan like she knew something he didn't. Otonashi would lean into her unconsciously, happy just to exist next to her. Ayato caught Yuri noticing the same thing he did, and she caught his eye in that moment and raised an eyebrow, like aren't our friends sweeter than the food here?

Ayato tore his gaze away. If she still thought romance was too lovey-dovey, it was lucky she'd missed most of the looks he'd been giving her today. He was pretty sure a few of them would've been cavity-inducing.

The café was their last hurrah. None of their stops on the Mizuzaka tour had done anything for Yuri's memories, but he wasn't horribly disappointed with the way the day had gone. Besides, the Battlefront had helped him make new ones.

Back at the house, after they'd pulled their stuff together, Hinata, Yui, and Shiina were the ones to leave first, though Otonashi and Kanade mentioned their departure moments after the other three did. Hinata and Yui lived in Shibuya with Otonashi and Kanade, so Kyuuya wasn't on their way, but they wanted to give Shiina a ride to the train station in Yuri's car.

"Yukine said she wasn't leaving for Kyuuya until half an hour from now," Otonashi said, remembering. "Couldn't you catch a ride with her?"
Yui looked cross at him, obviously scandalized. "You don't ride home with an ex!"

Hinata nodded in enthusiastic agreement, slinging an arm around Shiina's shoulder. "Yeah, and besides, she didn't offer! You snooze, you lose."

Shiina, who had wrinkled her nose at Otonashi's suggestion, shyly grinned at the floor. "I do prefer this arrangement."

Ayato regarded the three curiously. It was almost as if… He shook the thought off, not giving it any mind, and joined Otonashi, Kanade, and Yuri to exchange goodbyes and numbers.

"I'm out too," said Yuri, moving forward to hug Hinata. Ayato glanced over at the pair sharply as Hinata's enthusiastic hug lifted her up onto her tiptoes.

"Really?" Hinata raised his eyebrows when they broke apart. "I thought you were gonna stay behind with Naoi, and neck on the couch."

Yuri glared at Hinata and shoved him away, albeit halfheartedly, while Ayato stared in horrified suspicion. That had better not be a reference to this morning – how much did he know?

"I need time to think about some things," she said, cutting her eyes to the side. "Let it all soak in."

"And then neck on the couch?"

"You are the worst!" Yuri screeched, while Ayato added in the background simultaneously, "Do you want to be a fish again?"

Hinata danced away from Yuri's flailing arms, looking happy. "I missed you too, Yurippe," he said fondly.

Yuri, who had glanced suspiciously in Ayato's direction after the fish comment, flushed pink when she turned back to Hinata. She let herself smile. "Thanks for finding me."

"Yeah, well…" Hinata paused, scratching his head. In a moment of generosity, he noted, "Couldn't have done it without Naoi."

"Or Ryou. So I've heard."

Ayato's fleeting appreciation for Hinata skidded to a stop when he saw the look Yuri was giving him. He flinched, sweating bullets in realization. That explained her severe reaction to the fish comment.

"Yeah, her too," Hinata said absently. Idiot. He wandered over to Ayato, who for a horrific second thought the oaf was going to hug him too. Instead he offered him a friendly grin. "Good seeing you again, Naoi." He placed a hand on his shoulder in mock comfort. "It'll only be a week. Don't cry too much without me."

Ayato picked his hand off his shoulder by the finger like it was a dirty tissue. "You'll be the one crying."

Hinata hmphed amiably. "So much." Joining Shiina and Yui in the foyer, he called back to Otonashi and Kanade, "See you guys back in Shibuya, alright?"

Otonashi and Kanade chorused a goodbye before the door closed behind them, then collected hugs from Ayato and Yuri.
"Call me anytime, you guys. I'm serious," said Yuri, squeezing Kanade's shoulders before letting go.

"Aren't you leaving too?" Otonashi asked.

Yuri shook her head. "Not just yet. I have to talk to Naoi about something."

"That's alright, Yuri," Kanade said airily, joining her husband at the open door. "I have to talk to Yuzuru in private about something too."

"You do?" he asked, blinking at her.

She merely smiled and led him by the hand onto the front porch, letting a confused Otonashi close the door behind them. Silence fell over the house. Then, just outside, Otonashi let out a muffled cry. From the volume and pitch, Ayato wasn't sure if it was good or bad.

"—you tell me right before I'm about to operate a vehicle?!!"

He would have appreciated context.

"…What was that about?" he asked, turning to direct the question towards Yuri. He quickly found that she wasn't paying attention to the door. She was staring straight at him, arms crossed and head tilted.

"So you just hypnotize whoever you want, whenever you want, is that right?" she said, her tone decidedly cool.

Shit. Was that what she and Ryou had been talking about? Ryou Fujibayashi, talking to an impressionable Yuri Nakamura about his hypnotism. Just what he needed. Shit.

He cleared his throat. "Ahm," he said, very eloquently again.

"I asked Ryou how you found me, since she told me I didn't give you my address when I moved." She flicked an eyebrow up dangerously. Still attractive – no, now wasn't the time for that! "You hypnotized it out of her. You didn't give her a choice."

He measured his words carefully. Hypnotizing her best friend – this was a delicate situation. One part of him wanted to say she didn't give me a choice. Another part reminded him that Otonashi had given him permission. But it wasn't Otonashi's permission that mattered.

"I made the choice for her. I shouldn't have." He licked his lips nervously, studying her face for a reaction. "I just…"

"You wanted to help them find me," Yuri finished for him. It might've been his imagination, but her features softened. "I know, Ryou told me you apologized and she forgave you."

He mentally gave Ryou a few more bonus points. Yuri always did have good taste in friends.

"But apparently today you tried to hypnotize Hinata into being a fish?" Yuri added, narrowing her eyes.

"Hey, that one was funny," he said defensively. Then, as a thought hit him, he pointed a finger at her. "And I distinctly remember making you laugh with the stapler incident!"

A grin slowly spread across her face, making him lower his finger in satisfaction.

"Alright. That one was funny," she amended, rolling her eyes at the smug smile she got in return.
"Just… you're a member of the Battlefront now. I want to know I can trust you."

Ayato faltered back a step, stunned by her words.

So she really did accept him. The thought gave him a not at all unpleasant thrill. Despite everything, despite what he knew and she didn't, it really was as if she was prepared to recruit him into their group of misfits all over again.

As long as he earned her trust.

"Shiina mentioned I manipulated your memories," he said after some deliberation, emboldened as he saw her attention prick up and her gaze sharpen. "Back then… I caused a horrible bloodbath. Gunned down many of your friends… our friends. With the help of some entranced NPCs."

Her cheekbones twitched with a disapproving clench of her jaw.

"I told them I was going to bring about peace. And I tried to use you as an example," he continued, standing his ground. "I tried to make you move on when you clearly weren't ready. With my hypnotism, even without any knowledge of your past, I was able to give you false memories of a happy life."

"What did you make me see?" Yuri demanded. Matching her tone, her stare had gone from cool to frosty.

"You told me later, in the hall after I helped you jog Otonashi's memories," Ayato mused, thinking back, "you'd seen your little sisters and brother alive. Smiling at you. Thanking you for being a good sister."

Yuri was quiet, looking at him contemplatively. He didn't know what to make of her expression, or this situation, only that he wasn't finished.

"But Otonashi stopped me." He knew he would never stop thanking Otonashi for what he did that day, but he never thought this would be one of the reasons. "He shook some sense into me, made me realize those memories weren't what you wanted or needed. Real or not, I have no right to force memories on you."

He uncrossed his arms, letting them fall vulnerably at his sides.

"I wanted to tell you this, not only because you asked back in Kyuuya and you deserve to know," Ayato said, meeting her eyes with natural power only, "but because I swear to you I will never do anything like that again."

Silence followed, her standing there and watching him dangle in a strange emotional purgatory. Then she closed her eyes for a moment, a minute, an hour (he didn't trust the analog clock's sense of time any more than he trusted his own).

Finally, she stepped forward, closing the distance between them, and reached out to him.

"Welcome to the Battlefront, Naoi," Yuri said warmly.

Smiling, he took her hand, and they shook.

---

Preview:
"Locus Felicis, as requested."

"Who are you and what are you doing in my house?"

"So, how does this work exactly?"

"She was and is just as much a part of the Battlefront as you are."

"I want peaches."

"That's not going to happen to me!"

"What is the point of just standing around?"

"YURIPPE!"

[Chapter 22]: Turn.
Ayato's coworkers gawked at him every day in the week that followed.

He heard the whispers starting up again in the breakroom, busy chatter about his life like they had nothing better to talk about as always. Like his life was some sort of interesting television show they needed to discuss in detail amongst themselves. Oh, they had no idea.

This week and from now onward, however, things were different. Where he had once brooded about their mindless gossip, seething over what they didn't know and had no business in, now he didn't give a damn.

"—saw Yuri Nakamura with him and a bunch of other people—"

"Here in town?"

"They were talking at the bookstore."

"—think they're back together?"

Alright, so he gave a small sliver of a damn. Because they were absolutely correct in some regards. She had been here in town. They'd be seeing her again soon, and so would he, again and again. Of course, she had no memory of him whatsoever, but as long as they kept their noses out of it and kept their damn distance, they wouldn't suspect any of that.

Yui emailed him the photo of the group shot and he made it his desktop background. His coworkers stared some more.

What's more, Ryou told him that she'd talked to Yukine about the situation with his mother. Apparently Yukine found a way to send someone to Akuma and set his mother up with a secret cell phone in case of emergencies. He asked Ryou who Yukine's contact was, but Ryou said that Yukine simply told her to tell him it was "a mutual friend with all the necessary stealth skills," and he wasn't sure what that meant but he was grateful anyway. Having experience in these situations as a nurse, Ryou had programmed Naoi's number into it under a name that suggested the number would be texting his mother helpful recipes and cooking tips.

Although his mother was very hesitant about calling him directly, she warmed up to it by the middle of the week. Now he had her back in his life too, even at a limit.

Life was so, so good.

Otonashi seemed like he was in just as wonderful a mood, calling every couple of days to tell him the happenings in Shibuya. Apparently, despite the lack of a lead with Ryou, Yui was impatient to find Girls Dead Monster because it was possible they could also use Iwasawa's voice in person to bring back people's Afterlife memories.

"You can tell Yui that I said stop trying to put me out of a job," Ayato had said wryly.

Otonashi had laughed. "I'll tell her. When she and Kanade get back from the spa."

Right, Hinata and Yui lived in the same city as them. Those four got to hang out whenever they damn well pleased. They got to do cutesy double dates and couple things with their friends, and he didn't even live in the same town as his former wife.
Ayato tried not to feel jealous. Sure, Otonashi didn't even have to call Hinata to keep in touch with him, but the fact that his friends knew and remembered him and cared enough to call was a step up in this life.

All the same, he felt massively relieved when he heard the first knock on his door on Saturday morning – even if it was (undoubtedly) Hinata.

"Would you please—" Ayato growled as he flung open the door, "—bring a BATTERING RAM next time!"

"What do I need that for?" Hinata asked innocently, stepping through the threshold with Yui and Shiina following shortly behind.

"For your obvious vendetta against wooden entrances." Ayato closed it once they were all inside. He nodded at the other two. "Hello, Yui. Shiina."

Yui had already texted him letting him know they'd picked Shiina up from the train station, and that she had the charm with her. She waved mindlessly and snuck into his kitchen to raid his fridge for the drinks he'd promised. Meanwhile, Shiina gently shook a corked glass bottle of powder in the air as greeting.

"Locus Felicis," she said, "as requested."

"Interesting."

When he held out his palm, she dropped it into his hand and wandered off, possibly already bored with it anyway. He couldn't really tell with Shiina. As he examined the bottle more closely, however, he couldn't see how she could be. The innards were fascinating, a rich yellow powder of various-sized flecks. If he didn't know better, he would think he was holding a bottle of molten gold that had hardened and gotten crushed into an uneven fineness. Did Yukine have the money for that? It had to be fool's gold, if anything of the sort.

Otonashi and Kanade came in minutes later, having carpooled with the other three. After a quick, lighthearted wave and nod from Kanade, she zipped straight to the bathroom before Ayato could return the greeting, prompting him to roll his eyes. Of course.

Hinata looked up from his established spot on the couch. "What took you guys so long?"

Otonashi shrugged. "We just needed a few minutes alone to talk."

"You two have been doing a lot of just talking lately," Hinata said, the dip in his voice suggesting playful suspicion.

The tone made Otonashi lift an eyebrow at him. "As opposed to what you and Yui usually do?"

Hinata smiled lecherously – and to Ayato's dismay, included him in his creepy stare.

Making a face, he pointed to the door. "You're disgusting. Get out of my house with that."

"What, and leave you alone with Yui? I know you've been texting her lately."

"Not in the manner that you text her."

Otonashi beamed at them, seemingly enjoying their back-and-forth, which Ayato briefly found horrific. "I love you guys," he said. Ayato felt slightly better.
"You love everything lately, you weirdo." Hinata shook his head at him fondly, although his broad grin masked lingering perplexity. "What's with you?"

More beaming from Otonashi.

"Just... feels like my family is coming together, I guess," he said after a moment.

Watching his friend drop his bag in the foyer and plop down next to Hinata on the couch, Ayato puffed up even more at the prospect of being called family by Otonashi. After all, he knew the feeling. With his dad out of the picture (thankfully), his brother gone, and his mother distant, rejoining the Battlefront had been a light in dark times.

He twisted the charm bottle between his fingers, admiring the golden sparkle. He was only happy to let this new family grow.

"Sorry to break up the lovefest," said Shiina, looking particularly focused, "but I think I hear a car outside."

Sure enough, there came a knock at the door moments later. Having just emerged right after Shiina said something, Kanade scurried across the hall to the foyer before Ayato could do anything about it, and happily let the next guest in.

"Hi Kanade. Hey everyone!" Yuri greeted, strolling through the hall like she still owned the place.

Ayato blinked, feigning confusion. "Who are you and what are you doing in my house?"

"Funny, I was about to say the same to you," Yuri said easily. She headed straight to the hall closet and put away her bag while Kanade joined Otonashi on the couch. At first, she started to close the door, then thought better of it and fished something out of her bag. It was the hat—the one that closely resembled the beret from her Battlefront days. She returned to the TV room wearing it proudly.

Ayato cursed under his breath. Damn, that was cute.

"Alright," Yuri said, clapping her hands together. "Operation: start!"

"Commander's really into this thing, isn't she?" Yui said aside to Hinata, sipping her pineapple soda as she balanced on the armrest next to him.

Hinata laughed, leaning into her. "You have no idea."

If she heard the two, she ignored them. "Shiina—you got the Locus Felicis from Yukine, right?"

From her comfortable, shadowed corner to the left of the couch, Shiina made a small sound of confirmation. "Naoi has it now."

He handed it over to Yuri before she made the request, reading her expectant look instantaneously. Their fingers grazed, but he pretended not to notice. Appeased, Yuri rolled the bottle over in her palm, her eyes lighting up with intrigue as she noticed the golden condition of the powder.

"So, how does this work exactly?" asked Otonashi, raising his hand.

Much to Ayato's dismay, Yui almost spilled her soda on the couch in her eagerness to field his question.

"You're supposed to sprinkle it on the ground and walk in it so you can track it around," she said,
waving the can in her hand despite Ayato's mildly distressed and offended noises. "Then you walk around a building – this house, I guess. You do it one to three times, and it'll make it an epicenter for a location of luck!"

The group pondered this for a moment.

"So, circle Naoi's house like a shark — three times — tracking gold glitter everywhere?" Hinata said skeptically. He glanced around the room. "Is anyone willing to do this without feeling like a complete idiot?"

Just about every pair of eyes fell directly on him.

Hinata scowled. "No—"

"I'll do it," said Kanade, getting up from the couch. If Ayato didn't know any better, he would've thought that the Angel had thrown Hinata a challenging look over her shoulder just now. Hinata looked affronted as Kanade took the charm right out of Yuri's grip and flounced out of the house. A minute later, Kanade's head passed by the window beside the couch. Yui hummed the *Jaws* theme, making Hinata and Otonashi crack up. She did it louder each time Kanade passed, until even Shiina was suppressing a smile.

Finally, Kanade strode back in with an empty bottle, which she tossed to Yuri – absurdly too high. Luckily Shiina was able to swoop in and catch it.

"What's next?" she asked blankly, staring at Hinata.

"I can't believe you would one-up me like that," he muttered under his breath, melodramatic as ever. Ayato snickered at him, feeling happy.

"Wait," said Yuri. She turned her attention to Yui, holding the bottle up for display while gesturing to Kanade. "So is she the only lucky one, or did we just make this whole town lucky?"

Yui wrinkled her nose thoughtfully. "Kanade's the one who activated it, so now the town is a lucky spot for people she's fated to meet. That's what the book made it sound like."

This revelation made Ayato give Kanade a slight frown.

"Is she fated to meet the Battlefront members, though?" he asked, regarding the former student body president with curiosity. "As much as, say, Yuri is?"

Yuri looked surprised at him.

"Of course she is," she said, wrapping an arm around Kanade's shoulders. "She found us, didn't she?"

"Yes, but we graduated with her." He meant no disrespect to her, he truly did see her as a friend now that he thought about it. Yet it seemed like everyone who was tied to her emotionally was already in this room.

"But in the end, she sided with all of us," Hinata pointed out. "She was and is just as much a part of the Battlefront as you are."

Ayato tried not to preen. He didn't need Hinata's validation, but he couldn't deny it felt good. "Fair enough."
Yui shrugged and nursed more of her soda. "Anyways, I can't promise it'll work, but you can always track it on your shoes too if you're still unsure."

"That won't be necessary." He gave Kanade an apologetic nod; she smiled reassuringly at him.

Shiina spoke up next, as this group was full of surprises.

"From what Yukine told me, the person who enacts the charm should sense where she needs to go next." Shiina's gaze flicked to the woman in question. "She should have a good feeling about it."

"Like when Yui and I felt like going to the baseball field?" Hinata looked at Shiina, and then at Kanade appraisingly when the former nodded. "Sounds like we're on the right track."

"Where are we headed, Kanade?" Otonashi asked his wife encouragingly.

She tilted her head at him, as if deeply considering the situation – though dreamy faraway looks were her natural state.

"I want peaches," she said.

Ayato rubbed his temples in frustration. Did she even hear the question?

Otonashi looked to him helplessly, a sheepish smile on his face. "Is there a grocery store or something close by?" he asked. "I didn't exactly think to bring any fruit along."

"Same place the three of you first found me," said Ayato. "Next to the arts and crafts place."

Yui's eyes lit up like Christmas lights. "Arts and crafts?!!"

"Kanade's thing first," Hinata said patiently. Shiina quietly took the soda can out of Yui's grip and walked it into the safety of the kitchen.

"So is that where we're going?" Yuri asked, tapping her fingers against the glass bottle.

Standing next to her, Ayato frowned. "I guess," he said slowly.

Yuri huffed her hair out of her eyes. "Damn," she said, and looked considering as she played with the pink ribbon of her beret. "This would've been a better time to say 'operation start.'"

Yui whined sadly at her empty hand.

Déjà vu wasn't horrible anymore now that Ayato knew it could be explained. Kanade led the way into town, skipping merrily and humming a different tune, and he let her. Unlike the park, Otonashi and Hinata weren't flanking Yuri on this excursion. Otonashi tailed just a few steps behind his wife, mooning over her more than ever, while Hinata was busy flanking Yui with Shiina and trying to explain that Kanade was the one who knew where they needed to go. Yui argued fiercely the whole time that they didn't know how long it would take for them to run into someone, and how did he know they weren't supposed to go to the grocery store so that they could find somebody in the arts and crafts store next to it?

Yuri walked next to him this time, behind Kanade as he was behind Otonashi so that they paralleled the couple. Every so often, she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He did his best not to visibly notice so as not to embarrass her and scare her away. Looking at her so much made her seem like a mission of his own, and he figured that maybe trust was normalization.
Unfortunately, what he used to know of as normal was taking her hand as they walked to the store together for a grocery run. The thought made him stiffen and secure his hands in a safe clasp behind his back. Old impulses tended to get him in trouble with her.

She did try to start up a conversation with him a few times, even over the jabber behind them. Five minutes in, she asked him about his mother, mentioning that Ryou had said they were keeping in touch now. She'd been pleased to hear she was doing alright despite the daring escape, and looked interested at the prospect of her having a prepaid phone.

"Do you think you could give her my number too?" Yuri asked, sounding hopeful. Then she backed down a bit. "I mean, just in case. I'd like to hear from her."

Ayato regarded her for a moment – it would be a nice gesture. But then, he wasn't sure.

"I don't know," he said, embarrassment starting to kick in. "I just… I didn't tell her about your memory loss. That could be confusing for both of you."

She frowned thoughtfully, almost a deflated little pout, but she nodded anyway. Then a grin crept onto her face. "I could try to wing it. For her. I bet she misses me to death."

He laughed, "You don't know the half of it," he said, knowing full well how much that was true. "When she found out about the divorce last week, it absolutely killed her. And then she almost killed me."

Yuri laughed too, looking smug. It must be nice to be loved immensely by the ex-mother-in-law from a marriage she had no recollection of.

Encouraged, Ayato began to grin. "Imagine that," he noted with a sardonic little chuckle. "And all this time I thought it would be my father to finish me off."

She stopped laughing, horrified, and whacked him on the arm. "God! Don't joke about that!"

"Sorry," he said, raising an eyebrow at her. Who was the amnesiac now? She'd always hated his dark, self-deprecating humor when it came to Kimito harming or literally killing him. Apparently that was still the case, even with her memory in this condition.

She'd been upset at him for a couple of minutes, walking in silence and watching the businesses of Mizuzaka pass by. He'd resigned himself to having killed the mood, until she engaged him in a cheery conversation about the "go die" line that had been a running joke in the Afterlife. Otonashi tossed back that it was even less funny in the living world, but Ayato smirked about it anyway. At least some good and common ground had come from his morbidity.

By the time they reached the familiar spot, the block where he'd hypnotized Okazaki and been discovered by Hinata, discussion between the two of them had died down. It was hard to be heard over Yui's indignant squawking.

"Just five minutes," said Yui, tugging on Hinata's arm and trying to pull him towards the arts and crafts store with her. "We're not going to miss anything. I just want to find some things for a new tail!"

"Why do you want a tail all of a sudden?" Hinata pressed, resisting with admirable stubbornness.

"Because one of Yukine's books probably has a charm to make it move and I'm gonna find it!" Yui paused, looking hopefully at Ayato. "Wouldn't this place have tail stuff?"
"I'm sure it would," Ayato said with a smile, rubbing his chin. He was happy to help, but also he liked making things more difficult for Hinata.

Hinata groaned. "Don't encourage her!"

Moving behind Kanade and Otonashi for support, Yuri crossed her arms at the others. "Come on, guys. Kanade's a simple woman to please." She jabbed a thumb over her shoulder at the grocery store waiting for them in the near distance. "We go in, get the poor girl her peaches, we're out in five minutes. We go into the arts and crafts place, and Yui gets bragging rights if we run into somebody in there."

"Yui with bragging rights." Hinata curled his lip at the thought. "No thanks."

"Mean," Yui sniffed, giving her husband a disdainful look. "Or I'll just go in by myself, and meet you guys in there, and, like I said, not miss anything because I know how long it takes you guys to shop for groceries!"

Shiina clicked her tongue, tsking.

"I wouldn't risk it. There's a curse I read about in one of Yukine's books – you leave before one miracle, you'll miss the rest of them."

"That's not going to happen to me!"

"We'll see about that, Blitz."

Yui whined a little, sending longing looks toward the crafts store.

On the other hand, Yuri frowned like she was just as tired of this purgatory as Ayato was. She put her hands on her hips, very leader-like.

"Kanade said she was hungry!" She motioned to her left at the woman in question, who actually looked unperturbed by the wait. In fact, she seemed rather serene and far away, though sometimes that was her famished face. Yet Yuri did not seem to notice her friend was perfectly content to stay outside as if waiting for something to happen. "What is the point of just standing around—"

"YURIPPE!"

The masculine, bellowing growl rang out from behind her for all of Mizuzaka to hear, preceded only by the sound of plastic bags hitting the sidewalk. Ayato could see him over Yuri's shoulder, tall and black-haired with sharp features. Her eyes growing wide at the nickname, Yuri whirled around to get a good look herself, and she let out a gleeful gasp.

"Fujimaki!" she shouted, and broke into a run.

The fool left his bags behind and sprinted at her, sweeping her up into a hug when they met in the middle and twirling her around in his arms. Yuri started laughing the moment her feet left the ground, smiling and rosy-cheeked.

It was the most enthusiastic reunion Ayato had ever seen. And it was a little much, wasn't it? Not even Otonashi or Hinata had spun her like that.

"Happy to see me, Yurippe?" Fujimaki asked, grinning as he lowered her back down again.

Yuri beamed back at him. "You just won me a bet."
Closer to him, Otonashi shook his head laughing at the heartwarming scene they'd just witnessed. "I guess we won't be needing your assistance this time, huh, Naoi?"

Ayato grunted an incoherent response.

Great. Now he'd lost money, he was jealous anyway, and he felt useless.

If Fujimaki had his memories back, that was fine. He didn't have to make an ass of himself and cause a scene in front of the entire town. If Noda had come and acted like his ridiculous self, at least Ayato would have won something from it.

As it was, he should have suspected. Yuri "Yurippe" Nakamura was the darling of the Battlefront. Of course Noda wasn't the only one who held affection for her.

Fujimaki followed Yuri as she rejoined the rest of the Battlefront, taking in the sight before him. By the easygoing smirk on the man's face, Ayato figured he was doing a good job hiding his annoyance.

"Looks like the old gang's coming back together," he said with a whistle. "Man am I glad I decided to go to the grocery store on this side of town today. Talk about being at the right place at the right time!"

Kanade beamed, puffing up with satisfaction. So she had made the spell work after all. Or perhaps she was just pleased to have won the Battlefront bet. The person using Locus Felicis finding the person they'd bet on… that felt kind of sketchy to Ayato. He tried not to scowl too much.

"Good to see you, Fujimaki. But do you live here?" Otonashi asked, scratching his head. "I'm surprised you and Naoi haven't run into each other."

"It's because Naoi's a shut-in, remember?" said Hinata. Ayato elbowed him in the side, and he grunted in pain but swiftly retaliated.

Fujimaki shrugged, looking amused at the two.

"My work is moving me out here," he said. "So I've been staying in a hotel on the other side of town for a little over a week or so. In the meantime, I've been scoping out the town, trying to find a place. Or somebody who needs a roommate." Then he threw Ayato a hopeful grin. "Maybe Naoi and I will start seeing more of each other. You're not looking for a roommate, are you?"

He stared back at him with dull eyes. "Someone's stealing your groceries."

Whipping around in surprise, Fujimaki gave a shout and barreled after the thief. Still uttering his terrible war cries, the man chased him down with hulking bear-like movements until the guy squeaked in fear and finally dropped the bags in his escape.

Yuri laughed hysterically, wiping at her eyes as she watched him go. Ayato felt better.

---

Preview:

"Why the hell do people keep staring?"

"You idiot, we're in public!"

"That's 92%.

"You accepted our enemies into the Battlefront at the drop of a hat."
"We want you around because we like you!"

"Fate decides the order."

"You can do the charm the next couple of times."

[Chapter 23]: Sulk and Savor.
With Fujimaki found, the group reached a compromise. Fujimaki had already made his grocery run, but he still wanted to hang out with the group and catch up, so he went with Shina, Hinata, and Yui to the arts and crafts store while Yuri, Ayato, and Otonashi got Kanade her peaches.

Ayato was thrilled with the arrangement, but it turned out Yui wasn't kidding. Kanade ventured through the grocery aisles like a tortoise in no rush to beat the sleeping hare.

"*They never go in for just one thing,*" Yui had texted him with an evil devil-horned smiley. "*See you in five hours!*"

Yuri had leaned over to read the text over his shoulder, then groaned in great horror.

"We're on a date with them, aren't we?" she'd intoned.

"I'm afraid so," he said gravely.

She'd snorted then, and grabbed him by the wrist to lead him out of the accursed produce section they'd been stuck in for fifteen minutes. If he looked at onions any longer he was sure he'd cry.

As he passively let her lead him through the aisles, watching her familiarize herself with structure and stocking changes, they both caught onto something rather quickly. A feeling, at first, then muffled whispers.

After a few minutes of this, it seemed to grate on Yuri's nerves.

"Why the hell do people keep staring?" she muttered aside to him. She ended her façade of a lingering investment in the chip bags, and cast an odd look over her shoulder until the fellow customers scurried past. When she was satisfied, she turned to him with a raised eyebrow. "Is there something so weird about me being back in town?"

"After leaving so abruptly, and being gone for several months?" Ayato mirrored her facial expression. "Yes. But it's also rare to see an estranged divorced couple shopping together."

Yuri frowned.

"Good point," she said after a pause. "It's too domestic."

"But we aren't really shopping together, are we?" Ayato said quickly, not wanting to scare her off or discourage her. He cracked a smile. "We were just… dragged here together by mutual friends, forced to get along at first… now united by a common ground of being utterly bored."

The grin returned to her face. "Is that the story we're using?" she asked, laughing.

He laughed too. "The real one is more ridiculous."

"So ridiculous I don't even know all of it." Yuri rolled her eyes, sighing heavily over the various snacks in front of her.

*I can help you with that.* The thought came to him again, but he didn't voice it this time. Yes, he still wanted her to know him, he wanted badly to exist to her as more than a new face in the Battlefront, but he'd made a vow to not push the hypnotism option. He always respected his vows, just as he respected her. Still, he was running out of ways to jog her memory.
Except for the walking bridge. The bridge held more sentimental value than anywhere else. He'd been thinking about it over the past week, and now he realized it would have to do. It was his best chance.

"Naoi?"

He glanced up abruptly, shattering his thoughts. Yuri was standing at the end of the aisle, giving him an expectant look. When she was satisfied she had his attention, she tilted her head, gesturing down another section.

"C'mon," she said, voice beckoning him like some kind of siren. "Last I checked, you were still out of dressing."

With that, she disappeared around the corner, her hair flying over her shoulders. He lingered for a few seconds, then snapped his fingers. He knew he'd forgotten something when he went to get Yui's stupid drinks. How did Yuri always know…? Damn psychic woman.

With a heavy huff that blew his bangs out of his eyes, Ayato followed her into the next aisle. Did Fujimaki know about her impeccable taste in dressings, oils, and sauces? Unlikely. He made sure to wipe away his smug grin by the time she turned around and shook the bottle triumphantly in his face.

Right place at the right time indeed. If the fool had showed up a few minutes later, he might've had the pleasure of shopping with Yuri Nakamura.

---

Despite Yui's five hour warning, Ayato and Yuri managed to navigate Otonashi and Kanade out of the store and into the arts and crafts place within forty-five minutes. Decked in devilish cat ears and a devil tail, Yui certainly looked surprised to see them.

Or, rather, horrified.

"Oh God!" she said in great distress, clutching Hinata's hand fearfully. "I thought we had more time!"

Ayato and Yuri exchanged puzzled glances.

"What's wrong?" Yuri asked, furrowing her eyebrows at the little devil woman.

"Do you know what you've done?!" Yui squeaked, with Hinata and Fujimaki looking terribly amused next to her. "You think Kanade takes a long time with groceries? You haven't seen anything! Look, you've already released the beast!"

Ayato looked over his shoulder in the direction she was pointing. In a nearby aisle, Kanade was rubbing her cheek on some pastel-colored fabric.

"So soft," she said lovingly.

Yui buried her head in Hinata's chest. "We're never getting out of here."

Yuri snickered at Yui's dramatics. Otonashi simply wandered over to join his wife in admiring the softness of the available fabrics, taking a special interest in the baby blue selection.

Ayato was not so distracted. "What about you?" he said to Yui, motioning towards Shiina. "It doesn't look like you guys are ready to go anyway."

The ninja in question was in another aisle not far off, admiring a few ceramic puppy figurines.
Elsewhere, Ayato could hear the rattling, clicking, and barking of some toy dogs that were tightly wound up and skittering around the display. At least one hit the ground and kept going, probably not the first and certainly not the last. He had no doubt it was Shiina’s doing.

"I gave her a fifteen minute warning," Yui huffed at him. "Who knew we had less than an hour? I should've texted you: wait for us outside."

"Oh, just let her have fun." Ayato was in a good mood, and Hinata looked bored, so that made him happier. "Yuri and I are good at pushing her out the door."

"Yeah, it's no harm," Yuri said, her own good mood carrying into her tone. She glanced towards Fujimaki, checking with him. "We didn't get anything perishable, right?"

Fujimaki looked at her slowly, curiosity etching into his features. Ayato didn't like the intrigued scrutiny behind his eyes; he had to repress a strong urge to make them glow red with the reflection of hypnotism.

"Nah, but…" Fujimaki rubbed his chin, considering. "Yurippe, are you and Naoi… together?"

Ayato blanched. How the hell did he read them like that? Was he being that obvious? And what business was it of his anyway?

Beside him, Yuri flinched at first, but covered it up with an easy smile.

"That's a long story, one we apparently have time for." She nodded at Ayato. "Why don't we tell you all the ridiculous details while we look around the store, and let the others do their thing?"

"I'm fine with that," said Fujimaki, tailing her as she headed towards the beads and ribbons section. He gave a throaty chuckle. "Tell me the truth – you got drunk and woke up with a ring on your finger, right?"

Ayato rolled his eyes, watching them disappear into the aisle. He wasn't looking forward to being the third wheel.

"I gave you 45 minutes!" Yui hissed.

"I was going to tell him!" Yui's devilish cat ears drooped in disappointment. "I was going to tell him!"

"I gave you 45 minutes!" Ayato hissed.

Yui held her devil tail to her heart, looking deeply distressed and jealous. Before he followed Fujimaki and Yuri into the aisle to keep an eye and ear on them, Ayato frowned over his shoulder at her.

Good. If she kept it just like that and added an unwavering need to hit her own head against a wall, she'd have where he was at right now.

It was just as bad as he expected. He was the one trailing behind Fujimaki and Yuri when the aisle was only wide enough for two people. Fujimaki dug all he could from Yuri, even though she was the amnesiac. The glances he occasionally threw at Ayato ranged from suspicious to smarmy.

"Why do you think it didn't work out?" he asked her. And then, in a knowing and feigned warning tone, "Naoi, did you try to make her call you God in bed?"

"No!" Ayato was mortified; Yuri busted up laughing because Fujimaki was just so funny. "You idiot, we're in public!"
"I'm just curious," said Fujimaki, stretching his arms behind his neck as if proud of a joke well done. "You're the only one who knows what happened between the two of you. And all you've got to say is 'things fell apart'?"

"We weren't the same after the concert." Ayato closed his eyes, trying to tune him out and resist a few hypnotic urges. "The rest is none of your business."

Honestly. Everyone thought they had the qualifications to be a relationship counselor.

Fujimaki gave a rich, skeptical snort, then leaned in to whisper in Yuri's ear: "You dumped him so hard."

Ayato bit back a snarl. Yuri made a sharp disapproving noise and whacked Fujimaki on the arm as she shushed him. The apologetic smile she sent Ayato afterward soothed him at first, but then he wondered if it didn't look a little… pitying.

Ugh.

Why did everyone think one person had to have dumped the other? They were both sensible adults with the capability of coming to a mutual – albeit rushed – decision. They'd made it with muddled minds during a hectic night, but he still clearly recalled suggesting it and her angrily agreeing. He remembered the looks she'd given him when everything came rushing back. Disbelief at first, then sheer unease. Even though she'd thrown a fit when he started calling their bluff, he knew what he'd seen. Uncertainty – the likes of which he had felt in volumes that night.

He wished he could personally thank Fujimaki for the reminder.

The good news was that Yuri changed the subject; the bad news was, it changed to Fujimaki. Ayato returned to third wheel status while Yuri asked their newfound Battlefront member all sorts of questions about his new life in Mizuzaka, where he'd been before, and how he'd seen the concert. Ayato lingered over crafts here and there, doing his best to act just as invested in paints and paintbrushes as Yuri was in Fujimaki's every word.

Fujimaki, the considerate person that he was, let his booming voice carry throughout the store so that Ayato didn't miss a single detail. He regaled Yuri in tales of his home life growing up in Nerima, just him and his older sister Satone. He'd stayed around as long as he could to make sure her boyfriends didn't harm or disrespect her, but when an opportunity came along for him to move up in his career, she told him off and sent him packing. She said she could take care of herself, and that he hadn't been the same since he went to the concert with her. He was more ambitious and restless, like he was missing something. Satone told him she knew he'd find what he was looking for in Mizuzaka.

"She was right, as always," Fujimaki said, regarding Yuri fondly.

Shrugging, Yuri gave an enigmatic smirk as she walked ahead of him. "She's a big sister. What do you expect?"

The topic transitioned, thankfully, to Fujimaki finding a place. Ayato was grateful for all of two seconds, and then Fujimaki playfully tried to call him "roomie" again, and he had to find a respectful way to tell him exactly how funny he thought that was. He settled on saying, "I'll think about it," in a tone that suggested keep looking, simpleton.

While Ayato slowed to a stop to inspect some clay and tools in the pottery aisle, Yuri nicely helped Fujimaki keep his options open.

"Ryou has a guest bedroom," she said absently, picking up a bottle of lavender glaze. Then she
shook herself out of a trance. "No, what am I thinking? A guy, staying at her place? You'd have
Sunohara on your ass in seconds."

"Are you kidding?" Ayato snorted. He could already hear squeaks of terror – hypothetical music to
his ears. "Fujimaki could punch that pipsqueak into dust."

Fujimaki beamed at him. "Thank you, Naoi."

Oh no, he'd paid him a compliment. Well, whatever. It was true. "I mean... would you? It'd be funny."

"For one night's lodging, I'll punch whoever you want."

Ayato rubbed his chin, mulling it over. Fujimaki wouldn't be that bad of a roommate. "Well…"

Yuri looked appalled at both of them. "You, stop putting a hit out on Ryou's boyfriend! You, stop
considering it!"

Fujimaki and Ayato laughed uproariously.

Before Yuri could unleash any wrath, Hinata rounded the corner and interrupted the scene. He
folded his arms across his chest, eyeing the trio with masked impatience.

"Alright, Kanade's actually burnt out so Yui wants to get out of here before she gets a second wind." He
looked at Fujimaki and Ayato, frowning for some reason. "Are you rowdy kids finished loitering?"

"Sure," Fujimaki said, picking up a stray green ribbon that had been left among the clay scrapers. He
held it up to his hair, looking very serious. "But I'm coming back later to look at more of these hair
ribbons. Yurippe's not the only one who can pull off this look."

Hinata rolled his eyes. "Okay, weirdo, no one's denying that. Come on, Yui and Shiina are checking
out."

Fujimaki, obviously pleased with himself, dropped the ribbon on the display shelf and was the first
person to obediently walk past Hinata, followed by Yuri. While Ayato grazed the ribbon
absentmindedly, noting its similarity to her Afterlife headband, he overheard her say, "You can
borrow the hat sometime."

"White and pink aren't my colors, Yurippe. You know that."

Ayato frowned, but fell into step behind them. Flirting in front of the ex-husband should be
considered bad form. He was a little irked with Hinata for starting that up again. Speak of the devil –
Hinata followed alongside him, arms still crossed as they headed to the front of the store. Kanade
was waiting outside the glass doors with Otonashi, staring in at them and happily satisfying her
peach craving.

"So," Hinata said carefully, "what's all this talk about you and Fujimaki being roommates?"

Ayato threw his head back and groaned.

Fujimaki had to go drop his stuff off at the hotel, but he made a raincheck to meet up with the group
at a restaurant called Nozu's for lunch. This gave Kanade time to take a power nap in the guest room,
while Yui tried to dig into Kanade's peaches out of playful revenge for taking so long. Two peaches
in, Shiina swiped the second fruit from her hand while Hinata pointed out that she'd just make them have to go back for more.

Somehow that dissolved into Yui wrestling Hinata on the floor, while Yuri, Otonashi, and Ayato had to dodge the flailing limbs. Ayato nervously kept watch over the furniture, but Otonashi was unimpressed after a moment and went into the kitchen to make coffee. Yuri eagerly followed after him to help him find the coffeemaker.

When did his TV room officially turn into the Battlefront Headquarters and all of its tumultuousness?

Ayato decided to take a page out of Yuri's book. He went into the kitchen and fetched a spray bottle from the pantry, then returned to the room and spritzed them mercilessly. "Break it up!"

Yui squeaked, hissed, and freed Hinata's neck before rolling away. Then the couple started laughing, falling back onto the carpet together and snickering into their hands like they hadn't just attacked each other. Ayato lowered the spray bottle in disbelief.

Otonashi peered out at them from the kitchen. "That's 92%," he said in passing.

Yui and Hinata laughed even harder. Ayato spritzed twice more at them, annoyed, and plopped down on the couch with a sigh. His friends were weird – but the affection he felt for them was downright baffling.

He let them do their thing for a while. Yui had brought her guitar this time, so she practiced a few Girls Dead Monster songs he vaguely remembered – "Thousand Enemies" and "Alchemy" – along with her own song "Storm Song," which he could admit wasn't that bad. Kanade had to be a deep sleeper like Yuri because Otonashi didn't seem too concerned by her playing.

In the corner, Shiina listened half-attentively, enjoying it in the background while she permitted Hinata to chat with her and admired the ceramic puppy she bought. Ayato hoped she wouldn't drop it. Not that it mattered, now that he thought about it – going by her track record, she'd probably catch it anyway.

Yuri came back into the TV room with a mug in hand and made him move his legs, which he'd perched on top of the armrest that wasn't occupied by his head. Placating her, he slid them aside and scooted over to make room. Appeased, she dropped down next to him and nursed her drink.

He did his best to be subtle as he looked at her out of the corner of his eye, considering. She really had no idea what had transpired between them the last few times they'd been on this couch together. Otonashi, the great friend that he was, sent him an inconspicuous headshake that made him realize he was borderline leering. He nipped that in the bud quick – just in time, too, because Yuri turned her head at that moment to meet his eyes.

"Don't tell Otonashi," she said under her breath, smirking, "but you make coffee better."

Otonashi frowned from the pass-through, looking mildly offended. Ayato smiled back at him shamelessly. Saturdays were officially his favorite day of the week.

Nozu wasn't close enough in terms of walking distance for Otonashi's comfort – apparently even after her nap Kanade wouldn't have the energy for it – so they piled into two cars and drove there. Hinata took Yui and Shiina in his car, while Ayato took Yuri and the Otonashis in his. Yuri teased him in the front seat about how hard he gripped the steering wheel with both hands like he was stressed out (she was one to talk). Little did she know it was his way of making sure he wouldn't grab her hand out of impulse.
Honestly! She kept putting her left hand in the middle like a little minx!

Hinata, Yui, and even Shiina were singing Girls Dead Monster songs at the top of their lungs when they pulled up beside them. Interestingly enough, Shiina had a good voice when she used it, and it didn't miss Yui and Hinata's notice. Ayato was pretty sure he saw both of them giving her the same damn moony eyes that Otonashi always gave Kanade. As it was, he thought he'd happily said his goodbyes to Hinata's singing voice during their Afterlife graduation. God help him. If he wasn't God himself, then God help him.

He felt himself grinning anyway, teasing Hinata all the way into the restaurant. So had he finally learned how to keep up with a song's tempo after all?

Fujimaki already had a table for eight reserved for them, with him sitting in the middle grandly like he was posing for a *The Last Supper* painting. Kanade took the seat to his right, across from Otonashi, while Yuri took the one to his left, and he looked too smug to be surrounded by women so Ayato snagged a seat next to Yuri. Of course, it planted him right in front of Hinata, who had made another Yui sandwich with Shiina, but it was a small price to pay to make sure Fujimaki's head stayed deflated.

Luckily, Ayato didn't find it too difficult to hog Yuri's attention. Fujimaki, who hadn't had a lot of experience with good Angel, looked at Kanade with interest as she cooed happily over the menu at a salmon entrée. He said something to her that made her giggle, and it was Otonashi who had to issue a good-natured "don't woo my wife" warning. Kanade held his hand over the table in reassurance.

Fujimaki smirked knowingly. "So that's why you always wanted her to join up with us."

"She turned out to be a great ally, didn't she?" Hinata said with a shrug, and turned to order green tea when the server popped up next to him.

Kanade leaned forward to beam across the table at him, misty-eyed. Ayato wasn't sure why she got so emotional from the sentiment. Hinata was practically her and Otonashi's neighbor back in Shibuya – yes, he was still jealous about that – and he apparently knew her enough to tell the server that her drink order was water with lemon.

Meanwhile, Fujimaki was shaking his head as he looked from Otonashi to Yuri.

"You two," he said, scoffing. "Otonashi. Yurippe. You accepted our enemies into the Battlefront at the drop of a hat." He swept a shit-eating grin around the table at everyone, though Otonashi was too busy giving his drink order to notice. "I guess now we know why."

Yuri fumed indignantly and buried her face into her menu. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"She really doesn't," Ayato affirmed, vaguely amused.

By the situation, that is. He was already quite used to coping with her amnesia through humor. But even after the server passed and got the rest of their drink orders, Ayato found himself frowning over Fujimaki's comment. It implied that Yuri had been interested in him during their time in the Afterlife, which was of course completely unfounded. Why on earth would she have liked him back then? He was ruthless and bloodthirsty on his worst days, insolent on his best.

And yet… that did raise a question that had long been at the back of his mind. He'd raged a horrible, bloody battle against her group one rainy afternoon, and was sitting comfortably on her headquarters' couch reading a book the next. Why *did* she accept him so quickly?
Thinking back, it was probably for Otonashi's sake. He'd always figured as such, anyway. When she'd first sought him out to recruit him, he'd prided himself on the speculation that she had either recognized his superior battle tactics or been persuaded by Otonashi to let him join. Then she'd enlisted in his help to hypnotize Otonashi, and he chalked that one up as another possible reason.

Unlike what Fujimaki seemed to insinuate, he really didn't think there was more to it than that.

He tuned back in when the server placed his tea in front of him. Yui was ranting excitedly to Fujimaki about her not yet dead ambitions of seeing Girls Dead Monster brought back together, especially if she had to do it herself. Seconds after the group's collective "kampai," Yui had already downed half her soda, and was talking at him even faster. He actually seemed to be following along, grinning at her like he'd missed her animated chatter. Or he was a bigger fan of Girls Dead Monster than Ayato had thought.

"—and if Iwasawa's music is magical on her own, think of what GlDeMo could do together!" Yui glowed, her hands shaking around her third refill, and Ayato presently thought that maybe she didn't need a charm, she could power a devil tail just as efficiently on caffeine. "Hinata says that he always knew the band was enchanting. If we got them together for a live performance, everyone else would have another chance to remember everything! I think—"

"You're breaking my heart here, Yui," Ayato said gravely.

She twisted her features at him like he'd caused her great pain. "But we want you around because we like you, not because we're just using you."

"I see." He heaved a theatrically dejected sigh into his tea. "Nobody wants my hypnotism, is that right?"

Yui whined at him and kicked his leg. Indignant, he looked up and kicked back, only for Hinata to snarl in pain instead.

"Hey, that was my leg!"

"Even better," said Ayato, smiling.

Otonashi sent them a cross look from the other end of the table. "Boys," he said sternly.

Ayato frowned repentantly while Kanade giggled. Otonashi didn't have to be such a dad about it. It wasn't like he and Hinata were Hayato and himself, trying to push each other out of the plum tree. Though he felt guilty even slightly comparing Otonashi to a monster like Kimito. He wondered how his mother was doing…

"Anyways, Yui, we can't choose who we find next," said Hinata, draping an arm around his wife. He cast a sideways glance behind her. "Right, Shiina?"

"Correct. Fate decides the order."

"But what if I'm not talking about the charm!" Yui looked aggrieved, tapping her painted nails on her glass. "What if we take a break to find GlDeMo first? Since Iwasawa's the reason we remember each other in the first place? Or what if I go find them the way you guys found Naoi and Yurippe? I know I can!"

Otonashi shrugged. "Where's the fun in that?" he said with a chuckle. "I thought you were the one getting so passionate over charms lately."
"Because I thought maybe there'd be some stuff in there about magic in music," Yui sniffed. "And there was. A little."

"And now you're thinking about ditching us." Fujimaki did his best to sound betrayed.

Hinata looked unworried, but still curious as he studied his wife. "Haven't we been over this? Why are you so eager to run off to GlDeMo?"

"It's quite simple, really," said Shiina, impassive. "She likes Iwasawa better than us."

Yui looked badly conflicted, and made some upset noises at her while Hinata covered up a grin. She turned and buried her head into Hinata's shoulder, squawking something about the group being "so manipulative." Ayato resented the comment, as well as the leg kick from before, so he decided to wait a while before telling her about his theories on betting on someone and being the one to enact the charm.

"If it makes you feel better," Hinata said, lovingly patting her head, "you can do the charm the next couple of times."

While Ayato seriously contemplated betting on GlDeMo, Kanade hummed happily like she liked the idea. "That way you'll know if and when you're meant to meet her."

Reluctantly, Yui pulled away from Hinata, and mulled over the group's words.

"If," she scoffed, but she looked mollified.

When that was settled, and Yui was back to her old sunny self, Hinata shifted his gaze to Ayato's right with inquisitive eyes and a nosy grin.

"Yurippe, you've been staring down at the table quietly all this time. What are you studying so intensely?"

Yuri, who'd snapped her head up at the mention of her name, glared at Hinata defensively as a rosy tint colored her cheeks. "I was reading the menu!"

"Can't wait to hear the book report," Fujimaki said cheerfully.

She kicked him under the table and turned his laughter into a wounded grunt. Ayato picked up his own menu to disguise a grin; his ex-wife could be so vicious.

The server came back around and took their orders, and Ayato suppressed the urge to predict Yuri's order to her in the spirit of her little amnesia trivia game. He would have been right, by the way, but he didn't want to appear too smug. Coming on too strongly hadn't worked out well for him in the Afterlife when he was vying for Otonashi's affections. In fact, he regularly got the feeling that he was exasperating him, what with his eye rolling, blank looks, and unimpressed silences.

He didn't want that to happen with Yuri, so it was better to play it cool for now. In this life, he'd won her heart with subtlety and solidarity, and long-established, deep-rooted trust. And a little teasing thrown in here and there, because he never could help himself. Maybe if things weren't as different as he thought, he could do it again.

Kanade plowed through her salmon entrée at a terrifying speed and Yui drank two more refills of soda and broke the sound barrier rushing off to the bathroom twice. In her absence, Shiina and Hinata seriously discussed encouraging — or enforcing — caffeine-free alternatives. While Otonashi and Fujimaki laughed about a soccer game against Yui that Ayato was apparently never invited to,
Yuri and Kanade chatted across the table over whether or not they should get dessert.

The server returned; Yuri and Kanade got two dishes and split a cake. Yui lingered hopefully but indecisively around the karaoke machine on her way back to the table, Hinata and Ayato kicked each other in the leg four and five more times respectively (Otonashi scolded them again but Ayato prided himself in having gotten the last jab), and Yuri knocked her elbow against his two more times than he considered accidental, which was curious but he gave her the benefit of the doubt.

Fujimaki repeatedly asked everyone if they dared him to go up and sing, only to be met with preemptive booing from Hinata, Otonashi, and Yuri. Kanade ventured in a soft voice that she thought he'd sound good, and Fujimaki broke into a heartfelt speech about how she was his only true friend.

All in all, an unsurprising lunch with the Battlefront. They all paid and moved on to the next adventure. Fujimaki, who had apparently walked to Nozu, hitched a ride with Hinata back to Ayato's place.

On the way home, Ayato clearly heard boisterous singing once more from Hinata's car. Fujimaki's voice was the loudest of them all.

(He rolled down the window and booed; Yuri roared with laughter.)

Preview:

"Tell her I said hello."

"Are you looking for a younger man?"

"Please give him a hard time for me."

"We still haven't taken our group photo yet."

"Don't tell. Show."

"What are you doing here?!"

"There is more than one way to inflict pain."

[Chapter 24]: Connection Breaks.
24: Connection Breaks

The group stopped at the house to laze around for a bit. Kanade hogged the couch this time, her head resting peacefully in Otonashi's lap. Hinata, the traitor that he was, told Fujimaki where to find the box of marriage mementos and now the latter was nosing through it with Yui and Shiina peeking over his shoulders. Ayato had sighed heavily at them but resigned himself to having invasive friends.

In fact, he was not surprised in the least when his phone rang and almost all seven heads swiveled in his direction – save for Shiina, who'd just excused herself from the room.

What did startle him was the number on the caller ID. A number he recognized after a second, but still wasn't accustomed to.

Mindful of his prying audience, he gave them a warning frown. "It's my mother."

"Tell her I said hello," Shiina said as she passed him.

Ayato squinted over his shoulder, the phone still ringing in his hands. He didn't think he understood her sense of humor. But he didn't want to leave his mother hanging, so he gave his friends one last "behave" look and answered the call.

"Hello?"

"Hi there, Ayato," his mother said fondly. She didn't sound worried. "Your father's just gone back to the shop after his lunch break, so I wanted to see how you were doing."

"Well, I—"

Yui popped up right next to his ear and shouted, "HI, MRS. NAOI!" making Ayato jump into the air and nearly drop the phone. Hinata, Fujimaki, and Otonashi howled with laughter, something he was sure his mother had also overheard.

"Are those your friends?" She sounded pleased, and especially curious.

"Hey, put her on speaker phone!" Yuri urged, nudging him. He turned to her, uncertain, but she stared back at him bright-eyed and determined.

He gave in. Why was he letting his friends turn him into a softie?

"Yes, my friends are here." He rolled his eyes, but grinned despite himself. "They want me to put you on speaker."

"Go ahead!" His mother was audibly beaming on the other end. "I know I just heard Yuri."

Mentally calculating a dozen saves in case of amnesia confusion, he pressed the speaker button and raised his eyebrows sternly at the others. "You're on now."

"Hello, Mrs. Naoi!" Yuri sang mischievously, obviously already having too good a time with this.

"Yuri, I've missed your voice." She sighed on the other end in wistful happiness. "You know you can still call me Ayame if you'd like. Hasn't my son begged you to take him back yet?"

"Well, of course. He gave me the ring and everything." Yuri winked at him, then procured the engagement ring from her pocket and rotated it between her fingers.
Ayato stared at her in astonishment, wondering if he should feel robbed. That vixen! She'd been snooping in the shoebox as well!

"He better have," his mother hummed. "I had hoped to see both of you when I came by. And perhaps a grandchild." Ayato choked on air so hard that Yuri had to rescue the falling phone with fumbling hands while Hinata alternated between cackling and hitting him on the back. "I must say, it pained me greatly to learn that you two had fallen apart. I don't think Ayato will ever find me a better daughter-in-law."

Yuri's eyes softened.

"Sorry I broke your heart like that," she said, gazing down at the phone as if it were a magic mirror of maternal affection. "We didn't mean for you to get caught in the crossfire."

"It's just good to hear from you again, Yuri. Ayato's father has been in a foul mood lately..."

"It's my pleasure, Ayame. You know I haven't talked to my mother in months?"

"Well, like mother like daughter, I suppose. I haven't seen her in months!" His mother tried to sound stern with her, but she failed and let her voice give a lilt of a smile. "I used to be able to sneak some information from them when they came by the shop while I was the only one there, but your parents are always so busy! Your mother says—"

Ayato watched in disbelief as Yuri paced around the room and into the kitchen with full control of the phone. How was she doing this so masterfully? He should never have doubted her charisma. But also he'd like to talk to his mother too. He wasn't happy about Kimito making her help out around the shop sometimes now that he didn't have his son to do it anymore.

"—and they stopped buying from you?!"

"Back in November. Barely heard from them since. Kimito went ballistic."

Ayato scowled deeply, rubbing the phantom bruises on his arm. He knew what "ballistic" was code for.

"—around the same time I called them for help in house hunting," Yuri noted with a frown. "I'm sorry — they must be upset about the divorce. They throw themselves into work when they're upset."

"That's what I think too, and of course Kimito wasn't helpful when he started badgering them again —"

More to herself, Yuri mused quietly, "Must be why they never mentioned him."

"—and Yuri, it makes me feel terrible sometimes," his mother said breathlessly on the other end. "You left Akuma for our son, and it didn't even work out. But you won't come back because of his father. I admire your loyalty, I do, but your parents must feel so much resentment towards our family."

"They don't have time to love or resent anything," said Yuri, sitting down on the couch next to an upright Kanade. "But I don't resent your son, and I'll never have a reason to resent you."

"Yuri Nakamura, I will never understand what my son was thinking."

Hinata chuckled at the phone from his perch on the armrest. "You sound smart. And nice. Are you
sure you're Naoi's mother?" Ayato snarled, glowing his eyes at him and ready to march over there; Fujimaki held him back.

To Ayato's horror, giggles emanated from the phone. "Unfortunately I was only able to pass on my good looks."

Hinata opened his mouth to say something, but a knowing Kanade reached over and covered his mouth without even looking at him. "It's his mother," she said.

"Mmmphmm," Hinata said, resigned.

"Thank you for the apology, Hinata, I do agree that I'm far better looking than you."

Hinata rolled his eyes to the ceiling. Otonashi and Yuri laughed wildly. Fujimaki lifted his eyebrows towards the phone in Yuri's hand. "Are you looking for a younger man, Mrs. Naoi? Because I would be glad to be your son's new—"

"Shut up!" Ayato roared, tackling him into submission. Or at least knocking into him and making him double over (he was not paying for any new furniture).

More shrieks of laughter. Kanade took the phone from Yuri while the latter was trying to hold her sides.

"As you can hear, your son is being well cared for," she said kindly.

There was silence, save for a few ragged breaths, and then a light sniffl e that Ayato didn't like the sound of. "You don't know how much I appreciate that. To know he has wonderful friends who love him enough to embarrass him during a phone call with his mother."

Otonashi beamed, and all the others looked rather pleased with themselves. "Just doing our job, ma'am."

"Mizuzaka really was his best chance, and I'm so glad he took it." She gave a watery chuckle. Ayato turned away to hide his face. "Even if it meant being apart for so long. I'm grateful to talk to all of you."

There was a slight inhale; from the corner of his eye, he saw Yuri open her mouth to respond, but then they all heard noises on the other end – a door opening downstairs, maybe. Ayato spun back around, a nervous tremor in his chest.

"I have to go," his mother said quickly. "Please give him a hard time for me."

The phone clicked. Call ended.

Silence.

Everyone looked around the room at each other; Ayato chewed the inside of his mouth, wary as he attempted to read their expressions. Pity? Judgment? Discomfort? Did they think—

"Did you hear that?" Hinata crowed. "Straight from his mother's mouth!"

Yui pumped a fist into the air. "Certified permission to be a huge pain in the butt!"

"And she never did say no," Fujimaki said, stroking his chin.

Ayato face-palmed. Of course… what else could he expect from a group of imbeciles? But also, he
refused to give them the satisfaction of a smile.

The bright side was, fuming while his friends had giggled and jeered and prattled on about the phone call had given him some time to think.

About why she was so relieved to hear him surrounded by friends. About when she'd last seen him, and where she'd found him – lying under the bridge like a dead drunk – and why he'd been there in the first place.

He picked himself up off the couch, where he'd been waiting patiently, arms crossed next to Otonashi and Kanade, for everyone to get ahold of themselves. Unfortunately his broodiness had taken them even longer, and then they'd had to let Shiina in on the joke.

Luckily she'd been unimpressed, so Hinata and Yui let the humor die down, and the latter turned the conversation towards whether or not Yukine knew a charm for her devil tail to make it twitch when she was excited.

"Surgery," Otonashi had quipped, and the group started losing it again.

Now, they were cool and collected, chatting idly amongst themselves and lazing about again, so Ayato took advantage of a lull.

"Does anyone feel like going on a walk?" he asked, leaning against the wall closest to the foyer's hallway. "There's a place somewhere in the park you haven't seen yet."

"I don't know." Otonashi looked at Kanade thoughtfully; she was resting her head on his shoulder. "Kanade's still worn out from lunch."

"It's not very far," Ayato reasoned. Hell, he could get there in five minutes if he ran fast. "Not to mention I'm sure she'd enjoy the scenery. Besides, it would probably help us all to walk it off."

Yuri took in his words with a thoughtful head tilt, then looked expectantly at Kanade.

"It would give us a chance to shed off the calories from that cake," she pointed out, and Ayato struggled not to choke on air again. Apparently déjà vu still had a stronger effect on him than he thought. "Kanade, what do you say?"

Kanade popped up from the couch with renewed energy and sent Ayato a wispy smile. "I say we still haven't taken our group photo yet."

He sensed there was more to it than that, her willing consent, but it got everyone out the door and that was what mattered. They stopped by the entrance to the park again, where they'd first posed, and got a helpful stranger to snap the picture. Their stances were more or less the same, only Yui had her tail back and had Hinata in a headlock this time, while Fujimaki stood between her and Shiina with his hands in his pockets.

Leading the group farther along, Ayato couldn't help but feel hopeful as he made the turn he hadn't dared to last Sunday. Clouds were beginning to roll in, yet it was pleasantly warm and breezy – a perfect close to the month of April and a timely afternoon for a walk. There was a soothing familiarity to this… strolling down the path with Yuri at his side as the area turned more and more into forest. Breathing it into his lungs felt positively therapeutic.

He almost forgot to worry whether or not it would work.
The photographs didn't. The bookstore, park, and café didn't. With the ring, she felt only admiration. But this…

There it was, uncovered but masterfully crafted, curving delicately above the river. The sun peeked in through the canopy of tree branches and shone down on it, giving the scene an enchanting glow. Water trickled downstream, a gentle sound adding to the tranquil ambience of the forest. He wondered, in great awe, why he had ever wanted to avoid this place.

He heard a feminine murmur of admiration and turned around. It was Yui – and Kanade too, starry-eyed as they exclaimed softly over the sight before them. Even Fujimaki and Hinata looked impressed, but it wasn't their reaction he was after.

Yuri stood a few steps back from the others, staring ahead and taking it all in. She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times, then settled on pursing her lips in deep reflection. A light in her eyes dimmed and glowed as if struggling with a thought, or perhaps a memory.

"The bridge," she said softly.

His heart thumped so loud he suspected Otonashi could hear it as he passed him. He stepped toward her, hopeful. "Do you remember this place?"

The question seemed to snap her out of a trance.

"Of course I remember this place," she said, with an edge of suspicion in her tone. "I used to come here whenever I needed a place to think, or… or be alone."

*You were never alone*, he wanted to tell her, but he left it unspoken.

She walked over to the bridge, finally choosing to follow after everyone. Their friends were already exploring the far end of it, with Otonashi, Kanade, and Fujimaki leaning against one siding and Hinata, Yui, and Shiina peeking over the other. Yui was trading her concert camera back and forth between the others, and once every few seconds Ayato would hear a click followed by a flash that lit up the bridge.

Yuri gave him a careful look as she passed. "So, how was it important to us?"

He faltered. It wasn't enough…

But that look. That glow in her eyes. He refused to be disheartened when he'd seen something like that. Maybe she just needed a little nudge.

Resolute, he followed her onto the bridge. And he opened his mouth.

"No."

She'd turned on her heel, and was facing him now. She held up a hand signaling for him to stop. He closed his mouth, dumbfounded – hadn't she asked him a question?

"No," she repeated, staring straight into his eyes. "Don't tell. Show."

Ayato furrowed his eyebrows at her, more confused than ever. What the hell did she mean by that? Did she… want him to reenact the proposal? He thought he'd seen her drop the engagement ring back in the shoebox on the coffee table before they left, but now he lowered his gaze to her ring finger skeptically.
Yuri lifted his chin with a finger, compelling him to meet her eyes again.

"I've been thinking it over ever since you helped Shiina," she said, "and I've decided that I want you to use your hypnosis to bring back my memories."

He barely heard the commotion from the eavesdroppers behind them in the cascade of emotions that consumed him. He felt as if the opposite of a shadow creature had taken over him, burrowed itself into his chest, into his very core, and combusted into pure inescapable joy. As if he'd soaked in all the sugars and caffeine of Yui's stupid sodas and would be forever reeling from that high.

She wanted... her memories. Their memories.

He wanted to scream. He could have screamed. He could have catapulted himself into the cold river water below. But he needed to be cool, so he decided to let words come out of his open mouth like a normal person.

"You—" His voice cracked, coming out in a prepubescent squeak. He heard Hinata laugh. Hinata was the worst – he would hypnotize him next.

But that didn't matter right now. What mattered was that Yuri wanted to know him. She thought he was worth remembering. And she trusted him. Life was incredible. He could probably give her his mother's number after this—

Yuri cleared her throat.

"Right... right!" He cleared his throat too. She was smiling. Her smile was also beautiful...

No! He had to snap out of it, and do what needed to be done. He could feel himself still shaking with unrestrained joy – was this what it was like to be Yui all the time? Trying to regain his composure, he cleared his throat once more, then nodded seriously at her.

"Alright, please sit down."

Yuri took a seat on the bench of the bridge, positioning herself slightly sideways when he joined her so that they were facing each other. This would take all his concentration, so he took a couple of breaths to calm himself. She was grinning at him, probably because of his happy fidgeting, which only exacerbated things. He had to treat this like business or he'd just be bringing them both down.

Enter serious mode. "I'm going to start now."

She nodded, further affirming her consent, and he began to focus his mind.

This wasn't like with Otonashi, and it was a little different than Shiina; he had to put pieces of the Afterlife and this current life back into her head. He knit his brows together, calling forth from the back of his mind the telltale sound — like ringing in his ears — that died to a dull but steady hum, until the sea-green of her eyes reflected red.

Her mind welcomed him, submitting to his hypnosis like clay to a potter's hands, making his task that much easier. Yet her lack of resistance didn't change the fact that the task at hand involved bringing back her memories of a single person. Would that make it simpler, or more complex? Perhaps that was for Yuri's mind to decide. He could only bend, sculpt, unearth, unlock.

All he knew was, beneath the spell was an entire lifetime they'd had together. And an afterlife in which they'd fought alongside each other. The good memories and the bad. And he'd be damned if he couldn't uncover them.
The effort of his concentration seared at the back of his brain, but he pressed on. A headache would be a small price to pay.

How long had it taken Otonashi to remember, again? Considering the circumstances, he wasn't sure when to stop this time. He'd known when Otonashi abruptly bowed his head in shame. He'd known when Shiina blinked, backed away, and glanced at Hinata and Yui in disbelief.

They'd both broken eye contact. Yuri wasn't breaking eye contact.

It was getting harder to focus. The muted buzz rose once again into a shrill ringing sound. How long had they been doing this for? There was probably such a thing as going too far back, probing too deep. Besides, she'd offered such little resistance. He had too strong of a hold on her. He had to let go first, before he gave them both a migraine.

Ayato broke first. Blinking twice and shaking his head to retract the trance, he withdrew from her with a sigh. Then he searched her face for clues.

The burgundy tint faded into soft green. She stared back at him, dazed, the sheen of hypnotism like a veil over her eyes. Silence fell over them, until she blinked twice and furrowed her eyebrows as if it had finally hit her that he was finished. She looked lost.

Otonashi noticed it too, a mix of curiosity and concern on his face as he touched her shoulder. "How do you feel, Yuri?" he asked, his voice gentle.

Yuri glanced up at him, then back at Ayato, her features pinched into a frown like she'd expected something more.

"I don't…" She hesitated. "I don't think it worked."

"What do you mean?" Ayato asked, feeling his heart sink to his stomach.

She worried her lip, and he could see an apology in her eyes instead of her life flashing across them.

"Naoi, I… I still don't remember you."

Ayato's breath hitched, in pain and in the outrage of it all. How could he have failed? In all his hypnotic acts, afterlife or living world, without an outsider's intervention he had only ever failed once before. And that failure had lost him his consciousness and his watch, but this… the consequences of this were far worse.

She didn't know him. The memories they'd made together were hopelessly lost to her, and there wasn't anything else he could do. This had been his last chance.

How could he have failed?!

"You're going to have to do more than that, dearie!"

Ayato jumped to his feet, instantly recognizing the voice, and spun towards the source. Perched on the opposite ledge in front of him and Yuri was none other than the leather-vested thief with crocodile skin and a perpetual irritating smile. On Yuri's left, the other Battlefront members yelped and got into defensive or fighting stances, despite their lack of weapons.

Where had he come from? How in the world had he climbed up there without anyone noticing?

"You!" he snarled, jabbing a finger in his direction. "What are you doing here?"
"You know this guy?" Hinata asked, glancing suspiciously between the two. Yuri looked just as confused, slowly getting up from the bench with her eyes locked on the crocodile man.

Ayato's jaw clenched as he lowered his hand and balled both into fists. "He's the one who choked and robbed me."

"The one you couldn't hypnotize," Kanade said softly.

There was no need for Kanade to remind him how the man had added insult to injury. Ayato remembered it all too well. And here he was, returning to the scene of the crime, no less! Lounging on the ledge, legs crossed, in a pose like he was waiting for a damn photoshoot. His arrogance knew no bounds.

As if reading his mind, the man hoisted himself off the barrier and onto the deck in a quick, nimble movement. He bowed grandly before the rest of the group, giving a mock flourish of his hand. An open-mouthed Yui began to raise her camera, but Shiina silently nudged it back down.

"Rumpelstiltskin," he said, with an overly friendly grin that revealed all his yellowed teeth. "For those of you who haven't had the honor." His swampy eyes were focused directly on Yuri.

Ayato scowled at him, edging a little closer to his ex-wife. Was he threatening her?

"The honor?!” he repeated, a snarl scratching his throat. "You assaulted me and took my watch!"

"After you tried to play mind games on me," the man said coolly, still smiling.

"After you tried to play mind games on me," the man said coolly, still smiling.

Gritting his teeth, Ayato glared at him in return. Unbelievable. This… this Rumpelstiltskin was parading around in broad daylight at the scene of the crime like he had no shame at all. The smile on his face suggested very strongly that he likely even had the watch on his person at this very moment. And none of the officers in this town had caught him yet? How incompetent were police?!

Rumpelstiltskin let out a high-pitched giggle that grated at his nerves, then snapped and pointed a finger at him.

"The watch was payment for my troubles," he said. "The assault was a warning! Your hypnotism will never work on my magic." Gesturing to Yuri, he added dryly, "Exhibit B."

Realization set in; Ayato's eyes widened with fury. "You wretch. What did you do to her?"

"Now, now…” The magic man beamed. "I gave her what she asked for."

"What she asked for?!"

Ayato looked to Yuri for answers, though he knew it was futile. Going by the twist of her features, she was just as confounded as he was. Why on earth would she ever ask for this?

Bristling, Rumpelstiltskin stabbed a finger at Yuri. "She came to me," he spat, "in need of a cure for the pain you caused her."

The accusation sent a chill through his spine. "I didn't touch her!"

He would never…

He backed away, towards Otonashi and the rest of the group. For a moment, the way the man looked at him, he was terrified that he had, and that the magic had wiped his memory of it as well. But he refused to accept it. He'd vowed not to, and that vow still stood.
In no lifetime, afterlife, or mindset — in no existence — would he ever hurt Yuri the way his father hurt his mother.

Rumpelstiltskin's eyes narrowed at him, and darkened to match his frown.

"There is more than one way to inflict pain," he said.

He approached Yuri, the Battlefront silently watching his each and every movements, and leaned in so close Ayato could see her grimace at his breath. At the same time, she couldn't look away from his reptilian eyes.

"Would you like to know why you don't remember this man?" Rumpelstiltskin cooed. He curled a lock of her hair around his finger with one hand, and swept the other towards Ayato, who was now struggling under the restraints of Otonashi's arms. How dare he lay a hand on her!

Yuri, on the other hand, wasn't fighting. She was searching the man's face, as if... as if wondering where she'd seen him before.

"Because you drank a potion to forget him. Because he broke your heart." Rumpelstiltskin's voice grew cold and merciless, dipped in impish glee. "He tossed your love aside and told you that everything you had together meant nothing to him."

Lowering her eyes, Yuri broke free of his intense stare and glanced towards Ayato – but the look on her face turned his blood to ice. He faintly felt Otonashi loosen his hold on his shoulder. Rumpelstiltskin smiled broadly.

"You had to protect your heart," the man sneered, "by taking him out of it."

---

**Preview:**

"I don't believe you."

"There has to be a way."

"An act of true love can break any curse."

"You're just a chip off the old block, aren't you?"

"Read between the lines!"

"I can't believe I thought you'd ever be on my side."

"We just didn't want anyone else to get hurt."

"Do you love her?"

[Chapter 25]: **Pain.**
Contrary to popular belief, Ayato Naoi did not always like to be the center of attention.

In some cases, yes, he thrived from it, basking in the spotlight like a cat in front of a window as it soaked in the sunbeams. He got a lot of things done behind the scenes, but he ate up every moment when a gathering of Afterlife students gazed upon him as their new substitute president. They looked at him as the crowds had looked at Hayato in the art exhibit, with awe and veneration as they acknowledged his success.

On the other hand, he didn't much care for the sea of eyes when he'd done something wrong, or when he felt the attention was undeserved. When he was Hayato, small legs quivering at the front of the exhibit while art fans and critics snapped photos and the flash hurt his eyes.

As it was, he would prefer it if Yui put her camera away just in case.

Six pairs of eyes were on him now, occasionally switching to Yuri, who was avoiding eye contact with everyone. He chose to ignore their stares as best he could and focus on her.

What he'd said – what that imp had said to her – he couldn't make sense of it. It was wrong. He had to be wrong. And yet the way Yuri stared down at her shoes, hugging herself protectively, it was as if she believed it. Or was it guilt? No, that wasn't possible. She wouldn't even remember doing it. She wouldn't remember, because…

"I don't believe you," Ayato said at last. "You're making this up. You put the spell on her yourself. Conveniently for you, she can't deny anything that you erased."

Rumpelstiltskin turned away from Yuri and gave Ayato a crocodile grin. "Reassure yourself all you like, dearie! It doesn't change a thing."

He paced to the center of the bridge, tenting his fingers.

"After you divorced her, she couldn't bear the way you made her feel." He flourished his hand dismissively. "Yes, I gave her the potion. I warned her of the side effects. I didn't force it down her throat. It was Yuri who decided forgetting you was the best cure for her pain."

He gave another flick of his hand. Like magic, a golden chain slipped from his sleeve and dangled on his fingers.

"She even agreed to trade this lovely locket for my services."

Ayato stared at the jewelry in the man's grasp. The arrangement of emeralds and amethysts was unmistakable; even Yuri would be able to recognize its resemblance to her ring. For that man to have it in his possession…

No. No, it couldn't be.

"How do I know you didn't just steal the locket as you did my watch?" Ayato demanded, staring at him intensely. He couldn't hypnotize him, but he could search his scaly face for the truth.

Rumpelstiltskin merely blinked at him.

"Miss Nakamura," he said dryly. "A few months ago, did you or did you not find in your
Yuri finally looked up, realization flooding her features. "I… I did," she said softly.

Feigning a sympathetic cringe, Rumpelstiltskin leaned in and brought his mouth close to Ayato's ear. "Em-pty means she drank the po-tion…" he singsonged.

Ayato felt sick. There was only so much he could look past, so much he could explain away.

She had thrown her wedding ring at him and disappeared into the storm. She had come home, drenched and tear-stained. She had left him that Sunday night with only a letter on the table. Refused to get the rest of her possessions herself, refused to answer his calls, refused to acknowledge him any further.

And somewhere along the line, she had traded the locket he'd given her – for a potion to wipe his entire existence from her memories.

Because he'd broken her heart. Which meant he still had her heart in the first place.

And that meant he'd been drastically mistaken in his interpretation of what had happened between them the night of the concert. He wracked his memories, going over them with a fine-toothed comb. If she had loved him…

"You…" She'd looked up at him with anticipation, not unease.

"Hence the part where you scrambled off of me." She wasn't mocking him, she'd felt rejected.

"I didn't realize you hated me that much."

It was this line. This line that had stuck with him for so many months. This line that had bothered him the most. At first he'd thought she was just being melodramatic, making a scene and throwing things for effect.

Then she'd run out into the storm just to get away from him. She'd moved out of the house two days later just to get away from him. She'd left Mizuzaka by December just to get away from him.

Deep down, he always knew he'd driven her away.

But then – was this choice so easy for her that she'd been able to make it in two months? His mother wouldn't even leave his father after decades of cruelty, and Yuri could just decide to fetch herself a goddamn potion to forget about him in a matter of months? Or was it weeks?

He couldn't get the thought out of his head – she drank a potion to forget him. If Rumpelstiltskin was to be trusted, she'd heard the side effects. She knew exactly what she was doing. She traded her anniversary locket as payment, because she wouldn't need the reminder anymore, because she would get rid of all the other reminders as well.

She probably burned the pictures that Ryou and Sunohara had fetched for her. He wouldn't put it past her. Apparently he couldn't even put it past her to burn the memories from her head.

All along he'd been so concerned for her, so furious at this despicable magic man who'd randomly put a spell on her to specifically forget him. Only to find out she'd done it herself.

She'd wanted him out of her head. She'd chosen to erase his existence.

"If it's your potion, then reverse the effects," Otonashi said from behind him, breaking the heavy
silence that had come over the group.

Rumpelstiltskin glanced in his direction with interest, as if suddenly remembering he was there.

"Reverse the effects?"

"The magic," Hinata said sternly. "Undo it. There has to be a way."

Rumple stared blankly at them.

"There's nothing I can do," he said, and began to pace the bridge once more. "Nothing that can cure what she's got. The potion took away all her memories and her love for him. The Yuri you knew is gone, and there's only one thing that can bring her back."

"Oh yeah? What's that?" Fujimaki asked, narrowing his eyes.

"It's true love's kiss."

The entire group – minus Ayato and Yuri – flinched with a startled cry, gawking at Kanade like she had grown a brand new set of angel wings and a harmonics clone, or even accepted Rumpelstiltskin into the Battlefront just now.

"No offense, Kanade, but this isn't exactly a fairytale," Hinata muttered, rubbing the back of his head.

"Oh no, she's absolutely right," said Rumpelstiltskin, turning to him with another vague theatrical gesture. "An act of true love can break any curse."

Otonashi frowned thoughtfully. "So, if Naoi kisses her—"

"It won't work."

The Battlefront turned to look at Yuri, who had lifted her head again but still refused to meet anyone's eyes. She scowled out over the water, arms folded tightly across her chest. Hinata, Yui, Shiina, and Fujimaki backed away slightly, like the anger radiating from the woman had burned them. More concerned than afraid, Otonashi and Kanade stayed where they were.

Softly, Kanade ventured, "Why not?"

Ayato scoffed at the Angel's naïveté and her unnecessary comforting hand on Yuri's shoulder. The answer should be quite plain by now; it certainly was to him. "Because it's not true love."

"Why not?" Otonashi pressed.

Yuri brought her cold gaze to Ayato, eyes set in a hardened glare. "Because I don't love him."

He glared back at her. What right did she have to be angry about all this? It was like Rumpelstiltskin said, nobody forced the potion down her throat.

"That much is clear," he muttered. "I was right. You're not who I thought you were."

Her expression darkened. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"The woman I loved never would've taken that potion if she still cared about me, not with full knowledge of what I've been through!" he snapped, meeting her head-on. "Your amnesia is your own selfish fault."
"Who says I even want to remember you?" Yuri said crisply, jabbing a finger in his face. "I wouldn't do something like this unless you gave me a damn good reason!"

"Divorce is a terrible reason! Why didn't you just grow up and get over your pathetic heartbreak like an adult?"

Yuri recoiled with an indignant gasp, backing up a couple of steps. Her sharp emerald eyes widened with anger – and perhaps hurt, though at this point he doubted she was capable of feeling such a human emotion.

"And to think," she managed through gritted teeth, "all this time I thought that you… that I had…" Groaning, she clutched her forehead in frustration. "God, I feel so stupid!"

"Drinking that potion was stupid!"

"Really? Because I'm starting to think it was the smartest thing I've ever done." She pressed her lips together, frowning at him contemplatively, then held a clenched fist to her heart. "I loved my brother and sisters, so I held onto my memories of them for a long time, even when they were painful."

He faltered. That was true; one of the most notable qualities of Yuri Nakamura was her stubborn inability to let the past go. It was likely for that reason she had still been in love with him. But then, she had sure seen fit to let go of the anniversary locket he'd given her. And all of her mementos. And Mizuzaka. Just so she could properly let go of him.

Sucking in her cheeks, she leaned in so close he could see the flare of her nostrils and the fire in her eyes.

"I was right about one thing. You must have been worth forgetting."

Ayato felt like he'd been slapped. No — more like she'd shoved her fist into his chest, clamped onto his heart and twisted, then ripped it out of his body and squeezed with all her strength until it crumbled into dust.

Well, then. At least she'd finally come out and said it.

"You've just been trying to get me to remember you because of that God complex of yours, haven't you?" Yuri challenged, poking him in the chest. "It was nothing more than your desperate need for attention, and power. Well let me tell you something, Naoi, I never want to remember you. So don't even think of using your hypnosis to make me kiss you."

Outrage clawed at his chest, then his throat, making it hard for him to breathe. So they were back to that, then? It was offensive enough that she thought he was so foolish as to believe such a thing would work, but for her to still believe he would even do that to her in the first place…

"As if I would lower myself to such practices," he spat, resentment and irritation burning painfully at the back of his head. "Keep your amnesia! I have no interest in rescuing weak little damsels in distress such as yourself."

Her eyes flashed dangerously. "I assure you, I am not—"

"ENOUGH of your bickering!" Rumpelstiltskin barked, startling them into silence. He looked far less amused by this situation than he used to be.

Ayato fumed quietly. Yuri might've chosen to drink the potion, but that reptilian scum had dangled the carrot in front of her face. Among other things. That thief had played his part in this. But for what
reason?

To his and Yuri's surprise, Rumpelstiltskin reached out – and swiped the beret right off her head.

"Don't you recall? Everything comes with a price! Including information, and wasted time." He revealed his wrist and tapped the glass of a familiar watch with a sharp, dirty fingernail, sneering as Ayato growled warningly in chorus with Yuri's yelp of indignation. "If either of you two lovebirds need me, if you change your mind… you know how to find me."

With one last grating giggle, the magic man vanished into thin air.

Ayato let out an annoyed breath. He knew his mind hadn't been playing tricks on him that night. Good riddance – that man was fooling himself if he thought they would ever want to see his crocodile smile around here again.

Sighing resolutely, he turned back to Yuri with a frown. She was feeling around on her head for something she clearly knew wasn't there anymore, a dull look in her eyes. If he didn't know any better, he might feel bad for her.

"On top of everything, my beret is gone." Yuri darkened her gaze as it settled on him. "This is your fault!"

"Oh, is it?" Ayato scoffed, matching her glower as he hunched forward slightly. "What did I do in all this? Break your heart? You're the one who emptied it."

She bit her lip, swallowing hard. He had her and they both knew it.

"You drank that potion. You took away your love." He leaned in until he could feel her shallow breath on his lips. But he wouldn't dare go further, knowing what her own lips had touched. "It's your fault that you're just a hollow, loveless shell of the person you used to be."

An emotion that could once again be misconstrued as hurt flashed across her features, and she pulled back once more. Maybe he really had offended her. Maybe he wanted to. Maybe if that stupid potion hadn't eliminated all her pain, she deserved to feel what was left of it.

After all, he shouldn't be the only one dealing with this.

That vindictive little wench.

There was a long, persisting silence, then Yuri breathed out harshly through her nose and balled her hands into fists at her sides. Her stare was as empty as he imagined the potion bottle to be. As empty as it was when she first "met" him.

"This operation is over," she snapped. Pivoting on her heel, she breezed past him and headed across the bridge. "We're done here."

Another voice called from the opposite side of the bridge, "Yurippe, where are you going?!"

"Home!" she yelled over her shoulder.

Ayato felt a sudden rush of déjà vu, which infuriated him even more as he watched her storm off.

"Go on, Nakamura! Leaving is what you're good at!" he yelled after her, following her with his eyes as she stepped off the bridge. "Maybe you should call my mother and give her a few tips!"

His words made her slow, then stop, and she swung around to look at him. Standing there on the dirt
path, the sun glinting on the top of her hair and giving it an angry red glow, she sized him up from afar.

And then she said, in a cold voice, "Well, you're just a chip off the old block, aren't you?"

The phrase felt like a shard of broken pottery impaled through his stomach, twisting his innards and gutting him mercilessly. His heart froze up along with his blood, yet still it was pounding hard, and he could feel the same pounding in his head. Everything felt like ice, except for his throat, which burned and thickened with nausea.

Yuri Nakamura never compared him to his father. *Never.*

Who the hell did she think she was?

Satisfied with his silence, she turned again – and hurried down the path until she disappeared into the forest. Ayato watched her go, breathing heavily, his stomach turning over and over as pain and anger rammed into it along with his head, his heart, his lungs…

Someone cleared their throat. It finally registered that he wasn't the only one Yuri had left behind on this bridge. Taking a deep breath, he turned to properly face the rest of the Battlefront. They didn't look too pleased with him.

God, his head hurt so much.

Although he held it off as best he could, Ayato damn well got an earful when he got home.

Every single one of them, excluding a quiet Kanade, gave him the third degree on the trek back to his neighborhood. He refused to give either of them anything but clipped responses — not even Otonashi — and walked as fast as he could ahead of the group. Damn Yui and Hinata for being leggy and athletic!

Hinata and Otonashi seemed to give up for a couple of minutes, muttering things quietly to Fujimaki and the girls that he didn't care to eavesdrop on. Then, as they neared the house and saw the front door wide open and Yuri's car gone, they immediately started up again.

Apparently, Yuri had remembered where the spare key was and had let herself in. She'd grabbed her bag from the hall closet and left, but not before unleashing some classic Nakamura wrath. She'd knocked the shoebox off the coffee table, spilling the pictures and rings all over the floor.

Now Otonashi, Hinata, and Fujimaki were not letting him hear the end of it.

"You told us it was mutual!" Hinata growled, pacing restlessly around the TV room. "You said she wanted the divorce just as much as you did!"

"And she gave me *no* reason to believe otherwise!" Ayato shot back defensively. He started towards the kitchen, but Fujimaki grabbed his shoulders and spun him back around to face him.

"She moved out in days and fled town without telling you!" Fujimaki's grip tightened as he shook him by the shoulders. "Good God, man! Read between the lines!"

Ayato shoved him hard in the chest, pushing him towards Hinata with a snarl. "You keep your hands off of me!"

He burst into the kitchen, furiously opening and slamming the cabinet doors. Just as he suspected,
she'd taken off with the Key coffee. Apparently Rumpelstiltskin's thieving ways had rubbed off on her. There were spilled coffee grounds on the counter, likely left there out of spite. Hissing angrily, he swept his hand across the counter and knocked the mess into the sink.

"I should have known," Hinata said darkly, hovering in front of the pass-through. When Ayato turned to him with a questioning frown, he continued, "I gave you the benefit of the doubt, especially when I realized how you felt about her—"

"What?!"

"—but I knew there was more to it when Yurippe mentioned crying alone outside." Hinata gave him a death glare. "It was never the song and you know it."

"Of course it was the song," said Ayato, feeling particularly spiteful as he fetched a drink out of the fridge. Yui certainly wouldn't be coming in for one anymore. "You heard her sniveling about it on the way to Kyuuya."

He wouldn't pretend he hadn't seen Yui and Shiina rifling through the hall closet. They'd come in to take their verbal shots at him, then gone outside after fetching everyone's travel bags and hadn't come back in. He could see them outside through the glass of the windowpanes by the door, sitting on the front porch with Kanade and hovering over the phone in her hands.

"It wasn't the song, Naoi," Otonashi said firmly. "You made her cry. She probably associates the song with the pain she felt when you broke her heart."

Ayato purposefully ignored the wretched twinge in his chest, and popped the top off his drink. Wasn't Otonashi supposed to be the smart one here? Or did he take one of those ridiculous magic potions and forget what they'd learned today?

"But that's impossible, Otonashi. She erased her pain," he reminded him. He took a sip and grimaced. It left a bitter taste in his mouth, so he hurled it at the sink in disgust. "Just like she erased me!"

"Fair is fair, Naoi," Fujimaki said gruffly, leaning against the wooden frame of the kitchen doorway with his arms crossed. "You told her she meant nothing to you, so she made you nothing to her."

"How is that fair?!" Ayato demanded, glaring at him in astonishment. "How are you all seriously defending her petty decision?"

"Because maybe she didn't want this to happen," said Otonashi, always one of Princess Yuri's most loyal subjects. "Maybe that was the reason she moved, because she didn't want to hurt you!"

"Oh, my mistake, how considerate of her!" Ayato put a hand to his heart, not even trying to thinly veil his sarcasm. "She removed me from her memories, and then to make up for it she decided to never see me again!"

Hinata slammed his hands on the shelf of the pass-through, making Ayato flinch and throw him a warning look. Yuri's parents might have paid for this house but he would have to handle repairs.

"It means it was never about you!" he snapped. "She didn't want you to find out! She just wanted to stop loving you!"

Pushing past Fujimaki, Ayato re-entered the TV room and swept a disbelieving look at his critics. He reserved the most disappointed one for Otonashi, but especially shook his head at Hinata.
"Time – heals – all – wounds!" he said sharply, hitting his fist against the wall for emphasis. Then he pointed a finger at Otonashi. "You're a doctor! You should know this!"

"So does medicine," said Hinata, before Otonashi could speak up.

Ayato was outraged. Him and his smart mouth! He just kept running it! He had a response and a defense for everything, did he? Of course he did, since he was Yurippe's best friend and all, cofounding the Afterlife Battlefront together. What more could Ayato expect from him?

"I can't believe I thought you'd ever be on my side," he hissed. Hinata faltered at that, looking almost troubled. At the moment, Ayato didn't care. "Why am I the only bad guy here? Why do you defend Yuri on everything, even for doing something as foolish and insensitive as this?"

"Maybe we trust Yurippe's judgment a little more than we trust you."

With a scowl, Ayato spun towards the kitchen doorway. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

Fujimaki shrugged, unruffled.

"Yurippe's smart decisions in the Battlefront were why we stood behind her and called her our leader. Everything she ever did was to protect us, to leave as many unhurt as she could." He raised a judgmental eyebrow in his direction. "And you… I mean, I really wouldn't put it past you to hypnotize her into kissing you."

Ayato snarled viciously and tried to lunge at him, but the other two quickly reacted. Hinata grabbed hold of one of his arms and Otonashi grabbed the other.

"You should probably go," Otonashi said, tightening his grip as Ayato struggled against his restraints.

"Please," Fujimaki snorted. "What's that little shrimp going to do to me?"

"Hypnotize you into jumping into the river?" Hinata quipped.

Fujimaki froze, and there was a brief flicker of fear on his face as he registered Hinata's deadpan suggestion. Then he headed down the hall to the foyer with a dismissive wave. "Alright, later."

The front door closed behind him. Only then did Otonashi and Hinata release Ayato from their hold. Still, growling under his breath, he glared angrily at the door. He couldn't believe he had to share a town with that imbecile.

To think, if he had moved here six months ago, Yuri could have run straight into his arms like she had done today. Then Yuri never would have taken that vile forgetting potion and she would have gotten over him. She would still have her love, and she would have paraded it around Mizuzaka. And Ayato still would have hated everything. Fate was cruel any way you sliced it.

Otonashi and Hinata were still standing behind him, hovering over each shoulder. Their arms were folded when he turned to them, like he had done something wrong. Like he wasn't completely justified in trying to punish Fujimaki for his slander. It only fueled his ire more.

When Fujimaki had insinuated that he was likely to hypnotize Yuri into giving him his way, in that moment Ayato hadn't wanted to hypnotize him into a fish. He had wanted to punch him in the face. He wanted to knock him to the ground as he had done with NPCs. It was a violent urge he was admittedly grateful they didn't let him give into, because it would have made him exactly like Kimito – a "chip off the old block," so to speak. But remembering that just made him furious again.
"I know why you didn't let me get him," said Ayato. Unclenching his fists, he pointed a finger accusingly at the two of them. "You were siding with him too! Admit it!"

Frowning, Otonashi shook his head. "We just didn't want anyone else to get hurt."

"Who else is hurt except me?!" Ayato demanded, teeth gritted. "Certainly not Yuri! She relieved her pain, she can't remember any of it! She is just fine!"

Only he was hurt in this situation, but that clearly didn't matter to them. Yuri could flee to Noroi with no repercussions and no qualms, she could run away from their friends and their interrogations, but he had to just stand here and take it. He had to remember and feel everything.

"Bull shit," Hinata snapped. "Didn't you see her face? She was devastated!" He took a threatening step forward. "I'm starting to think we got a glimpse of what happened that night. You just can't ever let her down gently, can you?"

"So you just tuned out everything she said to me, is that right?" Ayato squinted at him angrily. "If she's so devastated, she can go take another potion!" He laughed then, a scoff bitter on his tongue. "You heard Rumpelstiltskin. She knows how to find him."

But presently, the snide comment started eating away at him. He knew how to find the imp only because Yukine had tipped him off. How would Yuri know...? How had she known to seek him out for the potion in the first place? She couldn't have asked Yukine all the way in Kyuuya—

Otonashi’s cell phone buzzed in his pocket. He dug it out and checked the screen.

"Kanade says they still haven't been able to get Yuri on her phone," Otonashi said, reading the text with a worried look. "They've tried a million times from Kanade's cell phone and Yui's, and she just won't answer."

Ayato rolled his eyes.

"Of course she won't answer her phone! She's driving," he stressed, as if talking to a child. A pang of guilt told him not to speak this way to Otonashi, but he was damn sure Yuri must have mentioned something to him about her past by now. "She may have monstrous road rage, but she refuses to talk on the phone while she's behind the wheel. Careless driving, snow or otherwise, is offensive to her!"

"Oh—" Otonashi started to say.

"So stop acting like I've broken her heart all over again!" Ayato's voice was hoarse with rage. "She's just embarrassed because I called her out for what she was!"

A hollow, loveless shell of a woman. An impulsive, selfish, spoiled princess who always ran away from her pain while somehow simultaneously letting it consume her. What the hell did she know about pain?

He glowered at her two lackeys he called friends.

"Get it through your thick heads – she doesn't care. She doesn't care about me."

Despite what they'd learned today – especially because of what he'd learned today – she never did. He made the mistake of glancing up, and Hinata was staring at him with the exact same horrible
card-reading look he'd given him when he dropped him off at his car in Noroi a week ago. He hated that look.

"And what about you?" Hinata asked, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

Ayato tightened his jaw – he hated that look so much. "What do you mean?" he said through gritted teeth, knowing exactly what he meant.

"Do you love her?"

Something withered in his chest and pinched at his lungs, compressing them. He struggled to ignore the ache, but his breathing felt heavy and irregular. He hated this question more than the look. Hinata was just as bad as Kanade.

Regaining his composure, Ayato scowled even deeper. "How can I love someone who would willingly reject my existence?"

"That didn't answer my question!" Hinata persisted, leaning forward dangerously. "I asked, do you love her?"

Ayato's eyes glowed a warning. "Ask me again, I dare you."

"Do you love her?!"

Third strike for the idiot baseball boy. Heat pooled at the back of his head, quick and at the ready, as Hinata's eyes unwillingly latched onto his. The keening whine that picked up into an annoying ringing buzz was worth his stunned silence.

"You love the front door," Ayato hissed, and gestured grandly down the hall. "Go on, throw yourself into your true love's embrace!"

Obedient, Hinata charged mindlessly towards the foyer with a wild, infatuated determination. Ayato followed to the hallway in sadistic interest. He would have finally become the battering ram he was born to be if Otonashi hadn't rushed in front of him at the midway point and caught him in his arms.

"Hinata, do not throw yourself at the door!" Otonashi shouted, sounding surprisingly stern and authoritative. More so than usual, that is. As Hinata shook himself out of his daze, Otonashi's booming voice had a severe glare to match. "Naoi, that's enough! You can't use hypnotism to solve all your problems!"

Ayato flinched at Otonashi's scolding tone, then recovered enough to snarl, "Just get out! Both of you!"

How dare he take sides! How dare they always take everyone else's sides! Even after he had been recruited, it was always him versus them!

Assenting, Otonashi turned around and dragged Hinata with him to the foyer. But before he walked down the aisle to his true love, Hinata chanced a dirty look over his shoulder at Ayato.

"Jackass!" he barked.

"Toilet paper!" Ayato shot back.

The door opened and slammed behind them. He stormed back into the TV room, searching heatedly for something to throw. Then the toe of his shoe stepped on something hard on the floor. Glancing
down, he realized he was standing amongst the wreckage of the shoebox. Underneath his foot was a familiar framed photograph. He bent over and picked it up, studying it for a second.

Yuri – his wife, Yuri – smiled up at him while wrapped in the arms of her loving husband. The man in the picture looked endlessly, blissfully happy, a look on his face like he'd finally gotten married to the love of his life.

Ayato hurled the frame across the room as hard as he could. It smacked against the wall perpendicular to the couch and shattered the glass into pieces.

Then he threw himself face-first onto the couch and screamed.

---

**Preview:**

"I should have seen this coming."

"She wouldn't have known if you hadn't shown her how!"

"It wasn't enough!"

"Were you so convinced I deserved this?"

"Ignorance is bliss."

"You're of no help to me."

"We both know what pushing out love does to a person."

[Chapter 26]: **Guilt.**
It was ominously dark, but he had never felt more illuminated.

He had fallen into a strange sense of consciousness, as if he’d been having an out-of-body experience and now his spirit had very abruptly dropped into place. All around him, there was little light... but Yuri, lying underneath him, was so clear she might as well have been glowing.

His mind had reached a state of baffling lucidity. It was so surreal, his senses couldn't handle it. Everything was happening too much, shifting back and forth between clarity and chaos. This must have been how Kanade had felt with one hundred personalities inside her head. A swirling storm inside where everything and nothing made sense. He just wanted one thing – one stable thing – to make sense. One thing to placate his warring minds.

Yuri. Yuri was common ground.

"You," he heard himself saying, and when she murmured it back in quiet disbelief, this scene started to feel achingly familiar.

He felt keenly aware of her body against his, her wine-colored hair splayed out on the couch, her chest rising and falling in anxious breaths. Her eyes were wide but glazed, and he had the vague suspicion that she was trying to hypnotize him.

She angled her neck in such a way that made him look at it longingly. The purple marks on her throat – he had done those, and she had let him... and maybe she would let him do it again.

Their eyes met briefly, hers searching his with just as much intrigue. She licked her lips and his brain short-circuited. For a blissful moment the war inside his head died down and all he knew was that he wanted her...

And then he was watching the scene from a distance, as if the short-circuiting had simply split him into two beings. He looked on from a corner of the room just as Ayato was leaning in, and he registered the sight before him... He was succumbing to her, as if her leader-like charm had lured him back in under her reins. As if he could ignore everything they had and hadn't been.

The room flickered and hazed like an illusion. He looked on, staring in odd fascination at what was about to happen. The sheer passive acceptance... Somehow, from this angle, he could see real love in Yuri's eyes. And Ayato... Ayato was really going to do it.

It wasn't like before. He looked less conflicted, more content. His nose brushed against Yuri's.

What was happening? Could he really accept this life's happiness just like that? With her of all people?! He felt a sharp surge of confusion and anger; clenching his fists, he glared out the window in anticipation.

Lightning cracked almost instantaneously, with a rumble as monstrously thunderous as his frustration, so blinding and loud that it knocked both Ayatos back. The whole room shook from its intensity. Ayato fell off the couch and stumbled to the corner opposite him.

Yuri stood up too. He met her in the middle, and they began to argue. Senseless bickering for a senseless situation. Yuri stammered meekly, something he hadn't noticed before. He snarled in her face, and she recoiled and went silent. Relentless, Ayato stood there and told her in no uncertain terms that their love and anything that came from it was false and he wanted nothing to do with it.
He felt the seething words forming silently on his own lips. He couldn't stop it.

Then Ayato turned to the window. While he wasn't looking, Yuri's face crumpled. She looked at him despairingly – the real him – as if she could see him, betrayal glistening in her eyes. Before the tears could break, she tugged off the ring and threw it at him. It passed through him like he didn't even exist. And then Yuri was gone.

The door slammed seconds later. Ayato should have followed her to the hallway by this point. Why didn't he go after her? Why didn't he try to stop her?! He glanced towards the spot by the window, but Ayato was gone too. Vanished into thin air.

The room plunged into total blackness, and it was so seeping cold he thought Yuri must have let in a draft. But at once the air around him felt so stifling it was like he was slipping away from himself. When he turned around, two small white orbs glowed at him in the darkness.

They were predatory eyes, unblinking and strikingly familiar. If possible, the shimmering space around them looked even blacker than the rest of the room.

By the time he recognized the shadow, it was too late. It pounced on him, engulfing him entirely and burrowing inward. The shadow's essence was so thick he was choking on it, but there was something more to this monster. It seemed to be bringing his misery to the surface, feeding on it, drowning him in it, and at this point he was certain he'd rather suffocate—

Ayato woke up gasping for air. It was the same room, but the darkness that had fallen wasn't as advanced as in his dream. He was grateful for the one light he'd left on, even though initially it was blinding when he'd pulled himself up from the couch pillow. He sunk back into it with a groan; his head was killing him.

It had been bothering him since the bridge, and started pounding right before Hinata and Otonashi left. Now it was driving him mad. He wasn't sure how he had fallen asleep like this, only that he was in no mood nor condition to move. Still, he hoped he wouldn't fall asleep in this position again.

That dream…

His mind was so masochistic, forcing him to relive that night after all of this. If it had gone the way it did in his dream, the divorce really had been one-sided. Had he truly been so blind?

Then again, Yuri was just that type of woman. Too stubborn to let anyone see her tears, an expert at masking weakness. The more vulnerable she felt, the harder she fought back. He should have seen right through her.

But how could he have, the way she'd blocked him out? As soon as the word "divorce" escaped his mouth, she'd hit him with the Kyogi Rikon papers. There was barely any time for him to breathe, let alone change his mind. If that hadn't assured him she was just as horrified at their union as he was, then—

Ayato closed his eyes, pressing his face deeper into the pillow.

That was just it. He had been horrified, and he had made no effort to hide it. The things he'd said… they were very straightforward. He'd been quite clear on what he wanted and didn't want. She'd just been characteristically fast-paced at fulfilling his demand.

If he'd responded differently that night, they would still be together – probably even with a child on the way. The thought was still mind-boggling. Even with her Afterlife memories restored, even after
knowing who they truly were to each other, she had loved him. Just as his dream reminded him, there was a moment where he'd felt a sense of curious acceptance and almost made a move. A move he now knew with certainty that she would have reciprocated.

If only that damned thunder hadn't…

The thought made him pause. His dream… wasn't exactly a precise replica of that night. Clearly his subconscious had veered off towards the end and tweaked the scene into a more creative interpretation. Another instance of his masochistic mind at work.

The way it played out, it almost seemed as if he'd manifested the thunder and lightning himself. He'd scowled at the window in wait, and lightning obediently struck a moment later. As if he'd caused it to happen.

But why? Why would he cause the lightning?

The answer came to him as quick as the resulting thunder. It was the lightning that had shaken him, that had set him free of his trance. Like a sudden heavy fall, the type people felt when they were safe in their bed about to fall asleep, he had snapped awake and stumbled backward into panic mode. It had interrupted them; it had freed his doubt. Deep down, he must've taken it as a sign. Maybe that was what he'd wanted, a sign that this happiness was false instead of fated.

Was that what the dream meant – that he'd sabotaged himself and his happiness? Did he cause his own misery, and then let depression swallow him up?

…Ridiculous.

He couldn't accept that. This was not all on him. Yes, he'd made a mistake lashing out at her the way he did, but thanks to Iwasawa and their situation at the time he hadn't been in the most stable of conditions. And yes, maybe he was cold to her up until the night she moved out, maybe the last snide comment he'd made before he went to bed had been insensitive enough to warrant an empty house when he awoke. Maybe he pushed toward the disintegration of the marriage.

But from the moment he and the Battlefront found her, it had taken him three days to fall in love with her all over again. Three days. If she hadn't ignored him the way she did, if she hadn't fled Mizuzaka and taken the potion, they easily could've drifted back together sooner. If she hadn't been in such a goddamn hurry…

She hastened the divorce. She left him. She drank that potion, and sabotaged her own heart. There would be no metaphorical dream shadow to swallow him up if she hadn't abandoned him.

He'd tried to call her, he had. Granted, once was to chew her out for sending Ryou and Sunohara to pick up the rest of her things, and the second time was to scold her for trying to get him to come crawling back to her like a subordinate. But the second try, if he was being honest with himself, had been an excuse to hear her voice.

"You must have been worth forgetting."

Now he couldn't get it out of his head, and it made his stomach churn.

He'd caused her pain; there was no arguing with that. He had unwittingly rejected her that night in his attempt to have the upper hand, and when they were both uncertain how to act around each other for the rest of the weekend, he'd shifted back and forth between petty remarks and cold shoulders. So yes, he shut her out first.
But he didn't make her drink that potion. He didn't tell her to go seek out Rumpelstiltskin and use magic to solve her problems. The way he saw it, all magic did was cause more of them.

Was fate so against them? So utterly against them that Yuri would chance upon the concert that destroyed their marriage? That she would somehow find the very man who was powerful enough to get her a forgetting potion? Could they really be that wrong for each other?

It was this kind of vulnerability he'd tried to protect himself from that night. He'd been such an idiot, falling for her this hard, that if he didn't know any better he'd say he belonged in her ridiculous Battlefront.

If he didn't know better. Especially after today.

Thinking about all this worsened his headache. His dream-filled sleep on the couch had been restless and only tired him out more, but the events from earlier had left the TV room in too much of a mess to escape and his bed was a whole staircase away. He didn't have the will or the strength to move.

Not even the sound of the front door opening was a strong motivator. It could be a burglar or one of the Battlefront members coming back to apologize. He was too exhausted to care at this point. They could either kill him or go to hell.

"Naoi, are you home? Sorry for the intrusion!"

Ryou's voice was muffled but distinctive through his pillow. He groaned in dismay with just enough energy to announce his presence, but did not acknowledge her further. In fact, her footsteps approaching made him shut his eyes tighter and bury his head deeper into the cushions.

"I wanted to see if—" A pause, then a shaken gasp and quickened steps. "O-Oh no! Naoi, what happened in here?!!"

Ayato growled and tried to cover his ears with the pillow. He did not need this right now.

From nearby, he heard the sound of glass moving and knew it had to be Ryou picking up the shattered picture frame. He didn't say anything; if she wanted to play with glass, he wouldn't intervene. The last time he helped a girl who cut her finger, it ended in disaster for both of them.

Why was she here? He would think as one of Yuri's best friends, and as her former roommate, Yuri would've told her everything by now. Considering Ryou withheld Yuri's address from him up to the point of hypnotism, surely she had more respect for solidarity than this. He didn't want her here; he just wanted to be left alone.

Unfortunately for him, Ryou's talent didn't appear to be mind-reading. She sighed to herself, closer to the coffee table now, and he heard the unmistakable plunk of a ring dropping into a box.

"I should've seen this coming," she said quietly.

Ayato fumed silently into his pillow. If she was here to start babbling about what she saw in the cards, she could get out now. Considering the circumstances he had extremely low patience for her magical know-how—

And then his eyes shot open.

"It was you," he said, finally raising his head to stare at her.

Ryou paused in the middle of putting scattered photos back in the shoebox and gave him a confused
"You did this." The accusation in his voice grew the more his realization did. "She was living with you. She wouldn't have known if you hadn't shown her how! You did this!"

"N-Naoi, you're not making any sense…" The fearful nervousness of a trembling lip betrayed her.

"YOU!" His patience snapped and left an echo that did nothing for his headache. He was so angry he could barely think in coherent sentences, let alone speak them. "You—Yukine—your friend, she knew how to find Rumpelstiltskin! You and Yukine… you led her to him!"

She'd regressed to squeaking now, at a frequency that did not escape his migraine's notice.

"I'm sorry!" she cried, eyes wide and already watering. "She was my friend — my guest! I-I only wanted to help!"

"Help!" He laughed bitterly. This was one of those instances where he wouldn't be swayed by tears. "If you want to help, you offer food and shelter, not amnesia!"

"I did what I could, but it wasn't enough!" Ryou insisted. "She barely ate. She cried every night. Everything reminded her of you! I… I tried to give her hope, but all she wanted was a way to stop thinking about you."

How ironic that a nurse's words could make him feel so physically sick. The last thing he wanted to hear was how much Yuri had cried because of him… how terrible it was to be reminded of his existence. He clenched his jaw, willing himself to ignore the painful throb in his chest.

"And you," he said slowly, through gritted teeth, "decided that this was the best way? The only way?"

"I—I thought—"

"How could you let her do this?!" He sat up in a rage. His head was already spinning too much, he couldn't even comprehend what had possibly gone through hers when she had the bright idea to send Yuri off to some wizard. "You might as well have bought her the potion yourself! Were you so convinced I deserved this?"

"Yes!" Ryou burst out, taking him aback. "Yes, I did think so! Because all I knew was that I had my best friend holed up in my guestroom bawling her eyes out from a divorce that came out of thin air, after you dumped her and let her fall flat on her face! All I knew was that one day she had a pregnancy test in her hand, and the next she had divorce papers. It didn't make sense—"

"NONE of this has made sense," Ayato spat. He was so tired of Ryou and her little friends bringing that up. "Not since the concert. The one that you told her about."

Ryou reverted to pathetic squeaks again – another sore spot. The noise, although irritating, was the only thing giving him comfort at this point. A fleeting moment of sadistic satisfaction that her conscience was giving her what she deserved.

"If you hadn't told her about that stupid concert, none of this would have happened," he continued, lying back down on the couch. He turned his back to her so he wouldn't have to deal with her weepy eyes. "We wouldn't have heard that stupid magic song. I never would have broken her stupid fragile heart, and she never would have taken your stupid magic potion. That Yuri never would've been so thoughtless."
It was… incomplete, but they wouldn't have known that. They could have been happy. At least he wouldn't be as miserable as he felt right now.

"Ignorance is bliss," Ryou agreed tentatively. Her voice wavered with worry. "But, without your memories… what about the reunion mission? What about the Battlefront?"

"Fuck the Battlefront," he muttered into the cushions. Ryou gasped, and he relished in the scandalized sound. He gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "If you see them, tell them to go die," he added, and laughed sardonically. "They'll know what I mean."

"I won't tell your friends to 'go die,' Naoi."

"Then you're of no help to me." He shifted around on his back, kicking his legs up on the armrest and staring up at the ceiling. "In fact, you've been quite the opposite from the start."

Ryou made a small strangled sound of indignation, but it didn't stop him.

"You told Yuri about the concert," he repeated. "When it broke us up, you had a guestroom ready so she could abandon me. When her heart was broken, you knew just the person who could 'fix' it." He made little quotation marks in the air. "Yuri tells me you even helped her leave town. And then… then you refused to tell me where she'd gone."

"Because she didn't want you to find—!"

"She didn't want me to find her," Ayato finished for her. "Yes, and you were happy to help her keep us apart forever. And then you couldn't even tell me the truth about what happened. Noooo… that was something I had to find out for myself!"

She made more shrill noises, but they were dying down. And laced with distinct traces of shame.

"But I didn't find it out for myself, did I?" The onslaught of bitter sarcasm was at least muting the bile in his throat. "I had to hear it from Rumpelstiltskin as he told her just how painful it felt to love me."

"Naoi, I'm… I'm sorry…"

"You caused all of this," he said, undeterred. "The concert, the potion, everything, I always heard that Fate's a bitch; I didn't know they were talking about you."

Silence. Maybe he'd gone too far.

"What's next for me, Ryou? Are you going to let slip my mother's phone records? Are you going to tell my father about her little trip last week?"

There… now that was delightfully too far.

"You're…" Her voice was quiet, unsteady, but determined. "You're just giving up. Don't—"

Ayato laughed derisively. That was only hurting her case more, reminding him of such a thing. Please don't give up on her the way she gave up on you. That was exactly what Yuri had done. She lost the strength of her love long before she took that potion. In forgetting about him, she had chosen weakness; he had every right to do the same.

"I give up," he said. "This isn't a fairytale, Ryou, and it doesn't have a happy ending. Yuri and I were never meant for one. You sure as hell saw to that."

Through time and space, Kanade and Otonashi were destined at the heart, and Hinata and Yui were
fated through a promise. But the world had made a mistake when it brought Ayato and Yuri together, and something or someone had been trying to fix it ever since.

Call it Fate, Destiny, Rumpelstiltskin… somebody. It didn't matter. Whoever it was, it was time he started listening again.

After a moment, Ryou sighed, and it almost sounded angry.

"I know you feel guilty, but you don't need to take it out on me." He heard her stand up, then drop the shoebox on the coffee table with surprising force. Enough to make the contents loudly jostle in protest. "Fine, you can stay in your emotional purgatory if you want. Even though we both know what pushing out love does to a person."

"Love is a disease," Ayato said over the sound of her footsteps as she walked away. Then, a little louder, "Say, you're a nurse. Perhaps you've heard of a cure?"

She made another strangled sound and her footsteps smacked quicker and more heavily against the foyer. He heard the front door slam, and it made him smirk to himself. How many doors had that tenderhearted jinx of a girl slammed in her lifetime?

Making her angry had been a good distraction. But now she was gone, and his troubles came swarming back around him like the shadow monsters of his dream.

No matter where he shifted the cause, the effect was there staring him in the face. He covered his face with a different pillow than the one under his neck. And involuntarily inhaled its scent. It smelled overwhelmingly of coffee.

He swore under his breath and threw it at the wall. It landed on top of the broken picture frame with a little crunch of glass.

Life was a goddamn mess. He should've stayed behind and ruled the Afterlife.

---

**Preview:**

"I was kind of hoping we could talk."

"I'm barely even your friend."

"The only one pushing you away is you."

"It was a lie."

"What made you fall in love with her this time?"

"You have no idea what that's like!"

"We've had our obstacles too."

[Chapter 27]: **Odd One Out.**
In the days that followed since the incident, Ayato found himself reliving some of those wonderful high points of what he called "the six month absence."

Same scrutiny from his coworkers, who had noticed the change in his desktop background. Yui had included him in the email she sent out with the latest group shot, but he ignored it and reverted the work computer's background to its default purely out of spite. They were whispering again, about him and Yuri. If he heard anything under their breath involving a fight over at the walking bridge he was going to officially file some restraining orders.

Same conflicted concern and disapproval from his boss when he tried to work extra hours. Ogura's resistance to his amount of overtime had always baffled him – what upside down world did this man come from where it was wrong to work with every ounce of strength you had? To use whatever time you could offer? Ayato was giving him productivity, even volunteering it, and all Ogura could think of was his sleep schedule? If Kimito heard of this, he would be rolling in his metaphorical grave.

On that note, at least one thing was different. His mother was fine, and still contacting him. So Ryou hadn't cut off her phone service after everything he'd said, even though he'd practically egged her on at the end. He supposed that was something only he was petty enough to do.

His mother was still asking about Yuri, which told him that either her dear little nurse friend wasn't keeping in touch or she just hadn't said anything. That was probably best, since his mother was looking for good news from the outside world. He'd always hear her cheery voice through the phone, glowing with the mischief of broken rules, simply begging to hear more about his charming friends.

When she asked about them, he couldn't just create a convenient excuse about how busy he was or mention a coworker demanding his assistance. It wasn't like he could just "call her back later." One badly-timed ringtone and the jig would be up. He managed a begrudging but brief description of Otonashi's budding medical career and Kanade's gardening prowess, died a little bit inside when his mother playfully asked if he'd given Fujimaki her number yet, and found masterful ways to change the subject after that.

He didn't know why his foul mood seemed to leak out even when he talked to her. She was, ironically, his only contact with the world outside of work. His only positive means of social interaction since Saturday. No one from the Battlefront had tried to reach out, which only reminded him where their loyalties must lie.

He doubted he'd see them in Mizuzaka this weekend, or any other weekend after that. This almost felt like the custody battle he and Yuri never had. She was their leader, sister, mother, and what was he to them?

Their God, once upon a time… but otherwise, he'd rather not answer that.

The truth was, he pushed working overtime like he did last winter for all the same reasons and more. During the six month absence, he had hated coming home after work more than he had hated coming home from school back in Akuma. He used to have intense pottery training and a spiteful father to look forward to back in his school years. Now all that awaited him was a dark, empty house.

The change had shocked his system in October. He would come home from work to absolutely no lights on as the season got darker, and it had hit him that Yuri always got home before him. The
lights and TV would be on and the house would usually smell like dinner. Without it — without her — seasonal depression had smacked him straight in the face.

But it had just rolled into May, so that shouldn't even be a problem. And yet here he was, wondering if his hypnotism worked on freezing time or even adding more because the last thing he wanted to do was go home to a silence he wasn't sure would be broken anytime soon.

At least at work, he had a purpose. At work, gossip and personal matters aside, he belonged. Nobody was disappointed in him. Nobody was trying to push him out.

Except for Ogura, who was now apparently insisting he take an extended lunch break.

Ogura had pulled this before, starting all the way back in October during the divorce, which perturbed Ayato to think he was already giving off such depressing vibes. He took the break anyway, since his coworkers were still sneaking glances and he decided he'd had enough probing eyes on him for now.

It would be good, after all, to get some lunch at the shokudo restaurant a few blocks away. To show that he wasn't a cryptid or a workaholic as Ryou persistently implied. But then again he didn't have to prove anything to her.

Making up his mind, he walked out of the building and into the warm May air. A lot of people were out and about at lunch hour during this time of year, but the shokudo didn't usually have too huge of a crowd. That was ideal, permitting those who were there minded their own business about him coming alone.

With a resigned sigh, he turned to start heading down the block towards the crosswalk — and found Otonashi standing in his path just a few meters away.

Ayato's mouth opened and closed a couple of times, but he couldn't find any words. He didn't know what to make of the man's sudden appearance, or the way he was looking at him now. His eyes were soft, and he dared a sheepish half-smile as he cut the distance between them.

"Hi," he said.

Ayato frowned at him, uncertain. "What are you doing here?"

Otonashi shifted awkwardly, which validated his suspicions. Even if this was his break as well, Mizuzaka wasn't exactly "in the neighborhood" for him. Why was a doctor (or doctor-in-training) like himself skipping work?

"Are… are you headed to lunch?" Otonashi asked after a pause, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Yeah." He had a feeling he knew where this was going, but he was still caught off-guard to see him here. "How did you know where I worked?"

"I asked Ryou."

Ayato didn't bother to mask rolling his eyes. Of course he did. She'd tell everything to everyone except him. For that matter, he was still peeved and greatly disturbed by Sunohara even mentioning Yuri's fertility.

His eye roll didn't seem to faze Otonashi. "Did you yell at her or something? She seemed kind of—"

"Would that surprise you?" Ayato asked darkly. "As you're well aware, I have a track record of
insensitivity towards women."

Otonashi did a poor job of covering up a wince, and the part of Ayato's conscience that held affection for him desperately warned him not to dig himself into a deeper hole. But a far more bitter part of him wondered why he should feel remorse for making Otonashi feel bad about offending him.

All the same, he breezed past Otonashi down the block. Then he glanced over his shoulder.

"Aren't you coming?"

Otonashi blinked twice, obviously thrown by the mood shift. He was quick to recover. "Ah – yeah! Right behind you."

In dutiful silence, he led the way a few blocks south to the shokudo restaurant. The line wasn't bad, but the tables were occupied and the noise level was a dull roar, which Otonashi seemed to notice as he took a sweeping look at the place.

"Do you mind getting this to go?" he asked. "I was kind of hoping we could talk."

Ayato agreed to it and they got into line. Despite his admittedly rather broody protests, Otonashi paid for both of them. The man behind the register looked at the pair and lifted his eyebrows at Ayato meaningfully.

The implications there startled him – not the assumption itself, but how strange it seemed.

When they were in the Afterlife together, he honestly would have preened at such a suggestion. No one else had held his attention and respect quite like Otonashi did, and he'd wanted more than anything to earn his praises again. To the point of throwing himself on Evil Angel's sword. There was no denying that he'd been a little infatuated with the boy in the Afterlife who'd affirmed his existence.

But it was different between them now. He wondered when he'd outgrown those feelings – what had changed.

He didn't feel like lingering over it, and luckily he didn't have to. Otonashi took his mind off the subject with light conversation as they searched for a better place to eat their food. Mindless work things, stuff they might've talked about over the phone this week, if… if it hadn't been for…

Ayato frowned; he couldn't help but notice what wasn't being said.

This side of Mizuzaka also had a park area fit for walking — not as nice as the one near his house, in his own biased opinion, but the spring sun did it some good. They meandered for a while, then found a small table to sit and eat where it suited Ayato's interests. In other words: out of the way of lunchtime traffic, but populated enough to people-watch with discretion.

Yes, he was allowed to scrutinize other people. They were just too beneath him to earn the privilege of staring back.

"Naoi."

He turned to Otonashi, who was giving him the same soft look from earlier. It reminded him of the last expression he saw on his face before he vanished, except a little different. Fondness, maybe, if he was feeling optimistic… and traces of contrition.
"I'm sorry. For ganging up on you the other day," Otonashi said. "It was a protective big brother instinct, you know?"

Ayato cut his eyes to the side. "I wouldn't know."

"It's… Remember what Hinata said when we found out about the divorce?" Otonashi made his voice sound snappy and gravelly. "'Yurippe's like my sister! You've gotta at least let me kick his ass a little. It's kind of our responsibility. It wasn't easy to hear that she'd been hurt to the point of self-induced amnesia."

He'd appreciated Otonashi's deliberate attempt at a stupid-sounding Hinata impression at first, but the faint grin left as swiftly as it had come. "Well, it wasn't exactly an ego-boost for me either."

Otonashi nodded in understanding. "She hurt you too."

He clenched his jaw tightly, to keep from humiliating himself with a trembling lip. Someone else acknowledging his pain tended to make it feel significantly more… magnified. He'd cried in front of Otonashi twice before and personally wasn't in the mood for a third.

"You both made mistakes," Otonashi continued wisely, finishing some tempura. "It's not fair for us to forgive one and not the other."

"I know why you do," Ayato muttered.

His sullen manner was the only cloudy spot on an otherwise beautiful sunny day. It was a wonder Otonashi was still sitting here and even bothering with him, as if he was worth the effort. This pity visit wasn't fooling anybody. Ayato did a lot of big talk in his Battlefront days but now he knew where he stood.

His companion stared at him for a moment, made a confused protesting noise that fell flat, and looked away with a sigh.

Ayato expected as much.

They continued to eat in silence for a few minutes, leaving him to stew in his conflicted thoughts. Otonashi felt somewhat more human to him, and he wasn't sure how he felt about that. It was easier to put him on a pedestal before, in the Afterlife, when he was keeping Ayato at arm's length and doing brave heroic deeds that changed people's hearts.

He still admired Otonashi, certainly, despite the incident. Despite the renewed distance he felt. The traits he'd valued were still all there – wisdom, bravery, kindness.

But to really see human flaws in him… it was unsettling. Like falling out of another tree.

"Naoi, you know…" Otonashi hesitated, "you're still one of us…?"

He said it like it was a question, as if it astonished him to think Ayato could ever second-guess something like that. The latter raised his eyebrows at him in disbelief.

"Am I?" he said, his tone dreadfully listless.

"Of course!" With the emphatic conviction in his response, coupled by its promptness, Ayato was almost tempted to believe him. "Naoi, why would you—"

"Because Yuri is your leader—"
"And you're our friend," Otonashi interrupted.

"—and she's the one who decides who belongs in the Battlefront." He harrumphed, then, at Otonashi's defense. "I'm not their friend. I'm barely even your friend. If there's one thing Yuri taught me, it's that these things are supposed to be a two-way street."

**Solidarity, remember?**

He shook his head at the memory. Goddamn that voice.

Otonashi's brows furrowed, but his eyes showed a surprising amount of repentance. "I considered you a friend back then too. We all did."

"I wasn't a friend, I was a villain," Ayato countered. "I should have known I was still an antagonist the moment I tried to enter the Anti-Angel Headquarters—"

"Because you refused to say there was no God and got sent flying out the window," Otonashi reminded him, looking amused.

Ayato scowled. "It's not funny."

"That trap happened to me too, you know. You're lucky Yuri even gave you the password beforehand."

He made a disgruntled sound of half-hearted acknowledgement. Fair warning or not, he hated the trap ever since. He still remembered hearing the Battlefront idiots through the open window laughing their asses off.

"Everyone still viewed me as an antagonist... even you," he went on. "When Hinata started fights with me, you would only intervene after I retaliated. When I agreed to Yuri's hypnosis idea, you got angry at me. I gave Ooyama a little push when he was clearly up next and you called me a monster. I told you I was staying to be with you and you told me not to."

These were just a handful of the Battlefront memories that had been keeping him up at night since the incident... the incident that had forced him to drastically reconsider things. People too.

"So forgive me," Ayato said resentfully, "if I don't feel like a friend who belongs."

Otonashi lowered his gaze to the table for a moment. His features had twisted uncomfortably throughout Ayato's speech, even more so when he mentioned Ooyama (Ayato supposed that was kind of a gray area). Then he looked back up and exhaled quietly.

"I won't make excuses, just explanations," said Otonashi. "I wasn't much of a social person until I joined the Battlefront. My sister was the only one I'd really talk to. It took extreme exceptions, like train wrecks — and, you know, death — for me to break out of that shell."

Ayato tried not to appear moved. If this was his explanation, he didn't buy it. Otonashi had been plenty chummy with Hinata and Yui by the time baseball season rolled around.

"Even Hinata was too forward with me at first. I got used to it. It became a running joke." He shrugged, a sentimental grin tugging at his lips. "But you... I didn't know what to do with you. I felt like a petulant baby duckling had imprinted on me."

Ayato's determination to stay angry dissolved, at least long enough for him to burst out laughing. He couldn't even clamp a hand over his mouth in time to stifle the first giveaway snicker. The
description should have been emasculating but he couldn't even stop to breathe, let alone assert his godliness.

"A duckling?! A petulant baby duckling?"

Encouraged, Otonashi was laughing too, red-faced and grinning from ear to ear. "I wasn't ready for children, okay?!

"I can't believe you! Don't ever call me that in front of the others!"

Otonashi was still chuckling about it, but Ayato's own laughter died down after that last bit. Jokes aside, he still doubted his existence would matter to them. He figured the way they'd see it, they weren't that close with him anyway.

Also, did Otonashi just call him clingy?

"I wasn't perfect, Naoi… no one is. It's not that black and white," he said, crinkling his to-go bag. "And you weren't a villain – not after your recruitment. You were just… unconventional."

"Unconventional," Ayato repeated, narrowing his eyes at him.

Otonashi nodded in confirmation. "And disrespectful. Which, I have to say, hasn't really changed."

"Disrespectful…" The denouncement made him snort. "For mind games, harsh words, and violence? You'd think those were the classic qualifications of a Battlefront member."

With a laugh, Otonashi reached over and clapped him on the shoulder. "Now you're getting it!"

Ayato stared at him as if he'd grown twelve heads. Was Otonashi praising him or criticizing him now? Or couldn't he make up his mind?

"Naoi… you've always been one of us," Otonashi said, with a firm sort of gentleness that compelled him to listen. "The only one pushing you away is you."

Upon reflection, Ayato could believe that. He was the one to yell at them to get out, after all. But it didn't take him long to realize this was only optimistic thinking, contagious positivity as a result of Otonashi's visit.

"And Yuri," he noted. Then he lifted an eyebrow at him. "This is different from the Afterlife, Otonashi. You can't honestly expect that Yuri's beloved group of imbeciles would welcome me back with open arms like you did."

Otonashi shrugged. "I got them to recruit Kanade, didn't I?"

A grunt from Ayato. That was under entirely different circumstances.

"And I'm sure Hinata has had some choice words for me this week," he added as an afterthought.

"No more so than usual," Otonashi said with a smile.

He wasn't sure why that made him laugh, but it was also slightly frustrating that Otonashi was being so positive. He didn't know if he wanted to be cheered up. Especially by someone whose life was essentially the stuff of fairytales.

The talk died down for a bit as they ate the last of their meals. It left him to his thoughts, which mainly centered on how different this lunch break had turned out to be. Or even this week. Though
he was inclined to hold a grudge and let the Battlefront withdraw from his life just as Yuri had almost seven months ago, he couldn't deny what Otonashi's gesture meant to him.

It almost made him regret what he'd said to Ryou that night… No, still, fuck the Battlefront – except for Otonashi, of course.

He had a love-hate relationship with solitude. It was necessary sometimes, and he self-isolated, but he didn't want it as a last resort. He didn't like having companionship ripped out from under him. And he hated even more to think that he'd brought it upon himself.

And that was what made him so angry at Yuri. Somehow, she had managed to make him blame himself for the six month solitude and for this one. For the way she abandoned him mentally and physically.

She managed to break his heart and somehow make him feel guilty for it too. But she wouldn't see him drinking a potion for that.

In fact, not that he was petty enough to do it, but with circumstances as they were, he damn well could have gone to Rumpelstiltskin and fetched one for himself without too many consequences.

If it weren't for Otonashi.

Ayato glanced at the man in question, whose gaze had drifted out towards the park's walking path. He was people-watching innocently, with a thoughtful expression on his face. Same softened look in his eyes that he'd seen when Otonashi first showed up at his workplace. He followed his line of sight to a little ways down the trail, where a small family of three was taking a lunchtime stroll.

It was a relatively young couple, maybe just three years older than him or Otonashi. The husband was grinning like an idiot, and Ayato might've described him as bright-eyed if said husband didn't have his vision obscured by two tiny hands. He had his son on his shoulders, a giggling toddler with a mess of black hair like his. The wife was giggling just as much and encouraging the little boy's mischief.

"Don't worry, he'll be your eyes," she said as the couple passed their table.

"Easy for you to say! He's already got yours."

For a moment, Ayato watched them curiously. Was that the same family he'd seen at the restaurant during his and Yuri's third anniversary dinner? The son had certainly grown, but his shrieking laugh was the same. It was surreal to see them again, like an artifact from a different time, when so much had changed.

Shaking his head, he turned back to the table and returned to his food. Otonashi's attention lingered just a little longer on the family, and Ayato was tempted to wave a hand in front of his face to break the spell. That little kid must be dangerously cute or something.

Finally, Otonashi glanced away with a wistful smile. Ayato decided not to call him on it, but really – someone had petulant ducklings on the mind.

Later, as Ayato was finishing his food, Otonashi spoke again.

"Listen, I hate to ask," he said, which didn't sound like a promising way to begin. "Especially with the way you reacted to Hinata, but…"

Son of a bitch.
"Do you… love Yuri?"

Ayato clenched his jaw. He couldn't help it – he glared at Otonashi, curling a lip disdainfully.

Otonashi grimaced, then recovered. "I mean… did you?"

The correction only mollified him a little. But he knew that it wasn't a hostile question when it came from Otonashi. The truth was, when Hinata asked, he didn't know what to think. And now… well…

"It was a lie," he said with finality. "Just like the first time – a lie of omission. It was a deceptive love."

Otonashi looked thoughtful. "So you fell in love with her, but you wouldn't have if you'd known she'd done this to herself."

He managed a nod. This conversation was already draining him.

"But wait," Otonashi said, tapping his chin, "what made you fall in love with her this time?"

"Otonashi…" he groaned, then cringed. That sounded so whiny!

"Tell me."

Even louder groan. Just because Otonashi was playing nice with him didn't mean it was any easier to articulate his feelings for Yuri.

It had been… a lot of things. Her laughter when he hypnotized Hinata, the occasional evil glint in her eye, the way she teased people, how simple it still was to talk to her about things like his father, knowing he could trust an amnesiac even when she saw him as a stranger, the compassion she had behind all that charming malevolence…

Otonashi folded his arms on the table. "Fine, then tell me this. Was it anything about her that changed when you found out about the potion?"

Ayato glared some more.

"Well, the trust part has sure as hell taken a blow," he said spitefully. "And then there's strength. Love. Compassion. Bravery. Consideration for other people and their pasts!"

Otonashi opened his mouth and then closed it, not having any words of wisdom this time.

"She abandoned me, Otonashi!" he snapped. "She left town so that she could magically erase me from her mind. She purposefully made it so I had never existed!"

Passersby picked up the pace. He didn't care – no one in this town mattered to him.

"When she left, this place became a cold, cruel, hellish purgatory." He crinkled up his bag in restless anger. "I was alone. Because she disappeared without a trace. Because she only thought about her own happiness! She didn't think about what it would do to me!" He threw the bag at a nearby garbage bin. "You have no idea what that's like!"

Otonashi raised an eyebrow but remained silent.

The way his friend's mouth had twitched, as if in concealed amusement, only agitated Ayato more. His situation was laughable. Horribly laughable. Unrequited love mixed with magic? It was one of the best jokes he'd ever heard.
"Go ahead and laugh." He stood up and started pacing around the table. "Here's something that just makes me laugh so hard I might cry. Stop me if you've heard this one. You and Kanade are the most blissful married couple I've ever seen. Hinata and Yui have gotten married too, just as promised, but they are both blatantly having some sort of emotional affair with Shiina and it's somehow the one thing they aren't even fighting about!"

Otonashi blinked, and interrupted with a frown, "I don't think—"

"You live in the same town as them! How can you not be seeing it?" Ayato said impatiently. He started counting on his fingers. "So we've got Otonashi and Kanade as the happily married couple living the perfect love story, Hinata and Yui married to each other and also dating Shiina and apparently it's no big deal…"

He turned back to Otonashi for the grand finale, slamming his hands on the park table.

"And then there's Naoi and Yuri, the love story that fucking imploded," he finished in a hiss. "The story where everything went wrong, everything went to shit."

Where even when it got rewritten, the only ending was heartbreak.

Otonashi stared at him, almost contemplatively, for what felt like endless minutes. He was looking him up and down, his expression darting back and forth between sympathy and thoughtfulness.

Then he furrowed his eyebrows. "You think Kanade and I have lived the perfect love story?"

Ayato gaped at him in sheer disbelief. That was the only part of his rant that he wanted to focus on?

"You two are heartmates," he managed to say after he'd regained his composure. "You were bonded by a heart in your past life. You found her and fell for her in the Afterlife. And you found each other again in this life. Clearly you two are destined for each other. You have it so easy."

Otonashi laughed, shaking his head.

"It hasn't been that easy," he said with a smile. "We've had our obstacles too."

"No offense, Otonashi, but I don't think arguments about which curtains to buy count as obstacles. Considering the scale of things."

With another good-natured chuckle, Otonashi patted the park table.

"Sit down, Naoi. Let me tell you a story or two."

Ayato hesitated, but after a moment he obediently sat back down across from him. This had better drive him to tears.

---

**Preview:**

"All alone in that world."

"I wonder if he's still there."

"You talk about her condition so easily."

"There are always bumps in the road."
"Nakamura isn't interested in remembering."

"And you?"

[Chapter 28]: Parted.
Otonashi told him exactly what he'd missed out on when he left the graduation party early. Yuri had been the next to leave not long after him, which was surprising. He had imagined that as leader she would be either the first or the last to leave. He'd opted out immediately so he didn't have to see or hear her tearful goodbye speech (which had apparently gone to Kanade).

Hinata had insisted on going next, even though Otonashi had offered ("Don't leave Kanade behind," he'd protested). Otonashi would later thank him a million times for enforcing this, for reasons that would be soon revealed. Left alone, Otonashi and Kanade had gone outside to spend a little more of the morning together. That was when he told her how he felt. Her response? Nothing but silence.

Boohoo, Ayato had wanted to say. Still not as bad as you must have been worth forgetting. But obviously, the story wasn't over.

Kanade told him why she was reluctant to reply. She had come to the afterlife to thank him for extending her life. She'd guessed it was him when they first met and she stabbed him in the hollow chest ("It's okay, she was just doing what I told her to," Otonashi had hastily explained to an aghast Ayato). He regained his memories from listening to her heartbeat when she was in that coma, because it was his own. And that meant she could finally fulfill her one regret.

"I told her I loved her. She thanked me. And she was gone," Otonashi said softly. "Vanished while she was still in my arms. Then it was just me."

"Just you," Ayato repeated, numb except for the goosebumps on his arms. "All alone in that world."

That was one of the worst fates he could think of. Being alone in the Afterlife, left behind, without the person he loved.

"But… you moved on," he pointed out. "You found her again."

"Not right away," Otonashi told him, smiling despite himself as a little girl ran squealing down the park trail chased by her mother. "Losing Kanade was hard for me – you know the feeling. My emotions got all mixed up, unstable. It tied me to that place. I needed some way to clear my head. I stayed for a while, became the student body president—"

"Wait a minute, aren't you a little older than me?" Ayato interjected. "You stayed that long… How does that work?"

Otonashi shrugged.

"How did Kanade get there before I did?" he said. "How is Iwasawa not a decade older than us? Time is either really weird down there, or reincarnation, even fate, doesn't play by our rules."

Ayato motioned for him to go on.

"I realized after a while… what I needed to do to make me want to move on." He played restlessly with his wedding ring. "I wanted to go after Kanade, sure. But initially I'd asked her to stay there with me. Because I wanted to make sure there was someone there who could help lost souls. If that couldn't be the two of us, I had to find someone to take my place."

"A human," Ayato considered. "But didn't Yuri say there weren't a lot of them? Not a lot of people like the Battlefront?"
Though now that he thought about it… if humans were that unheard of, there really wouldn't be much of a point to Otonashi staying behind to help them.

"I guess if they're rare, I got lucky," said Otonashi. "One day I just followed the sound of teenaged angst and there was this guy throwing a fit in the middle of a test. He rebelled against me, so I told him where to find me if he needed help. I became his mentor. His name was Maeda…"

A nostalgic grin crossed his face.

"Great kid. Real pain in my side at first, but in the end he became another friend carved into my soul." He leaned back, looking up at the sky in deep thought. "He showed me he could be a strong leader. I wonder if he's still there."

Ayato had to admit, that story was one of the reasons he still admired Otonashi. It was his selflessness that had kept him apart from Kanade for so long. His dedication to leadership and helping people find their way… it made him feel small in comparison.

So he added, rather petulantly, "Then you graduated, gained new life, and found Kanade again. Happy ending." He tried to lean over for a look at Otonashi's phone sitting on the table between them. "What time is it? Aren't you a doctor – shouldn't you be at work?"

Ayato's impatient urge for a subject change didn't offend him. Instead, he smirked sort of wistfully.

"Yeah, that's actually another thing I wanted to talk to you about," he said, self-consciously rubbing the back of his head. "I have this rule about making time for friends and family." He started to get up. "Long story, though, I guess you do have to get back to work soon—"

"Not really," Ayato said quickly, before he could stand. "I'm pretty sure my boss has been pushing the same agenda as you."

With a satisfied smile, Otonashi sat back down.

"Well, as I was saying," he continued on. "Kanade and I did meet again in this life, but I was a slacker and she was student council president. She didn't like me skipping school, and I didn't like some star student scolding me, because I got enough of that with Hatsune…"

---

Otonashi didn't know what to do as he walked home from the hospital that day.

Hatsune had caught an illness recently and suffice it to say it was not meshing well with the cancer. She was doing way worse. It was so hard to see her like this. He would do anything to make her feel better. Except that usually entailed buying her some manga to read, or a coloring book, or bringing in his video games and letting her watch and even play against him.

Today she had told him she didn't want a manga this week. She wanted him to find a tutor.

It was no secret that he wasn't doing well in school… in any of his classes. He told her over and over that studying was not as fun as she imagined it to be. She told him that studying would benefit him in the end, and insisted that learning new things was a joy in and of itself.

He told her when she grew up, she should be a teacher. And then she could be his tutor.

She'd laughed so hard at the thought of him being a thirty year old man in her own class that she thankfully didn't notice how his face had fallen at the mention of her living to be that old.
His sister was so optimistic. Why did she believe in him so much?

How could he ever let her down?

He stared straight ahead mindlessly, feeling the weight of his books in his backpack as he passed building after building. He didn't even know what he wanted to do with his life. Bringing up his grades was hopeless. He was hopeless...

The person leaning against 10Q LL Angel looked like a familiar face, but the thought was fleeting as he walked by. On the other hand, the humming didn't escape him. It was a familiar tune he couldn't put his finger on, and his mind's insistence to make the connection stopped him in his tracks. He turned slightly to listen close. Then, as he spotted the source, her silver hair and fair skin registered in his brain.

The student body president! Kanade Tachibana!

An idea popped into his head, but he had to act quickly. She was closing her phone and starting to walk away. Desperate, he scrambled after her as fast as he could, reached out, and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Tachibana!" Otonashi gasped when she turned around. "Help me!"

"Wait, how could she have known the song then?" Ayato asked. "All those years before the concert…"

Otonashi wasn't fazed by the question. "The same way Iwasawa knew it, I guess. That's what I always figured."

"But I don't recall that I've ever hummed the song in my life," he said, thinking back.

"I think it just affected Kanade in the Afterlife more than it did you," Otonashi said with a shrug. "You weren't all that impressed with it, remember? But Kanade loved it."

That was true. It was a good song, with a strong message. He'd just been too busy making a fuss over the school speakers to appreciate it the first time around.

The second time he heard it, he could safely say it made an impact.

"If that's the case, though, I wonder," Ayato mused, "why knowing and humming it didn't bring back either of your memories at the time."

Otonashi laughed warmly, as if at a funny inside joke.

"Well, as much as Kanade loves to argue for it, just humming the song doesn't do the trick."

To Otonashi's amazed relief, Tachibana had been so surprised and charmed by his heel-face-turn and desperation to do better that she agreed to be his tutor without too much groveling.

She helped him focus on studying and he helped her take breaks. It was a brilliant symbiotic relationship (mutualism, she called it). He never thought this would happen, but Tachibana – Kanade – became his friend so fast his head spun. So did his grades.

Soon, Kanade was even accompanying him on his Hatsune visits. His sister was so eager to meet the tutor who had managed to make her brother smart, while Kanade couldn't wait to know the little...
sister who had gotten him to actually care about school.

Did he mention how hilarious these girls were?

Despite their gentle teasing and ganging up on him, seeing Kanade and Hatsune get along like this made his heart soar. It was nice hearing Kanade talk to Hatsune about high school and her gardening club while he conversed with doctors about his sister's condition. She even started bringing in Hatsune's favorite flowers from time to time. Hatsune would gasp at every single one of them, with a smile that lit up the room. Seeing her so happy made his day that much brighter.

Once, while Otonashi was fluffing Hatsune's pillow, Kanade said something to him that caught him off-guard.

"Maybe you'd like to be a doctor," she told him. When he blinked at her and made a small confused sound, she pointed out how caring he was being with Hatsune. "And just now... you talk about her condition so easily. And you're always observing what the medical staff do for her."

"I don't know," Otonashi said, feeling bashful at the compliments. But maybe he did know. He really liked being able to help her.

"It's a great idea!" Hatsune was beaming as she hugged her newest manga to her chest (now that Otonashi was doing well in school, these were her regular gifts again). "You should do it, bro! You should be a doctor!"

He'd only started improving his grades this year, and they were talking to him about a medical career? Wouldn't that be really hard? It was a little overwhelming... but weirdly enough he meant that in a good way.

Hatsune was practically bouncing in her hospital bed with excitement.

"Dr. Otonashi!" she cried, which made him smile just a little bit. "You could take as good care of people as you do with me! And then you'd make enough money to buy a big house for me, you, and Kanade."

"Wait, what?" Otonashi stammered.

Hatsune's confidence didn't waver one bit. "Because you and Kanade are going to get married someday. Right, bro? You would make a cute couple."

Otonashi choked on air. Kanade merely smiled at him.

After that, Hatsune had been a little more discreet but obstinate about the topic. She raved about how wonderful it would be to have Kanade as a sister, and whenever he came to visit her alone she encouraged him to ask her out. She could tell he liked her a lot. And, well, his sister had always been perceptive.

It was around December when she made another secret gift request. He'd passed along the idea to Hatsune that he could sneak her out for Christmas to see the trees and lights she loved so much. He could almost get his fill of Christmas lights from the joy in her eyes as she squealed her gratitude. But then—

"On one condition," she said, sobering up immediately.

"What's that?"
"Ask Kanade to come with us!"

Otonashi reddened at the fierce grin that crossed Hatsune's face. "Seriously? C'mon…"

Hatsune gave him her most innocent doe-eyed look in return. "You don't want to spend Christmas with her?"

"It's not like that. I just know where your mind is going," he said sternly, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. "Be honest. Is this going to be like a date?"

"A sort of date." When Otonashi huffed, Hatsune grabbed his hand. "You know it wouldn't be the same without her!"

Otonashi sighed, unable to disagree. "She won't like the 'sneaking you out' part."

"She'd do it for us," Hatsune insisted. "I just know it."

"Alright," he said, caving. "I'll ask her."

"Yay! Thank you, bro!"

He was right to take her word for it, because on Christmas evening he found himself taking in the sights of a festive downtown, piggybacking Hatsune with Kanade at his side. The formerly strict student body president's reluctance to violate hospital regulations had been fleeting, and she merely waited outside while Otonashi slipped his sister past the staff. Maybe he'd been a bad influence on her. The thought made him grin even wider as he watched her excitedly point out all the beautiful trees to his similarly dazzled sister.

It was snowing in speckles that night, and their breaths came out in silver clouds. Kanade admired her own, catching snowflakes on her gloves.

"It's very cold out, isn't it…" She glanced over her shoulder. "Are you doing alright back there, Hatsune?"

"Yeah." Hatsune's small voice was muffled against Otonashi's neck. "Everything's so pretty."

"Really pretty," Otonashi agreed, smiling. "By the way, Kanade and I pooled our money together, and we want to get you some presents."

"We'll go wherever you like; you can pick out whatever you want." Kanade grew more and more cheerful with each step, slowing only to look left and right in amazement. "Look, Hatsune, there are so many stores to choose from."

Otonashi hadn't had a Christmas as merry as this in such a long time. Seeing Kanade's eyes twinkle like this...? Hatsune really knew what she was doing when she told him to invite her. Maybe it could be like this every year. The thought of it raised his spirits even more than the Christmas tree straight ahead, which was slowly climbing over the horizon as they walked.

"And after that, we have reservations for dinner. Kanade's parents took her there for her sixteenth birthday, and it's been her favorite restaurant ever since." He was rambling, but he had to talk so he could keep Hatsune awake. Her grip had loosened a bit on his shoulders, and he suspected she was drifting off. "She says they have full course meals. Isn't that amazing?"

"You're going to get so full," Kanade said with a giggle. "Your brother will need help carrying you back."
Otonashi started laughing too; her sense of humor was usually something he never saw coming, but also her laughter was more musical than any Christmas carol he’d ever heard.

"Guys?" Hatsune said wearily behind them. "Thank you."

This earned her a smile from Kanade. "Thank you for inviting me," she said to both of them, though her eyes were on Otonashi.

"It wouldn't be the same without you," Otonashi said honestly (secretly giving Hatsune a little nudge).

He and Kanade shared a grin and pressed forward, chatting all the way down the well-lit streets. Through careful teamwork, tonight had been well planned, and he could feel Hatsune smiling to herself behind his back as he and her "future sister-in-law" took in the Christmas beauty together.

It was only when Kanade asked a question and was met with only whistling air, when she repeated "Hatsune?" until both pairs of footsteps slowed, that he truly felt the winter night's chill.

After his sister's funeral, Kanade was there for him every step of the way. She was perceptive too in her own fashion, and knew this would make him study even harder to get into medical school like his sister wanted. She brought him Key coffee when he needed it and he took her on mapo tofu breaks. One moonlit night, two months after Hatsune died, they were standing right outside the 10Q LL Angel building between the hospital and their favorite restaurant when he asked Kanade to be his girlfriend—

"I'm sorry about your sister, but I don't see how this isn't a peaceful fairytale love," Ayato said, which he hoped wasn't as insensitive as it sounded.

Otonashi nodded. "I'm getting to that."

Kanade did teach him to study and work hard towards being a doctor, but the truth was, she may have done too good of a job.

After high school, they got engaged, but Otonashi kept putting off the wedding. Studying and medical school just made him so busy. He made a promise to Hatsune and Kanade, so becoming a doctor was his top priority. In all his dedication towards that promise, he neglected to prioritize a different one – becoming a husband. Or even being a fiancé.

Two, even three years passed and he was still pushing the wedding date aside because of school and training. That was when Kanade pulled him aside. She thought it was best that they spend some time apart instead of always waiting around for each other. With that in mind, she moved in with a friend, deciding to make the most of her time and life while she let Otonashi work hard on what meant a lot to him.

Otonashi was heartbroken that she left. The only thing that kept him going was the thought that "maybe it's for the best." He was miserable, but resolute in his goal. And so life went on without her. If it really was life.

Then October rolled around. Kanade was still living with her friend Mai. They'd been having great fun together while the season was warm, but as autumn closed in, Kanade was missing Otonashi terribly. When Mai heard about a concert that was happening in Shibuya, she took Kanade with her to cheer her up. Maybe it would make her forget about him for one night.
This concert, however, did just the opposite. That night, she remembered why being a doctor meant even more to Otonashi than he realized. And she remembered why they should be together.

Meanwhile, Otonashi chanced upon Iwasawa's performance on a TV at the hospital and promptly flipped his lid. His very first thought was to call Kanade immediately, but the surge of memories made him so dizzy that his coworkers swarmed him like ants. They made sure he was okay, but after that, they kept him too damn busy to do anything about it.

During that time, doubts filled his mind. Maybe Kanade hadn't seen the concert. Maybe she didn't have her memories back.

Maybe she didn't even want to talk to him.

So he didn't try.

But Kanade sensed deep down that it was possible Otonashi had seen the concert too. Call it a heart's instinct. She decided one day to wait for him at their spot – the 10Q LL Angel store where it had all started. It was between the hospital and the mapo tofu place where they used to go on dates. When he started training and working at the hospital, it became his regular stop during lunch breaks.

Wanting to be subtle, she found herself a hat and wore her hair differently. Then she leaned against the store in wait. As soon as she spotted him in the crowd, she began to hum "My Song." It was a test to see if he remembered and would notice her.

Sure enough, the soft tune tickled his memory and made him freeze. He hesitated, taking a moment to register the song, then turned around. It was Kanade, and she was starting to walk away. He panicked, putting the pieces together and realizing Kanade had heard the concert.

She remembered. She had been waiting for him. And now she was walking away like he had failed her test.

Rushing after her, he reached out and grazed her shoulder just like before…

"I felt so lucky to have her in my life again." Otonashi rubbed his ring finger, a faraway look in his eye. "I'm never going to take that for granted."

The weight of his friend's words wracked his insides with inescapable discomfort. He had known that joy, for about ten seconds in Noroi when she hurled herself out the door into her best friends' arms. He'd thought he was going to know it again back at the bridge when she requested his hypnotism.

But it would never be like that with them. It just wouldn't.

"So now you know, we're not perfect," said Otonashi. "She left me too – twice, actually – and I neglected her. We had a breakup of our own."

Sounded to him like they parted on pretty good terms, but he kept that thought to himself.

"There are always bumps in the road, Naoi. Always some sort of interference," Otonashi continued in what Ayato bitterly but silently called his "wise doctor" tone. "But the concert helped us reconcile."

Ayato scowled down at the table. If his friend's goal was to establish common ground, that last part
had dreadfully backfired.

"What's the point of all this?" he muttered.

Otonashi reached over and touched his arm; when he looked back up from the contact, his friend's eyes were earnest. "Whatever force works against us, love works harder."

Clearly he meant every word of that. Of course, why wouldn't he? A heart, an afterlife, and a song had brought the two of them together. Hinata and Yui had a baseball and a promise – a promise the song helped him make good on.

What did he and Yuri have? Bloody fingers, broken pottery, Kimito, a lightning bolt… literal magic working against them!

Iwasawa's heartfelt ballad had resulted in three things – a proposal, a reconciliation, and a divorce. One of these things was very plainly not like the others. It didn't belong.

Maybe love worked overtime on Otonashi and Kanade (and very likely on Hinata and Yui). But if it had ever given a shit when it came to him and Yuri, it was for damn certain taking a lunch break.

Or it had quit altogether… or it had rushed back to its desk to rectify a horrible mistake.

Because despite Otonashi's compelling story of a love lost and found, his and Kanade's romance was still just that. A well-crafted fairytale, with its own ups and downs, destined for a published happy ending they could read to kids. And Ayato and Yuri's was pages upon pages of gibberish and mess that Fate had crafted while falling asleep face-down on the keyboard. But hey, Yuri had done a hell of a good job with the backspacing!

That Otonashi would even begin to make a comparison… it frustrated him to no end.

"So what you're saying is," Ayato said evenly, drumming his fingers on the table, "the two of you got back together because you remembered that you loved each other in the Afterlife."

Otonashi flinched, possibly realizing his mistake.

"We got back together because we remembered what we meant to each other!" he stressed.

"Nakamura isn't interested in remembering," Ayato said darkly.

Curious sympathy softened the crease on Otonashi's forehead. "And you?"

He frowned again. "I have to get back to work."

Otonashi didn't press the matter further. They stood up and left the park, walking in mostly silence after that. He offered to give him a ride to the train station, but Otonashi shook his head and pointed in the direction of his car.

"I don't do trains," he said.

At least they parted ways on a laugh – albeit a dark one.

Ayato wasn't a fool. He knew what the visit had been about in the end, peace offerings aside. All that talk about love overcoming obstacles? Love being more powerful than anything else? Otonashi actually wanted him to take a shot at true love's kiss.
It was a good thing he hadn't outright suggested it, or else Ayato would have laughed in his face.

Knowing Otonashi and the curveballs life had thrown at him, he could see how that appeared to be such a simple solution in his eyes. It would work like a charm with him and Kanade, and even enrich their romance knowing their love was true.

But Otonashi had to get this analogy out of his head!

There was no parallel. Remembering what they meant to each other may have reconciled Otonashi and Kanade, but it shattered him and Yuri on the same night. That had been the damn problem!

What was Otonashi thinking?

After the concert, remembering who Yuri was to him in the Afterlife had made him feel like a subordinate. At the baseball game, remembering who she was to him in this life had sent him on a downward spiral into unrequited love. False, uninformed, unrequited love.

He'd lost himself loving her again. He'd made himself too vulnerable. There was no way he was going to make the same mistake twice and even think about true love's kiss.

She didn't love him, she said so herself. So why should he bother?

Why should he bother when, unlike Kanade, she had never sought him out and tried to fix what was broken? When she had actively made things worse?

At home, Ayato lingered in front of the bathroom mirror and took a long hard look at his reflection. Staring out at him was someone soft, dull, and vulnerable. Someone who had regressed too much and been broken as a punishment. He glared in disapproval.

Yuri obliterated much of the person she used to be in this life. Maybe he needed to do the same.

---

Preview:

"Why is he here?"

"I know Girls Dead Monster better than any of you!"

"It seems you do need me after all."

"I would have liked seeing the concert alongside you."

"What are the odds, though?"

"I think that's Yuri's story to tell, not yours!"

[Chapter 29]: Songful Scheme.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!